The Relationship Between Kurdish Peoples and Non-Abrahamic Religions Before 2010: An Examination Excluding Abrahamic and Related Syncretic Faiths

I. Introduction

Purpose and Scope Definition

This report investigates the historical relationship between the populations ancestral to or identified as Kurds and strictly non-Abrahamic religious traditions within the geographical region commonly known as Kurdistan—primarily the Zagros and Taurus mountain ranges and adjacent areas. The analysis focuses on the period *before the year 2010*, examining connections to faiths such as Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, and Manichaeism.
Crucially, this examination adheres to specific exclusion criteria. It will *not* delve into the history of Kurdish interactions with Abrahamic religions, namely Islam (including all its branches such as Sunni, Shia, Sufism, and Alevism), Christianity, or Judaism. Furthermore, it explicitly excludes analysis of syncretic religious groups often associated with Kurds but falling outside the defined scope, specifically Yazidism, Yarsanism (also known as Ahl-e Haqq or Kakayi), and Kurdish Alevism (distinct from Turkish Alevism, which has Islamic roots). Information pertaining to the notable revival of Zoroastrianism in Iraqi Kurdistan since approximately 2015 is also excluded, except where sources discussing this revival provide relevant context about pre-2010 historical beliefs or background.[1]

Methodology and Sources

The analysis presented herein is based exclusively on a provided corpus of research materials.[4] This approach necessitates acknowledging the inherent limitations of the available data. The historical record, particularly concerning the popular religious beliefs of non-elite groups in antiquity and the early medieval period, is often fragmented, mediated through external observers, or influenced by the agendas of state religions. Therefore, conclusions drawn must be appropriately cautious and reflect the nature of the evidence.

Defining "Kurd" in Historical Context

A fundamental complexity in examining the pre-Islamic religious history associated with the Kurds lies in the application and historical evolution of the term "Kurd" itself. While modern Kurdish identity is well-established, applying this ethnonym directly to ancient populations is anachronistic and requires careful consideration.[6]

Historical sources suggest the term *kwrt-* existed in Middle Persian, potentially as a common noun referring to a nomadic or 'tent-dwelling' lifestyle, applicable to various Iranian groups.[6] It appears to have gained traction as an ethnonym primarily following the Muslim conquest of Persia in the 7th century CE, gradually becoming associated in Arabic and Persian writings with an amalgamation of tribes and groups in the Zagros-Taurus region.[6] Some sources date the name "Kurd" with certainty only to the time of the tribes' conversion to Islam.[7] Early Islamic writers themselves sometimes expressed confusion, unsure whether "Kurd" denoted specific nomads of the Zagros or a distinct ethnic group with unclear origins.[8]
Therefore, this report will use terminology sensitive to this historical context, employing phrases like "ancestors of the Kurds," "peoples of the Zagros-Taurus region," "groups later identified as Kurds," or specific names of ancient peoples (e.g., Hurrians [10], Guti [7], Carduchoi – though their identification as Kurds is debated [7]) where appropriate. This terminological care is essential for maintaining historical accuracy when discussing periods long before the consolidation of modern Kurdish ethnic identity. The fluidity of this definition inherently shapes any discussion of the religious affiliations of these populations over time.

Report Structure Overview

The report proceeds by first exploring the ancient religious landscape of the Kurdish highlands, considering indigenous and pre-Zoroastrian Iranic influences. It then examines the specific role and extent of Zoroastrianism in the region before 2010. Subsequently, it investigates connections to other relevant non-Abrahamic traditions like Mithraism and Manichaeism. The discussion then turns to potential cultural echoes and the processes of religious transition leading up to the modern era. Finally, the report addresses historiographical challenges and scholarly debates surrounding this topic before offering concluding remarks.

II. The Ancient Religious Landscape of the Kurdish Highlands (Pre-Zoroastrian and Non-Zoroastrian Context)

The mountainous region historically associated with the Kurds possesses a deep and complex history of human settlement and cultural development, resulting in a layered religious heritage long before the rise of Zoroastrianism or the arrival of Abrahamic faiths. Understanding this ancient backdrop is crucial for contextualizing later religious developments.

