# Investigating the Nexus: Mithraism and Kurdish/Proto-Kurdish Identity in Antiquity

## I. Introduction

### A. Overview of Mithraism

Mithraism stands as one of the significant, albeit enigmatic, religious phenomena of the ancient world. Primarily known through its Roman manifestation, it flourished as a mystery cult particularly popular between the 1st and 4th centuries CE.[1] This Roman iteration, centered on the deity known as Mithras, involved complex initiation rites and communal meals held in distinctive underground temples called Mithraea.[1] Originating potentially from Iranian religious traditions centered on the cognate deity Mithra, the cult spread widely across the Roman Empire.[4] Its reach extended from Persia and the Hellenistic East through Anatolia and Mesopotamia, regions historically pertinent to the Kurdish people, and westward into the heart of Europe, reaching as far as Britain, Spain, and the Rhine-Danube frontiers, as well as Roman Africa.[2] Despite its considerable influence, particularly among Roman soldiers and administrators [3], Mithraism eventually faced suppression, declining rapidly with the official acceptance and promotion of Christianity within the Empire in the 4th century CE.[2]

### B. The Complexity of Kurdish Origins and Pre-Islamic Religion

The historical origins of the Kurdish people, an Iranian ethnic group traditionally inhabiting the mountainous region known as Kurdistan, particularly the Zagros and Taurus ranges, are shrouded in considerable complexity and remain a subject of ongoing scholarly debate.[11] Attempts to reconstruct Kurdish ethnogenesis are hampered by the lack of definitive scientific elucidation and a heavy reliance on historical accounts often penned by non-Kurdish observers, whose perspectives and terminologies can be ambiguous.[11] Current scholarship suggests a heterogeneous origin, likely involving the amalgamation of various ancient tribes and populations over millennia.[12] Compounding this complexity is the diverse religious landscape of the region prior to the widespread adoption of Islam beginning in the 7th century CE.[17] This milieu included indigenous mountain beliefs, various forms of Iranian religion including Zoroastrianism and potentially Mithraism, alongside Judaism and Christianity, creating a rich tapestry of interacting faiths that shaped the cultural background from which Kurdish identity emerged.[17]

### C. Statement of Aim and Scope

This report aims to meticulously examine the available evidence within the provided research materials to investigate potential connections – whether direct or indirect, historical, cultural, or archaeological – between the religion of Mithraism (in both its Iranian and Roman forms) and those groups identified either as Kurdish or as potential proto-Kurdish ancestors, such as the Medes or the Carduchi. The scope of this analysis is strictly limited to the synthesis and

critical evaluation of the information contained within the supplied research snippets. It acknowledges the inherent limitations of this dataset and the contentious nature of many scholarly debates surrounding both Mithraism and Kurdish origins, striving for an objective assessment based solely on the provided textual and archaeological references.

## II. Mithraism: Origins, Beliefs, and Spread

### A. The Iranian Precursor: Mithra

**Indo-Iranian Roots:** The worship of the deity Mithra extends deep into antiquity, predating the emergence of Zoroastrianism in Iran. Evidence points to his veneration during the shared Indo-Iranian period, likely before 1400 BCE. His name appears as Mitra in the Vedic texts of India and is invoked alongside other Indo-Iranian gods in a 15th-century BCE treaty between the Hittite Empire and the Mitanni kingdom of northern Mesopotamia.[2] In this early context, Mithra functioned as a principal deity, perhaps second only to Ahura Mazda in the pre-Zoroastrian Iranian pantheon.[6] His primary domain was that of the contract (*mitra* meaning contract or covenant, and by extension, friendship and interpersonal obligation).[6] He was revered as the guardian of oaths, truth, and mutual obligations, ensuring cosmic and social order.[6] Associated with the shining light that beholds all, he was naturally invoked in oaths and treaties.[6] His portfolio likely extended to kingship, guaranteeing the bond between rulers and their warriors, and thus also encompassed war and justice.[6]

**Mithra in Zoroastrianism:** The religious reforms attributed to Zarathustra (Zoroaster) in the centuries preceding the Achaemenid Empire likely challenged the existing polytheistic system.[5] While Zarathustra's own Gathas do not mention Mithra by name [27], and he vehemently denounced the ritual sacrifice of the bull – a practice potentially central to pre-Zoroastrian Mithra worship [6] – Mithra was not eliminated from Iranian religion. Instead, he was incorporated into the reformed Mazdean (Zoroastrian) system, often understood as a Yazata, a venerable being or angel subordinate to the supreme God, Ahura Mazda.[6] This adaptation is evident in later Zoroastrian texts, particularly the *Mihr Yasht* (Hymn to Mithra) found in the Younger Avesta.[6] This hymn portrays Mithra in grandiose terms: as the all-observing god of heavenly light, traversing the firmament in a chariot drawn by white horses [26], the vigilant guardian of oaths and covenants, the protector of the righteous, and, crucially, a mighty warrior and archfoe of the forces of evil and darkness, ensuring victory in battle.[6] The historical trajectory of Mithra thus reveals a dynamic interplay of continuity and adaptation. While his worship persisted from early Indo-Iranian times, his role and status were clearly renegotiated within the framework of Zoroastrian reforms, possibly reflecting a compromise with nobles who remained attached to the older deities.[6] This process of integrating a popular, pre-existing deity into a new religious structure, rather than attempting outright eradication, offers a relevant parallel when considering how Mithraic elements might have survived or been syncretized in other contexts.

### B. The Roman Mysteries of Mithras

Distinct from the Iranian worship of Mithra, though clearly inspired by it [2], a specific mystery religion centered on a figure named Mithras (the Latin and Greek form) emerged within the Roman Empire, with archaeological evidence appearing suddenly in the last quarter of the 1st

century CE.[1] The degree of direct continuity between the Persian traditions and this Roman cult remains a central point of scholarly debate.[1] Roman Mithraism possessed unique characteristics, iconography, and structures tailored to a Roman audience.