Indigenous and Early Influences

Archaeological evidence points to millennia of cultural evolution within the Zagros-Taurus region. The Halaf culture, flourishing around 8000 years ago (c. 6000-5400 BCE) and named after Tell Halaf in present-day Syrian Kurdistan, represents one of the earliest identified unified cultures in the Kurdish mountains, known for its distinctive pottery.[10] This period may have seen the development of nomadic herding, facilitating cultural spread across the rugged

terrain.[10] Subsequently, the Ubaid culture, originating in Mesopotamia, expanded into the mountains, leading to a hybrid culture blending Halafian heritage with new influences.[10] Perhaps most significant among the pre-Iranic populations were the Hurrians, whose culture was prominent in the region from approximately 6,300 to 2,600 years ago.[11] The Hurrians established numerous city-states and kingdoms (such as Urartu, Mitanni, and possibly the Gutians and Mannaeans) and left a fundamental legacy considered foundational to later Kurdish culture, mythology, material culture, and potentially genetics.[10] Numerous modern Kurdish clan names (e.g., Bukhti, Tirikan, Bazayni) and topographical names (e.g., River Murad, Lake Van, Mardin) are potentially of Hurrian origin.[10] Proximity to Mesopotamia also ensured interaction with Mesopotamian civilizations and their religious ideas.[8] Some cultural symbols, like the crescent and star associated with Sumerian deities, persisted in the region long after the decline of those civilizations.[15] This deep history indicates that the populations inhabiting these lands possessed rich indigenous traditions before the arrival of Indo-European groups.

Proto-Indo-Iranian Substrate

Around the 2nd millennium BCE, Indo-European tribes, specifically Indo-Iranians, are believed to have migrated into the Iranian plateau and surrounding regions, including the Zagros area.[8] These groups brought with them a shared religious heritage, stemming from a common Indo-Iranian period likely lasting from the 4th to the 3rd millennium BCE.[16] This pre-Zoroastrian religious stratum formed a crucial layer in the region's developing religious landscape.

Central to this Indo-Iranian religion was the concept of *Aša* (cognate with Vedic *Ṛta*), representing cosmic order, truth, and the proper functioning of the universe and society.[16] Divinity was understood through classes of beings: the *ahuras*, associated with maintaining *Aša*, and the *daēvas*, another group of divine beings.[16] Ritual practices included the *yasna* (cognate with Vedic *yajña*), a ceremony involving offerings, potentially including the sacred drink *haoma* (Vedic *soma*).[16]

Significantly, sources suggest that before the widespread adoption of Islam, the majority of the population in the Kurdish regions followed a "western Iranic pre-Zoroastrian faith which derived directly from Indo-Iranian tradition".[4] This implies that while related to the tradition from which Zoroastrianism emerged, the dominant belief system among the ancestors of the Kurds may have retained features or emphases distinct from Zoroaster's specific reforms. Some discussions reference *Mazdayasna* as the broader pre-Zoroastrian belief system of the Aryan peoples, potentially encompassing local variations before Zarathustra's teachings aimed to "complete" the faith.[13] The persistence of this foundational Indo-Iranian layer, potentially less altered by Zoroaster's specific theological innovations compared to other parts of the Iranian world, is a key factor in understanding the region's religious history. It suggests that Zoroastrianism, when it arrived, interacted with a deeply rooted, related, yet distinct set of beliefs and practices.

III. Zoroastrianism and the Peoples of the

Zagros-Taurus Region (Pre-2010)

Zoroastrianism, one of the world's oldest prophetic religions, played a significant role in the history of the Iranian world, including the regions inhabited by the ancestors of the Kurds. However, its precise influence and level of adoption among these populations remain subjects of historical discussion.