**Core Mythology & Iconography:** The visual language of Roman Mithraism was remarkably consistent across the empire. Key scenes included:

- *The Birth:* Mithras was typically depicted being born from a rock (the *petra genetrix*), emerging fully formed, often wearing a distinctive conical Phrygian cap and sometimes carrying a torch and/or a knife.[1] This miraculous birth from stone emphasized a unique origin, distinct from human parentage and notably excluding female involvement.[10]
- *The Tauroctony:* The absolute centerpiece of every Mithraeum was the *tauroctony*, the scene of Mithras slaying a bull.[1] This iconic image, usually rendered in relief or sculpture, shows Mithras, clad in Anatolian trousers and Phrygian cap, kneeling on the back of a subdued bull, pulling its head back by the nostrils and plunging a dagger into its side.[2] The setting is almost always a cave.[2] Surrounding the central act are recurring figures and symbols: a dog and a snake lap at the blood flowing from the wound; a scorpion attacks the bull's genitals; a raven looks on; ears of wheat often sprout from the bull's tail or the wound itself.[2] Flanking Mithras are two torchbearers, Cautes holding his torch upwards and Cautopates holding his downwards, often dressed identically to Mithras.[2] Busts of Sol (the Sun) and Luna (the Moon) typically appear in the upper corners, and the scene may be framed by the signs of the zodiac.[2]
- *Other Narrative Scenes:* Less central but frequently depicted scenes illustrate other parts of Mithras' mythical life: hunting the bull, dragging it to the cave, riding it [10]; banqueting with the sun god Sol, often sharing the flesh of the slain bull [2]; and performing a miracle by shooting an arrow into a rock to make water gush forth.[10]

**Rituals and Structure:** Roman Mithraism functioned as a hierarchical mystery cult with specific practices:

- *Initiation:* Admittance involved progressing through seven distinct grades or ranks, each with associated symbolism and likely specific duties or roles in rituals. These grades, often listed from lowest to highest, were Corax (Raven), Nymphus (Bridegroom), Miles (Soldier), Leo (Lion), Perses (Persian), Heliodromus (Sun-Runner), and Pater (Father).[3] Initiation likely involved tests of loyalty and possibly symbolic ordeals or purifications, requiring sponsorship by an existing member and fostering strong bonds of trust within the community.[3] Initiates referred to themselves as *syndexioi*, "those united by the handshake".[2]
- *Communal Meals:* Ritual feasting was a core activity, conducted by initiates reclining on raised benches flanking the central aisle of the Mithraeum.[1] This practice resonates with the ancient tradition of sealing treaties and covenants – a domain of the original Iranian Mithra – with a shared meal.[6]
- *Mithraea:* Worship took place exclusively within dedicated sanctuaries known as Mithraea.[31] These were typically subterranean or built to resemble caves, whether utilizing natural caves or constructing rooms within buildings, often located near

sources of water.[3] They were characteristically small, long, narrow, and dark, lacking windows and illuminated by torches or lamps.[10] The layout featured an antechamber and a main hall (*cella*) with the distinctive side benches (*podia*) and a central aisle leading to an apse or niche containing the tauroctony.[3] The small size intentionally fostered intimate, close-knit communities or cells.[3]

- *Astral Character:* The cosmos played a significant role. Mithraea were often decorated with astrological symbols like the zodiac and representations of the sun, moon, and planets.[2] The cave itself was seen as a symbol or image of the universe, and rituals were possibly intended to induct initiates into mysteries concerning the soul's journey through the cosmos.[3] Mithras himself was identified with the sun, often bearing the title *Sol Invictus* (Unconquered Sun).[5]

**C. The Tauroctony: Central Enigma**

The bull-slaying scene, or tauroctony (a modern term from Greek *tauroktonos*, "bull-killing" [30]), is the defining and most perplexing element of Roman Mithraism. Its iconography, detailed above, is remarkably consistent.[2]

**Symbolism:** The meaning of the tauroctony is not explicitly stated in any surviving text and remains debated, but interpretations generally revolve around themes of creation, regeneration, and cosmic order. The bull's death is seen as a life-giving sacrifice, fertilizing the world (symbolized by wheat or grapes emerging from the blood or tail).[5] It may represent the victory of light/order over darkness/chaos, or Mithras' power to control cosmic forces.[10] The presence of astrological symbols (zodiac, Sol, Luna, scorpion representing Scorpio opposite the bull as Taurus) strongly suggests a connection to celestial events or the structure of the cosmos.[2] Mithras' apparent reluctance in some depictions adds another layer of complexity.[6]

**Debated Origins:** A critical point of divergence from known Iranian traditions is the tauroctony itself. There is no unambiguous evidence that the Iranian god Mithra was ever associated with killing a bull.[2] This lack of Iranian precedent makes the tauroctony appear specific to the Roman cult. Several theories attempt to explain its origin:

- It might be a Roman adaptation of the Greek iconographic motif of Nike (Victory) sacrificing a bull, which bears a strong visual resemblance.[33]
- It could stem from a pre-Zoroastrian Iranian ritual involving a bull sacrifice (perhaps connected to the deity Soma, who sometimes appeared as a white bull), a practice allegedly denounced by Zarathustra.[6] The parallel of Mithra/Mitra reluctantly participating in such a sacrifice in both Roman and Indian texts supports this possibility.[6] The absence of direct Iranian models for the tauroctony, coupled with its absolute centrality in Roman Mithraea, strongly implies that this scene, in its specific form and complex symbolism, was either a novel creation within the Roman milieu or a profound reinterpretation and synthesis of older, possibly disparate elements (such as Iranian mythology, Greek artistic conventions, and astrological lore). This creative act likely occurred within the Roman Empire, perhaps orchestrated by a specific founder or group [1], drawing on diverse cultural streams but ultimately producing something

uniquely tailored to the needs and understanding of the mystery cult's adherents. This distinction between the Iranian Mithra and the Roman bull-slaying Mithras is fundamental when evaluating potential links to pre-existing religious beliefs in regions like Kurdistan.

**D. Spread and Social Context**

Mithraism achieved remarkable geographical diffusion. While its ultimate roots trace back to Indo-Iranian traditions [5], the Roman mystery cult spread from a likely origin point within the Empire (perhaps Anatolia, Rome, or Ostia) [1] throughout its territories. It established a strong presence from Persia and India eastward, through the Hellenistic world, and most notably across the Roman Empire, reaching west to Britain and Spain, north along the Rhine and Danube frontiers, south into Roman Africa, and east into Syria and Dacia.[2] Its strongholds were particularly concentrated in the city of Rome and its port, Ostia, and along the militarized frontiers.[3]

The primary vector for the cult's dissemination appears to have been the Roman military. Mithraea and dedicatory inscriptions are frequently associated with soldiers of all ranks, from legionaries to centurions and officers.[1] Customs officials, imperial bureaucrats, freedmen (former slaves), and merchants were also significantly represented among initiates.[3] The possibility of diffusion along trade routes and via ports is also considered plausible.[10] However, the cult seems to have gained less traction in the core Greek-speaking world, perhaps due to Mithra's historical association with the Persians, traditional enemies of the Greeks.[6]

The appeal of Mithraism seems rooted in its structure and values, which resonated particularly with these social groups. It was an exclusively male cult [3], mirroring the composition of the army and administration. Its hierarchical structure, with seven grades of initiation, reflected the ordered ranks of Roman military and civil service, and importantly, appears to have reinforced existing social hierarchies rather than challenging them.[3] The cult emphasized virtues highly valued in these circles: loyalty (especially to the emperor, with Mithras seen as "Protector of the Empire" [5]), discipline, camaraderie, courage, and adherence to duty and contract.[4] Furthermore, as a mystery religion, it offered a sense of belonging to a close-knit community, mutual support (akin to guilds or burial societies [3]), and the promise of salvation or a favorable afterlife.[7]

**E. Origins Debate: Cumont and Beyond**

The question of Roman Mithraism's precise origins has been dominated by the legacy of Franz Cumont, the Belgian scholar considered the founder of modern Mithraic studies.[29] Cumont's influential thesis, developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, posited a direct and largely uninterrupted lineage from ancient Persian Mazdaism, specifically its Zurvanite variant, which he believed preserved pre-Zoroastrian dualism.[25] He viewed Roman Mithraism as essentially this Iranian religion transplanted westward, absorbing some Hellenistic elements along the way, possibly via Anatolia or Magi colonies in Mesopotamia.[27]

However, beginning in the latter half of the 20th century, Cumont's "Persian thesis" faced increasing challenges.[1] Scholars pointed to significant discrepancies between Roman Mithraic

practice and known Iranian traditions, most notably the absence of the tauroctony scene in Iranian sources.[1] The lack of clear Iranian precedents for the seven grades of initiation and other specific features of the Roman mysteries also raised doubts. This led to alternative hypotheses:

- Some propose that Roman Mithraism was effectively a new creation or a radical reformation, possibly originating in Anatolia (perhaps linked to the syncretic kingdom of Commagene, where King Antiochus I venerated Mithra alongside Greek gods [1]) or even within Rome or Ostia itself.[1] This view suggests a specific founder or group reinterpreted Iranian motifs through a Hellenistic lens, perhaps incorporating Platonic philosophy or complex astrological doctrines.[1]
- Others emphasize the transmission of ideas through Hellenistic kingdoms acting as intermediaries between Persia and Rome.[1]
- A strong focus on the Roman social and cultural context emphasizes adaptation and innovation within the Empire itself.[27]

Despite these debates about historical origins, it is significant that Roman Mithraists themselves perceived their cult as "Persian".[1] They referred to one of the grades of initiation as "Perses" (Persian) [10] and believed their mysteries were founded by none other than "Zoroaster".[3] This self-identification, however, may not reflect direct historical continuity. It could represent a form of "invented tradition," strategically employed to lend the cult an aura of ancient wisdom, exoticism, and legitimacy within the diverse religious marketplace of the Roman Empire. The "Persian" label might have enhanced its appeal, particularly to those seeking alternatives to traditional Roman state religion, without necessarily denoting an unbroken chain of transmission from pre-Zoroastrian Iran.

## III. Kurdish Origins and Pre-Islamic Religious Landscape

### A. Theories of Kurdish Ethnogenesis

Understanding any potential relationship between Mithraism and the Kurds requires grappling with the complex and unresolved question of Kurdish origins. As noted earlier, there is no scholarly consensus on a single point of origin or a linear descent for the Kurdish people, who are generally considered to be of heterogeneous background.[11] The very term "Kurd" appears to have evolved in meaning over time. Some theories suggest it derives from Middle Persian *kwrt-*, meaning "nomad" or "tent-dweller," initially used in Arabic sources after the Islamic conquests to describe nomadic groups on the Iranian plateau's western fringes, possibly including tribes aligned with the Sasanian state.[13] Other theories connect it to ancient tribal names like the Cyrtii (Kurti) mentioned in the 2nd century BCE Zagros region.[12] Regardless of the etymology, the term likely transitioned from a socio-economic or geographic designator to a more distinct ethnic identifier, a process perhaps solidifying around the 12th century CE.[12] Several ancient groups inhabiting the Zagros Mountains and surrounding regions have been proposed as potential ancestors or contributing elements to Kurdish ethnogenesis:

- **Medes:** This ancient Iranian people, who formed a powerful empire centered in northwestern Iran (overlapping with modern Kurdistan) in the 7th-6th centuries BCE [15], are frequently invoked, particularly in Kurdish nationalist narratives, as the primary

ancestors of the Kurds.[15] Supporting arguments often point to linguistic affinities (both Median and Kurdish languages belong to the Northwestern Iranian branch) and geographical overlap.[15] However, many scholars caution against assuming direct descent, citing the significant chronological gap between the Median empire and the first clear attestations of Kurds, the lack of definitive linguistic proof (Kurdish is not necessarily a direct daughter language of Median), and the fact that other Northwestern Iranian groups also exist.[12] Furthermore, the legacy of the Medes has also been claimed by other groups, such as Azerbaijanis.[45]