Origins and Core Tenets

Zoroastrianism, also known traditionally as *Mazdayasnā* (Worship of Wisdom/Mazda) or *Beh-dīn* (The Good Religion), was founded by the prophet Zoroaster (Avestan: Zarathuštra Spitama).[17] His dating is uncertain, with estimates ranging from as early as the 2nd millennium BCE [18] to perhaps 1800-1200 BCE [19] or the mid-6th century BCE based on first textual records.[17] He is generally thought to have lived in Central Asia or Eastern Iran.[19] Zoroastrianism originated as a reform of the ancient Indo-Iranian religion.[16]

Core tenets include a philosophical dualism, positing a cosmic struggle between the supreme, benevolent creator God, Ahura Mazda (Wise Lord), representing truth and light, and an opposing destructive spirit, Angra Mainyu (Ahriman), representing darkness and the lie.[17] Humans possess free will to choose between supporting Ahura Mazda through good thoughts, good words, and good deeds, thereby upholding *Aša* (truth, righteousness, cosmic order), or siding with Angra Mainyu.[6] The religion includes beliefs in an afterlife with judgment, heaven, and hell (though nuances exist, e.g., some modern priests express disbelief or reinterpretation [1]), messianism, and the eventual triumph of good.[6] Fire is revered as a sacred element representing purity and Ahura Mazda's light, leading to the establishment of fire temples (*Ātaškadeh*) for worship.[17] The primary scriptures are contained in the Avesta, the oldest parts of which are the Gathas, hymns attributed to Zoroaster himself.[17]

Historical Presence and State Patronage

Zoroastrianism spread throughout the Iranian cultural sphere and gained significant political backing over centuries. Its presence in the Zagros region dates back potentially to the Median Empire (7th century BCE).[20] The Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BCE), which incorporated the western Zagros and northern Mesopotamia, is widely considered to have been Zoroastrian, and under its patronage, the religion flourished and became further institutionalized.[16] Archaeological remnants, such as the rock-cut tomb at Qiz Qapan in Iraqi Kurdistan, bear witness to this historical presence.[20]

The faith arguably reached its zenith of influence during the Sasanian Empire (224–651 CE), which adopted Zoroastrianism as its official state religion.[1] This endowed the faith and its priesthood (the Magi) with immense prestige, political authority, and material wealth.[19] During this period, Kurdish tribes were recognized as an important element within the Sasanian realm.[4] The Sasanians also made efforts to standardize the religion and its canon.[17]

Adoption vs. Persistence of Other Faiths

Despite Zoroastrianism's status as the official religion of powerful empires ruling the region for centuries, the extent to which it was universally adopted by the diverse populations of the Zagros-Taurus highlands is debatable. A distinction likely existed between the religion of the imperial court and urban centers, and the beliefs prevalent among rural, tribal, or nomadic groups in mountainous areas.

Several sources suggest that while Zoroastrianism was the state religion or geographically widespread [13], significant segments of the population ancestral to the Kurds may have primarily adhered to other traditions. As mentioned earlier, a "western Iranic pre-Zoroastrian faith" derived from Indo-Iranian traditions is proposed as the majority belief before Islam.[4] Other accounts specifically highlight the persistence of Mithraism among certain Kurdish groups, such as the Guran/Hawrami, even when Zoroastrianism was the official Sasanian faith.[13]

Furthermore, a counter-narrative exists, arguing forcefully that the ancestors of modern Kurds were largely *not* Zoroastrians.[22] This perspective emphasizes the sociological difference between Zoroastrianism as an imperial, state-sponsored religion and the typically rural, nomadic, and relatively autonomous existence of many mountain tribes.[22] It points to alleged Sasanian-era records complaining about the persistence of non-Zoroastrian beliefs in what is now Kurdistan and highlights cultural practices among some Kurds (like the traditional reverence for black snakes) that directly contradict Zoroastrian tenets, where snakes are often viewed negatively.[22] The very fact that the Sasanian state engaged in standardizing and possibly enforcing Zoroastrianism [17] implies that religious uniformity had not been achieved previously and perhaps faced resistance or indifference from certain populations. This suggests a complex reality where state patronage did not equate to universal popular conversion, and older or alternative Iranic belief systems likely maintained a strong presence in the Kurdish highlands.