- **Carduchi (Karduchoi/Gordyene):** These warlike mountain tribes famously encountered by Xenophon's Ten Thousand Greek mercenaries in 401 BCE inhabited the region north of the Tigris River, in what is now southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq.[12] Their territory, later known as Corduene or Gordyene, is often identified as an early form of Kurdistan.[14] Some scholars consider the Carduchi to be proto-Kurdish.[14] However, their precise ethnolinguistic identity is uncertain; Xenophon distinguished them from Armenians, and some modern scholars suggest they might have been a pre-Indo-European indigenous group, or perhaps spoke an Old Iranian language with Armenian elements.[12]
- **Gutians:** An ancient people from the Zagros region known primarily from Mesopotamian sources of the 3rd millennium BCE, where they are depicted as disruptive invaders responsible for the decline of the Akkadian Empire.[12] While geographically relevant, a direct link to the Kurds is highly speculative. The Gutians were likely not Indo-European speakers, and later Assyrian texts seem to have used the term "Gutian" more generically to refer to various mountain peoples, sometimes including the Medes.[14]
- **Other Ancient Groups:** Various other peoples who inhabited the Zagros mountains and adjacent areas over the millennia – such as the Lullubi, Kassites, Hurrians, Mitanni, and Urartians – are sometimes mentioned as potential contributors to the Kurdish gene pool and cultural heritage.[12] The Hurrians, in particular, are seen by some as having left a fundamental legacy [58], while the Mitanni kingdom (mid-2nd millennium BCE) in northern Syria/Mesopotamia is notable for its Indo-Aryan or early Indo-Iranian speaking elite.[14]
- **Indigenous Peoples and Indo-European Migrants:** A widely held scholarly perspective posits that Kurdish ethnogenesis resulted from a long process of fusion between incoming Indo-European (specifically Iranian) tribes migrating into the Zagros region around the 2nd millennium BCE and the diverse pre-existing indigenous populations.[12] Recent genetic research lends support to this view, suggesting deep ancestral roots tracing back to the Neolithic Northern Fertile Crescent, followed by linguistic Iranianization imposed by later migrating elites.[59]

The collective weight of this evidence points towards Kurdish ethnogenesis being a protracted process rather than a singular event tied to one specific ancient group. It likely involved the gradual amalgamation, interaction, and assimilation of numerous distinct peoples within the challenging mountainous environment of the Zagros and Taurus ranges over thousands of

years. This complex, multi-layered formation makes it inherently difficult to connect specific ancient religious practices, such as Mithraism, to *the* definitive ancestors of the modern Kurds in a straightforward manner. Identifying a religious practice among one potential precursor group (like the Medes or Carduchi) does not automatically mean it was characteristic of the entire complex ancestry of the Kurdish people.

**B. The Pre-Islamic Religious Milieu**

The religious landscape inhabited by the diverse groups contributing to Kurdish ethnogenesis prior to the 7th-century Islamic conquests was correspondingly varied and complex. Multiple belief systems coexisted and likely interacted within the Zagros region and adjacent territories:

- **Indigenous Beliefs:** Underlying the later layers of organized religion were likely ancient indigenous traditions focused on the natural world. These may have included the veneration of mountains, sacred springs, fire, and possibly mother goddess figures.[9] The Kurdish figure of Ana, goddess of water, fertility, and wisdom, has been linked to the ancient Iranian water goddess Anahita, whose cult may be evidenced archaeologically at sites like Rabana-Merquly in the Zagros.[47] Early Mesopotamian religious influence is also attested, for instance, in the initial phase of worship identified at Daya Cave.[62]
- **Mithraism:** The worship of Mithra is explicitly cited in several sources as one of the pre-Islamic religions practiced by Kurds or present in their historical homeland.[18] Some accounts even suggest it was the "original" or predominant faith before the rise of Zoroastrianism or Islam.[18] This connection is often asserted through the potential survival of Mithraic elements in later syncretic faiths like Yazidism and Yarsanism, or through the association of Mithraism with proposed Kurdish ancestors like the Medes.[48] The celebration of Yelda night (winter solstice) in Kurdistan is also linked by some to the birth of Mithra in the Zagros.[64]
- **Zoroastrianism (Mazdaism):** This major Iranian religion is widely acknowledged as having a significant presence in the region before Islam, potentially serving as the official state religion under the Sasanian Empire, which controlled much of Kurdistan.[17] While modern Kurdish nationalist narratives sometimes claim Zoroaster himself as Kurdish, scholarly consensus, based largely on linguistic evidence from the Avesta, places the origins of Zoroastrianism further east, likely in Greater Khorasan.[20] Nevertheless, Zoroastrian influence on the populations of western Iran and Kurdistan is undeniable, and elements potentially derived from Zoroastrianism are identified in later Kurdish religious traditions.[49]
- **Judaism and Christianity:** Both religions had established communities within Kurdistan long before the arrival of Islam.[9] Some Kurdish populations, particularly those under Byzantine influence in western Kurdistan (Anatolia), converted to Christianity.[18]
- **Manichaeism:** This dualistic religion, founded by the prophet Mani in 3rd-century CE Persia, also had a presence. Mani is known to have engaged with Mithraic priests and incorporated elements of Mithraism into his own doctrine.[24] Manichaeism spread through the region and is listed among the faiths found in Kurdistan.[19]

- **Syncretism:** The overall picture emerging from the sources is one of religious pluralism, where different belief systems coexisted, competed, and inevitably influenced one another.[9] This environment fostered syncretism, the blending of different religious traditions, which is particularly evident in later faiths like Yazidism and Yarsanism.

Considering this complex religious tapestry, while Mithraism appears to have been a notable strand, potentially even a dominant one during certain periods (e.g., perhaps under the Parthians [9]) or among specific groups within the broader proto-Kurdish milieu, it existed alongside and interacted with numerous other powerful belief systems. Attributing a single, uniform pre-Islamic religion to all potential ancestors of the Kurds represents an oversimplification of a dynamic and diverse historical reality. Mithraism was likely one significant component within a complex web of indigenous, Iranian, Mesopotamian, and Abrahamic religious influences shaping the region.

**IV. Mithraism in Regions Associated with Kurds/Proto-Kurds**

Archaeological and historical evidence attests to the presence of Mithraic worship, in various forms, across territories historically inhabited by or adjacent to Kurdish and proto-Kurdish populations. Examining this evidence geographically helps clarify the nature and context of Mithraism in these key regions.

**A. Anatolia (Eastern Turkey)**

Several Mithraea, sanctuaries dedicated to the Roman mystery cult of Mithras, have been discovered in eastern and southern Anatolia, areas bordering or overlapping with historical Kurdistan:

- **Sites:** Discoveries include Mithraea at Doliche (modern Dülük, near Gaziantep), Perge (near Antalya), Arykanda (near Antalya), and significantly, within the Zerzevan Fortress (near Diyarbakır).[7]
- **Characteristics:** Most of these sites conform to the typical pattern of Roman Mithraea: subterranean or cave-like structures (though the Arykanda temple might be an exception, possibly being above ground [7]), featuring the iconic tauroctony relief.[7] The Doliche site yielded two cult rooms within a cave [7], while Perge featured a marble votive stele with the bull-slaying scene.[7] The Zerzevan temple, carved into rock, included columns, niches, and features possibly related to sacrifice rituals.[7]
- **Associations and Context:** The context of these Anatolian Mithraea strongly links them to the Roman presence:
    - The Zerzevan Fortress was an important Roman military base on the eastern frontier, making it highly probable that the Mithraeum primarily served Roman soldiers, a demographic known for its devotion to Mithras.[7]
    - At Perge, an inscription from the 2nd century CE explicitly names a Roman citizen, Marcus Lucius Crispus, who dedicated an offering to Helios Mithras "with his children for the council and the public assembly of Perge".[7] This indicates use by Roman civilians or officials and suggests some interaction with the local civic structure.
    - The temple at Arykanda bore an inscription dedicating it to the Roman Emperor Septimius Severus (ruled 193–211 CE) and his family, again pointing to imperial

connections.[7] The possibility that this temple was above ground is linked to Severus' relative tolerance or support for Mithraism.[7]
    - At Doliche, the later defacement of the tauroctony relief with a Christian cross signifies the eventual conflict between Mithraism and Christianity in the region.[7]

The Anatolian archaeological evidence, therefore, predominantly situates Roman Mithraism within the framework of Roman military and administrative control. While these sites were located in regions potentially inhabited by proto-Kurdish groups (especially around Commagene, Diyarbakır, and the eastern Taurus), the available information does not provide clear proof of widespread adoption of this specific Roman mystery cult by the indigenous Anatolian populations independent of the Roman imperial structure. The Perge inscription, while mentioning the local council, still involves a dedicator with a Roman name. This pattern suggests that the Roman form of Mithraism, with its characteristic Mithraea and tauroctony, may have been largely an import associated with Roman personnel, rather than a direct evolution of pre-existing local Mithra worship, even though earlier forms of Mithra veneration existed in Anatolia (e.g., Mitanni treaty, Commagene royal cult [1]).

**B. Mesopotamia and the Parthian/Sasanian Context**

The situation in Mesopotamia, closer to the Iranian heartland and under different political dynamics, presents a slightly different picture:

- **Parthian Era (c. 247 BCE – 224 CE):** During the long reign of the Parthian Empire, which originated east of the Caspian Sea but came to rule Mesopotamia and Iran, the worship of Mithra appears to have been particularly significant.[9] Some scholars suggest Mithra worship was the most widespread religious current in traditional Parthian domains, possibly even more so than orthodox Zoroastrianism, especially among the ruling elite.[9] This is supported by the prevalence of the royal name Mithridates ("gift of Mithra") among Parthian kings [9] and archaeological finds like a *mehriyan* ("place of Mithra") inscription in Turkmenistan and numerous ostraca bearing Mithra's name from the Parthian capital of Nisa.[9] Mithra was viewed as a protector of Parthian sovereigns, as depicted in the relief showing Mithra clasping the hand of King Antiochus I of Commagene (a Parthian-influenced buffer state).[1] The 3rd-century CE prophet Mani, founder of Manichaeism, encountered and debated with Mithraic priests in Parthian-controlled Mesopotamia and Persia, incorporating Mithraic elements into his own syncretic religion.[67] However, it is crucial to note that while *Mithra worship* was prevalent, evidence for the specific *Roman-style mystery cult* with its underground Mithraea and tauroctony iconography is scarce in Mesopotamia proper, except in locations with a direct Roman military presence, such as Dura-Europos on the Euphrates.[35] This reinforces the distinction between the broader Iranian veneration of Mithra and the specific Roman mystery religion.
- **Sasanian Era (224–651 CE):** The rise of the Sasanian dynasty, originating from Persis, marked a shift towards a more centralized and orthodox form of Zoroastrianism as the state religion.[67] The Sasanian founder, Ardashir I, overthrew the last Parthian king.[67] While Zoroastrianism was promoted, Mithra continued to hold some importance, as evidenced by the investiture relief of Ardashir II (late 4th century CE) at Taq-e Bostan,

where the king receives the ring of power from Ahura Mazda while Mithra stands by, witnessing the pact.[8] Mithraic worship may have persisted in some areas or influenced developing traditions. The paintings in Daya Cave, for instance, suggest its use as a Mithraic cult site may have extended into the early Sasanian period.[62]

**C. The Zagros Mountains (Kurdistan Heartland)**

Evidence from the Zagros mountains, the geographical core of Kurdistan, points towards the presence of Iranian religious practices, including those potentially related to Mithra, that seem more embedded in the local landscape than the primarily Roman-associated sites further west.