Decline Before 2010

The dominance of Zoroastrianism began to wane significantly following the Arab-Muslim conquests of the 7th century CE. The Battle of Jalawla (637 CE) marked a major defeat for the Sasanian Empire, initiating the conquest of Iran and Kurdistan.[18] Kurdish tribes, initially strong supporters of the Sasanian defense [4], gradually submitted to the Caliphate as the empire collapsed between 639 and 644 CE.[4]

The subsequent centuries saw a slow but steady process of conversion to Islam among the Kurdish population.[1] Mass conversions are noted particularly during the reign of the second Caliph, Umar ibn Al-Khattab (634-644 CE).[4] While conversion was sometimes voluntary, sources also mention periods of pressure, persecution, massacres, and genocide against remaining Zoroastrians, prompting emigration, notably the Parsis who fled to India.[1] Some Zoroastrians reportedly took refuge in mountainous areas.[18]

Although Islam became the dominant religion among Kurds over the following centuries [4], the historical memory of Zoroastrianism persisted. There are suggestions that the religion survived "in hiding," with knowledge passed down secretly through generations long before

the recent, post-2010 revival.[2] This historical connection, whether based on direct continuity or cultural memory, became significant in modern times. Even before 2010, the idea of Zoroastrianism as the "original" or "ancestral" religion of the Kurds was invoked, particularly within nationalist discourses seeking to emphasize a distinct, non-Arab and non-Turkish heritage.[1] However, this narrative itself was, and remains, contested. Some questioned how authentically "Kurdish" Zoroastrianism was, suggesting Persian or eastern origins [3], while others dismissed the connection as a "nationalist fantasy" disconnected from the historical realities of Kurdish ancestors.[22] Thus, the relationship between Kurds and Zoroastrianism before 2010 encompassed not only historical presence and decline but also its contested role as a symbol in identity formation.

IV. Exploring Other Non-Abrahamic Connections (Pre-2010)

While Zoroastrianism holds a prominent place in discussions of pre-Islamic Iranic religions, the religious landscape of the Kurdish highlands was more diverse. Other non-Abrahamic traditions, notably Mithraism and Manichaeism, also had a presence and potential influence in the region before 2010.

Mithraism

Mithra (Avestan: Mithra, Old Persian: Miθra) was a major divinity in the Indo-Iranian pantheon, associated with covenants, treaties, light, and oaths.[17] Although incorporated into the Zoroastrian system as a prominent *yazata* (a being worthy of worship, an angelic figure assisting Ahura Mazda) [17], Mithra also appears to have been the focus of distinct devotional practices, often referred to as Mithraism.

Evidence suggests Mithraism was significant in the regions inhabited by the ancestors of the Kurds.[14] Some sources propose it was particularly prevalent among specific groups, such as the Guran or Hawrami Kurds, potentially remaining the primary faith for many even during the Sasanian era when Zoroastrianism was the official state religion.[13] The persistence of Mithraic elements is also suggested by theories (like the controversial "Yazdânism") which, while primarily focusing on groups excluded from this report's scope, sometimes posit a Mithraic religious substrate in the region.[26] For instance, certain characteristics of the Yezidi figure Shaykh Shams al-Din (associated with the sun and oaths) are seen as sharing commonalities with the ancient god Mithra.[26] While direct evidence for distinct Mithraic cults among Kurds in later periods is limited in the provided materials, its importance in the earlier Iranic religious matrix suggests it formed a significant part of the religious background for the populations of the Zagros-Taurus region.

Manichaeism

Manichaeism was a major world religion founded by the Iranian prophet Mani (c. 216–274 CE).[27] Born near Ctesiphon in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) during the Parthian era, Mani

proclaimed himself the final prophet in a line including Zoroaster, Buddha, and Jesus.[27] His teachings presented an elaborate dualistic cosmology describing a struggle between a good, spiritual world of light and an evil, material world of darkness.[27] Manichaeism explicitly aimed to synthesize and surpass elements from existing traditions, including Zoroastrianism, Christianity (especially Gnostic and Jewish-Christian sects like the Elcesaites, to which Mani's parents reportedly belonged), Buddhism, and Mesopotamian religions.[27]

Manichaeism spread rapidly through Aramaic-speaking regions and thrived between the 3rd and 7th centuries, reaching from the Roman Empire to China.[27] Mani himself presented one of his key works, the *Shabuhragan* (written in Middle Persian), to the Sasanian Emperor Shapur I, who initially tolerated the religion's spread within his empire.[27] Given its origins in Mesopotamia and its spread through the Sasanian Empire, Manichaeism was undoubtedly present in the regions inhabited by the ancestors of the Kurds.[14]