- **Daya Cave (Near Sar-e Pol-e Zahab, Kermanshah Province, Iran):** This cave contains a remarkable collection of rock paintings, tentatively dated from the Achaemenid through Parthian and possibly into early Sasanian times.[62] Analysis suggests the cave was initially used for worshiping Mesopotamian deities before being transformed into a cult place for Mithra.[62] One specific tableau is interpreted as depicting a figure with rays emanating from his head, identified as Mithra based on comparisons with Sasanian (Taq-e Bostan), Kushan, and even Roman Mithraic iconography (Nemrut Dağ, Osterburken Mithraeum).[62] The figure is shown armed with a bow and possibly accompanied by a lion.[62] The cave's modern name, Aškawt-i Daya, is noted as being Kurdish.[62] This site provides potential evidence for a form of Mithra worship within the Zagros that might bridge purely Iranian and Roman iconographic traditions.
- **Rabana-Merquly (Piramagrun Mountain, Iraqi Kurdistan):** This extensive Parthian-era (2nd-1st centuries BCE) fortified settlement is linked to the rulers of Adiabene, a local kingdom vassal to the Parthians, known to have had Kurdish populations and ruling families.[13] Within the complex, archaeologists have identified a potential sanctuary area featuring significant architectural modifications around a natural waterfall and a nearby rock carving resembling a fire altar.[60] While the excavators hypothesize this sanctuary might have been dedicated to the Iranian water goddess Anahita rather than Mithra directly [47], its existence demonstrates significant investment in Iranian religious cult activity within the Zagros heartland during the Parthian period, associated with local rulers.
- **Other Potential Evidence:** The scholar Taufiq Wahby reported discovering Mithraic elements among sculptures excavated at Hatra (southwest of Mosul, a city with historical Kurdish presence [13]) in the 1950s and proposed a link between these findings and the origins of Yazidism.[40] Additionally, contemporary cultural practices like the celebration of Yelda night (winter solstice) in Kurdistan are sometimes explicitly linked in local tradition to the birth of Mithra, who is said to have been born in the Zagros mountains.[64] Some local traditions in the Pawa region (Hawraman, Iran) also claim it as the origin place of Mithraism.[68]

The evidence from the Zagros region, therefore, suggests a more indigenous presence of Iranian religious cults, including possible forms of Mithraism or related worship (like that of

Anahita), compared to the predominantly Roman military context observed in Anatolia. Sites like Daya Cave and Rabana-Merquly, along with potential finds at Hatra and surviving folklore, point to Parthian and possibly early Sasanian era religious activities embedded within the Kurdish heartland and associated with local populations or kingdoms (like Adiabene). This offers a more direct potential pathway for Mithraic influence on proto-Kurdish groups than relying solely on the spread of the Roman mystery cult from the west.

**Table: Archaeological Evidence for Mithraism/Related Cults in Anatolia and Zagros**

| Site Name | Location | Period | Key Features/Finds | Dedication/ Association | Potential Link to Kurds/Locals | Source Snippets |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Doliche (Dülük) | Nr. Gaziantep, Turkey | Roman (2nd-3rd c. CE?) | Two Mithraea in cave, tauroctony relief (later defaced with cross) | Roman presence (Jupiter Dolichenus cult nearby) | Proximity to Commagene /Kurdish areas. Interaction implied by later Christian defacement. | [7] |
| Perge | Nr. Antalya, Turkey | Roman (2nd c. CE) | Mithraeum near city, marble stele with tauroctony & inscription | Marcus Lucius Crispus (Roman citizen) dedicated *for* local council & assembly | Interaction with local civic structure, though dedicator is Roman. Region is Pamphylia, historically distinct but adjacent to Kurdish areas. | [7] |
| Arykanda | Nr. Antalya, Turkey (Lycia) | Roman (c. 200 CE) | Possible Mithraic temple on acropolis (not underground?), | Dedicated to Emperor Septimius Severus & family | Roman imperial connection. Lycian region, less directly associated | [7] |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | inscription on architrave | | with Kurds. | |
| Zerzevan Fortress | Nr. Diyarbakır, Turkey | Roman (c. 2nd-3rd c. CE) | Underground Mithraeum carved in rock within fortress, columns, niches, water basin, possible sacrifice apparatus | Roman military base | Strong Roman military association. Location is within historical Kurdistan; soldiers stationed there could interact with locals, but primary users were Roman. | [7] |
| Daya Cave | Sar-e Pol-e Zahab, Kermanshah, Iran (Zagros) | Parthian/Early Sasanian | Cave paintings, transition from Mesopotamian to Mithraic worship, depiction interpreted as Mithra with rays/bow/lion, modern Kurdish name noted | Local cult site, potentially Mithraic | Located in Zagros heartland (Kermanshah), strong Kurdish connection. Evidence of local Iranian cult practice. | [62] |
| Rabana-Merquly | Piramagrun Mt., Iraqi Kurdistan (Zagros) | Parthian (2nd-1st c. BCE) | Fortress complex, potential sanctuary near waterfall, architectural features, | Ruling dynasty of Adiabene (Parthian vassal kingdom) | Located in Zagros heartland (Iraqi Kurdistan). Adiabene had Kurdish populations/ | [47] |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | possible fire altar | | rulers. Suggests local Iranian cult (possibly Anahita) investment. | |
| Hatra | SW of Mosul, Iraq | Parthian | Sculptures and tablets interpreted as having Mithraic elements | Parthian-era city with diverse population | Proximity to Kurdish areas. Wahby links finds to Yazidism origins. | [40] |

**V. Potential Survivals and Syncretism: Yazidism and Yarsanism**

The question of Mithraic influence on Kurdish populations extends beyond antiquity into the study of syncretic religious traditions that persist among some Kurds today, namely Yazidism and Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq). These faiths, while incorporating significant elements from Islam (particularly Sufism), are often seen as preserving aspects of much older, pre-Islamic Iranian beliefs, potentially including those related to Mithra.

**A. The Yazdanism Hypothesis**

A controversial but influential framework for understanding these connections was proposed by the scholar Mehrdad Izady. He coined the term "Yazdânism" (Cult of Angels) to designate what he considers the "original," pre-Islamic religion of the Kurds, arguing that it represents an ancient Hurrian or Aryan faith that predates Islam by millennia.[20] In Izady's view, Yazdânism is fundamentally non-Semitic and forms the common root from which modern Yazidism, Yarsanism, and Ishik Alevism branched.[69] Key features attributed to this proposed proto-religion include belief in a supreme, transcendent God (Haqq) and the veneration of seven divine emanations or angels (the Heptad, including figures like Melek Taus and Shaykh Shams) who manage the world, along with a belief in reincarnation.[69]

However, the Yazdânism hypothesis has been met with significant skepticism in academic circles. Critics like Richard Foltz dismiss it as an "invented religion," arguing that it owes more to contemporary Kurdish nationalist aspirations for a distinct, ancient identity than to rigorous historical or religious scholarship.[20] While acknowledging the "striking" and "unmistakable" similarities between Yazidism and Yarsanism [69], many scholars argue that attributing these similarities to a single, unified ancient religion called Yazdânism is speculative and lacks sufficient evidence. They often prefer to explain the parallels through shared descent from a broader ancient West Iranian religious substratum or through later processes of syncretism involving Sufism.[20]

**B. Yazidism**

Yazidism is the distinct ethnoreligious faith of the Yazidi people, found primarily in northern Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and the Caucasus.[66]

- **Origins:** Scholarly consensus generally traces the formation of Yazidism as a distinct religion to the 12th century CE, centering around the figure of Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, a Sufi mystic of Umayyad descent who settled in the Lalish valley north of Mosul.[66] His Sufi order, the Adawiyya, attracted local Kurdish followers, and over time, his teachings blended profoundly with pre-existing local beliefs and practices, leading the faith to diverge significantly from Islamic norms.[66] Some Yazidi traditions claim a unique origin, separate from the rest of humanity (descended from Adam but not Eve).[66] The origin of the name "Yazidi" is debated: while some scholars link it to the Umayyad Caliph Yazid I (a connection Yazidis themselves reject), others derive it from the Old Iranian word *yazata* (divine being) or the Kurdish *Ez dā* ("Created me").[71]
- **Core Beliefs:** Yazidism is monotheistic, worshipping a supreme creator God (Xwedê or Êzdan) who, after creating the world, entrusted its care to seven holy beings or angels (Heft Sirr, the Seven Mysteries).[66] The chief among these is Malak Taus (Tawûsî Melek), the Peacock Angel, who acts as God's representative and world-ruler.[66] Outsiders have often controversially identified Malak Taus with Satan due to myths of a temporary fall from grace, leading to the misnomer "devil worshippers".[66] Other key elements include the veneration of Sheikh Adi as a divine figure, a strong belief in metempsychosis (reincarnation) for the soul's purification, reverence for the elements (especially fire and sun, with prayers directed towards the sun), an annual pilgrimage to the sacred valley of Lalish, a strict caste system dividing society into religious and lay groups, and numerous purity taboos governing daily life.[66]
- **Potential Mithraic Links:** Several features of Yazidism have been suggested as possible survivals or echoes of Mithraism or older Iranian traditions:
    - The Yazidi angel Shaykh Shams ("Sun of the Faith") is often compared to Mithra due to his strong solar associations.[69]
    - The practice of praying towards the sun is a prominent feature.[65]
    - The concept of seven primary angels (Heft Sirr) bears resemblance to the seven grades of Mithraic initiation or the seven Amesha Spentas of Zoroastrianism.[69]
    - Some sources mention an annual ritual killing of an ox or bull among Yazidis, potentially echoing the Mithraic tauroctony or pre-Zoroastrian bull sacrifices.[65]
    - The main sanctuary at Lalish, with its underground structures and association with water, has been compared to the architecture of Mithraea.[78]
    - The emphasis on purity and potential dualistic undertones (though Malak Taus is not an evil principle like Ahriman) might resonate with Iranian religious themes.[66]
    - More broadly, Yazidism is often seen by scholars and Yazidis themselves as preserving elements of an ancient, pre-Zoroastrian Iranian faith tradition.[17]

Despite these intriguing parallels, the heavy syncretism inherent in Yazidism makes definitive conclusions about direct Mithraic descent problematic. The documented historical origins involving Sheikh Adi and Sufism represent a significant layer superimposed upon any older traditions.[66] While the pre-Islamic Iranian influence is undeniable and likely includes elements shared with or derived from Mithraic traditions, isolating a continuous, specific Mithraic

lineage within Yazidism remains challenging. The observable similarities might instead point to a shared origin in a broader ancient West Iranian religious complex – one which also influenced the development of Mithraism itself – rather than Yazidism being a direct descendant of either Roman Mithraism or classical Zoroastrianism.

**C. Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq)**

Yarsanism, whose followers are also known as Ahl-e Haqq ("People of Truth") or Kaka'i, is another syncretic faith found primarily among Kurds in western Iran (especially Kermanshah province) and Iraq.[79]

- **Origins and Beliefs:** Yarsanism traces its specific formation to the teachings of Sultan Sahak, a figure believed to have lived in the late 14th or early 15th century CE.[82] Like Yazidism, it is generally understood as a blend of mystical Islamic (Sufi) influences and older, pre-Islamic Iranian traditions.[70] Central tenets include belief in a Divine Essence (Haqq or Ya) that manifests itself periodically in human form (avatars known as *mazhariyyat*) across different epochs of history.[70] In each epoch, God is believed to manifest primarily in one figure and secondarily in seven key companions, known as the *Haft Tan* ("Seven Persons").[79] Sultan Sahak is considered the primary divine manifestation of the current (fourth) epoch.[82] Other core beliefs include reincarnation (*dunaduni*), through which souls undergo a cycle of 1001 incarnations to achieve perfection; a distinction between the external (zahiri) and internal (batini) worlds, with emphasis on esoteric knowledge; the sacredness of music, particularly the *tambur* lute, played during communal gatherings (*jam*); and adherence to principles of purity, righteousness, modesty, and equality.[79] Yarsanism explicitly rejects social class and caste distinctions, setting it apart from Yazidism and traditional Zoroastrianism.[79] Their sacred traditions are preserved primarily in orally transmitted poetry, later compiled in texts like the *Kalâm-e Saranjâm*.[82]
- **Potential Mithraic Links:** Similar to Yazidism, Yarsanism exhibits features that suggest connections to ancient Iranian religion, potentially including Mithraism:
    - Its origins are often traced by scholars back to ancient Indo-Iranian religious strata, sometimes specifically mentioning Mithraism.[42]
    - The Sun and fire are considered holy elements.[79]
    - The belief in seven divine companions (*Haft Tan*) parallels the Yazidi angels and potentially the Mithraic grades or Zoroastrian Amesha Spentas.[70]
    - The strong emphasis on truth (*Haqq*) and righteousness resonates with Mithra's ancient role as the god of contracts, oaths, and truth.[79]
    - Like Yazidism, Yarsanism is sometimes viewed as stemming from an older West Iranian religious substrate, distinct from but related to Zoroastrianism, which might also share common roots with Roman Mithraism.[42] Philip Kreyenbroek, for instance, argues that key elements of Roman Mithraism's cosmogony seem traceable to an Iranian tradition akin to, but different from, Zoroastrianism, and that this underlying tradition might also inform Yarsani and Yazidi beliefs.[42]