However, Manichaeism faced persecution from various authorities. It was eventually suppressed within the Sasanian Empire, and later vigorously opposed by both the Christian church in the West and Islamic authorities in the East.[27] While it survived longer in Central Asia and China, its presence in its homeland diminished significantly after the rise of Islam, though it persisted into the Abbasid period (10th century).[27] Although direct evidence of widespread Manichaean adherence specifically among Kurdish groups before 2010 is scarce in the provided sources, its historical presence in the broader region is undeniable. Furthermore, some scholars suggest that elements of Manichaean thought may have influenced later syncretic religious developments in Kurdistan (such as Yazidism, though this group is excluded from detailed discussion here) [28], hinting at a lasting, albeit perhaps indirect, legacy within the region's complex religious tapestry.

Legacy of Earlier Belief Systems

Beyond the major organized religions, elements from much older belief systems likely persisted among the populations of the Kurdish highlands. The deep roots of Hurrian civilization [10], along with influences from other ancient groups like the Gutians, Lullubi, and various Mesopotamian cultures [8], probably left lasting imprints on local folklore, mythology, and folk religious practices.

Evidence for this can be inferred from descriptions of related groups or surviving customs. For example, among the Dimli (Zaza), who inhabit adjacent areas and whose relationship to Kurds is complex, remnants of "nature worship"—veneration of mountains, rocks, springs, and trees (especially oaks)—have been noted.[31] A distinctive cult of the snake, considered a holy creature and symbolized by a special staff, has also been reported among the Dimli.[31] This reverence for snakes is echoed in anecdotal accounts of traditions among some Kurdish communities (e.g., not harming black snakes [22]), a practice notably contrasting with the negative portrayal of snakes in Zoroastrianism.[22] These fragments suggest the survival of ancient, possibly pre-Indo-Iranian, layers of belief beneath the surface of later, more formalized religious systems.

The following table provides a comparative overview of the key non-Abrahamic religious

traditions discussed, focusing on their relevance to the Kurdish highlands region before 2010, based on the provided source materials.

Religion/Belief System	Approximate Timeframe of Influence in Region	Key Relevant Features (as per sources)	Evidence/Debate Regarding Connection to Kurds/Ancestors (Pre-2010)
Pre-Zoroastrian Indo-Iranian	From c. 2000 BCE onwards	Worship of *ahuras* & *daevas*; concept of *Aša/Arta* (cosmic order); rituals (*yasna*, *haoma*).[16]	Considered the foundational religious stratum for Iranic peoples migrating into the region.[16] Proposed as the majority faith among Kurds/ancestors before Islam, distinct from later Zoroastrian reforms.[4] *Mazdayasna* used as a broader term.[13]
Zoroastrianism	Influence from c. 7th C BCE; peak Sasanian era (224-651 CE)	Dualism (Ahura Mazda vs. Angra Mainyu); *Aša*; free will; fire veneration; Avesta scripture.[17]	State religion of Medes, Achaemenids, Sasanians; archaeological evidence in region (Qiz Qapan).[20] Adoption debated: state religion vs. popular practice.[4] Contested symbol of ancestral identity in pre-2010 nationalist discourse.[1] Declined after Islamic conquests.[4]
Mithraism	Ancient Iranic; potentially strong pre-Islam	Focus on god Mithra (covenant, light, oaths).[17] Incorporated as *yazata* in Zoroastrianism but also potentially separate cults.	Suggested as particularly strong among some groups (Guran/Hawrami) even during Sasanian era.[13] Part of the broader Iranic religious matrix

			of the region.[14] Possible influence on later (excluded) syncretic traditions hinted at.[26]
Manichaeism	Flourished 3rd-7th C CE; declined later	Founded by Mani (c. 216 CE); dualistic cosmology (light vs. darkness); syncretic (Zoroastrian, Christian, Buddhist elements).[27]	Originated in Mesopotamia, spread through Sasanian Empire including Kurdish regions.[14] Tolerated initially by Shapur I.[27] Later persecuted.[27] Possible indirect influence on later regional beliefs suggested.[28]
Hurrian/Mesopotamian Echoes	Pre-dating Iranic migrations; legacy persisted	Indigenous cultures (Halaf, Ubaid, Hurrian).[10] Mesopotamian influences.[12] Possible remnants of nature worship (mountains, springs, snakes).[22]	Hurrian culture considered foundational legacy.[10] Persistence of ancient symbols (crescent/star).[15] Folk beliefs potentially reflecting older strata.[22]

This table highlights the multiplicity of non-Abrahamic religious influences present in the historical landscape inhabited by the ancestors of the Kurds. It underscores that Zoroastrianism, while significant, was part of a more complex tapestry that included other distinct Iranic faiths like Mithraism and Manichaeism, all superimposed upon much older indigenous and Mesopotamian traditions. The interplay between these systems, and the degree to which each was adopted or resisted by various groups within the region, remains a central question in understanding this history.