The striking parallels between Yazidism and Yarsanism (belief in seven divine beings,

reincarnation, esoteric interpretations, syncretic blending of pre-Islamic and Islamic elements), coupled with their shared geographical and cultural context among Kurdish populations, suggest they may represent parallel developments. Rather than being derived directly from one another or from a single, unified pre-Islamic "Yazdanism," they might be seen as distinct syncretic faiths that emerged independently but drew upon a common reservoir of ancient West Iranian and Kurdish religious beliefs and practices – a reservoir that undoubtedly included Mithraic elements – which were then reinterpreted and reshaped under the influence of medieval Sufism through charismatic local figures like Sheikh Adi and Sultan Sahak.

## VI. Synthesis and Conclusion

### A. Summary of Evidence

The investigation into the relationship between Mithraism and Kurdish or proto-Kurdish groups, based on the provided sources, reveals a complex picture rather than a simple, direct connection. Key findings include:

- **Iranian Mithra Worship:** There is clear evidence for the veneration of the Iranian god Mithra (god of contract, light, oaths) in regions historically associated with Kurdish ethnogenesis, particularly the Zagros Mountains and Mesopotamia, especially during the Parthian period when Mithra worship may have been widespread among the ruling elite and local populations.[6] Archaeological sites like Daya Cave potentially show Mithraic cult activity within the Zagros.[62]
- **Roman Mithraism:** The distinct Roman mystery cult of Mithras, characterized by underground Mithraea and the central tauroctony scene, established a presence in Anatolia and Roman frontier regions adjacent to Kurdistan.[7] However, this presence appears primarily linked to the Roman military and administration, with limited evidence for widespread adoption by indigenous populations independent of the Roman structure.[3]
- **Potential Survivals:** Echoes of ancient Iranian religious beliefs, potentially including Mithraic elements (such as solar symbolism, veneration of seven divine beings, possible ritual remnants like bull sacrifice), are discernible within the syncretic faiths of Yazidism and Yarsanism, which are practiced by some Kurdish communities today.[42] However, these elements are heavily overlaid with later Sufi influences and unique developments, making direct lineage difficult to prove definitively.
- **Persistent Association:** Several sources, including scholarly works and local traditions, continue to associate Kurds (often through proposed Median ancestry) with Mithra or Mithraism, sometimes positing it as an "original" Kurdish faith.[18]

### B. Discussion of Limitations and Debates

Several factors complicate a definitive assessment of the relationship:

- **Kurdish Ethnogenesis:** The lack of consensus regarding the precise origins and formation of the Kurdish people makes it challenging to link them unequivocally to specific ancient groups (like Medes or Carduchi) among whom Mithraism might have been practiced.[11]
- **Mithra vs. Mithras:** The critical distinction between the ancient Iranian god Mithra and

the Roman mystery cult figure Mithras, particularly regarding the tauroctony (which lacks clear Iranian precedent), must be maintained.[1] Evidence for one does not automatically equate to evidence for the other in a specific context.

- **Evidence Gaps:** Knowledge of Roman Mithraism relies heavily on archaeological remains and often hostile or brief external textual references, as no theological writings from the cult itself survive.[1] Similarly, reconstructing pre-Islamic Kurdish beliefs is hampered by a lack of direct textual sources from the period.
- **Syncretism:** The syncretic nature of Yazidism and Yarsanism makes it difficult to disentangle original pre-Islamic elements from later Islamic (Sufi) accretions and internal developments.[20] Apparent survivals might stem from a shared older substratum rather than direct descent from Mithraism specifically.
- **Modern Influences:** Interpretations of historical connections can be influenced by modern nationalist ideologies seeking to establish ancient roots and distinct identities for contemporary groups.[20]

**C. Concluding Assessment**

Based on the synthesis of the provided materials, the relationship between Mithraism and Kurdish/proto-Kurdish groups appears to be multifaceted and largely indirect, rather than one of simple equivalence or direct lineage. Mithraic beliefs and practices, in both their Iranian and Roman forms, were undoubtedly present in the geographical and cultural milieu from which the Kurdish people emerged.

The most tangible connections are:

1. The documented worship of the Iranian god Mithra in the Zagros-Mesopotamian region, particularly during the Parthian era, coinciding with the formative periods of groups potentially ancestral to Kurds.
2. The geographical proximity of proto-Kurdish populations to centers of Roman Mithraism along the frontiers in Anatolia, allowing for potential cultural exchange, even if the cult there was primarily associated with Roman personnel.
3. The plausible, though syncretically obscured, survival of certain ancient Iranian religious themes and symbols (solar veneration, heptads of divine beings, purity concerns, perhaps ritual echoes) potentially related to Mithraism within the living traditions of Yazidism and Yarsanism among Kurdish communities.

However, the evidence reviewed does not support a conclusion that Mithraism, particularly in its distinct Roman form, constituted the primary or defining religion of a unified proto-Kurdish entity. The complexity of Kurdish ethnogenesis, the significant differences between Iranian Mithra and Roman Mithras, and the deeply syncretic nature of later relevant faiths preclude such a definitive statement. Mithraism appears to have been one significant thread among many woven into the rich and diverse tapestry of pre-Islamic religious life in the Zagros mountains and adjacent regions, contributing to the cultural heritage from which Kurdish identity and traditions eventually crystallized. Further interdisciplinary research, especially archaeological investigation within the Zagros region focusing on Parthian and Sasanian periods, alongside critical textual analysis of Yazidi and Yarsani oral traditions, holds the potential to further elucidate the specific nature and extent of Mithraic influence on the

ancestors of the Kurds.

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