V. Echoes and Transitions Before 2010

While the formal practice of most pre-Islamic, non-Abrahamic religions declined significantly among Kurdish populations over the centuries following the Islamic conquests, certain cultural practices and historical memories persisted into the period before 2010, offering echoes of this older heritage. The transition itself was a complex, long-term process.

Cultural Survivals

Certain cultural traditions widely observed by Kurds before 2010 have roots that potentially

extend back to pre-Islamic, non-Abrahamic times, demonstrating a layer of continuity distinct from formal religious affiliation.

The most prominent example is **Newroz**, the celebration of the New Year and the arrival of spring, typically occurring around the vernal equinox. Widely celebrated by Kurds and other Iranian peoples, Newroz is deeply embedded in Kurdish culture and national identity.[32] Kurdish mythology often links its origin to the story of Kawa the Blacksmith (*Kaveh*), who defeated the tyrannical king Zahak (a figure appearing in Firdawsi's 10th-century Persian epic, the *Shahnameh*) and lit a bonfire on the mountainside to signal the victory, marking a new day for his people.[32] This event is sometimes connected to the emergence of the ancient Median Empire, considered by some scholars like Minorsky as ancestors of the Kurds.[32] While the specific Kawa myth provides a distinct Kurdish narrative, the festival itself is generally recognized as having ancient Iranian origins, likely connected to Zoroastrian traditions celebrating renewal and the victory of light over darkness.[32] Its continued celebration as a major cultural event, even after widespread conversion to Islam, points to the persistence of ancient cultural frameworks.[22]

Beyond major festivals, **folk beliefs and practices** may also preserve remnants of older faiths. Anecdotal evidence suggests the survival of specific traditions or sayings among Kurdish communities, passed down through generations, that might have pre-Islamic religious origins.[22] The example previously mentioned—a tradition in some areas of not harming black snakes [22]—stands in contrast to typical Zoroastrian views and could potentially reflect much older, possibly pre-Iranic, reverence for certain animals or nature spirits, as also hinted at in practices observed among the Dimli.[31] The persistence of such elements, often detached from their original religious context and integrated into local folklore, indicates how cultural layers can endure long after dominant religious systems change.

The Process of Religious Shift

The transition from the diverse non-Abrahamic religious landscape described earlier to the predominance of Islam among Kurds was a gradual and multifaceted process spanning centuries. It began with the Arab-Muslim conquests in the 7th century CE, which led to the collapse of the Zoroastrian Sasanian Empire.[1] As Kurdish tribal leaders submitted to the new Islamic authority, their communities often followed suit in converting.[4]

This process involved various factors. While some conversion was likely voluntary or driven by political expediency, historical accounts also point to periods of coercion, violence, and persecution directed at those who maintained older faiths.[13] The imposition of taxes (like the *jizya*) on non-Muslims could also incentivize conversion over time.[19] Madrasas (Islamic schools) were established in Kurdish regions from around the 10th century, contributing to the spread and institutionalization of Islamic learning and civilization.[4]

By the centuries leading up to 2010, the overwhelming majority of Kurds identified with Islam, primarily Sunni Islam of the Shafi'i school, with smaller Hanafi, Shia, and Alevi minorities (though Alevism itself falls outside this report's specific scope).[4] Despite this near-complete religious shift in terms of formal affiliation, the historical memory and cultural influence of the

pre-Islamic past, particularly Zoroastrianism, continued to resonate, especially within nationalist movements seeking to define a distinct Kurdish identity separate from their predominantly Muslim neighbors.[1] The dominance of Islam for over thirteen centuries inevitably obscured many details of earlier popular religious life, making reconstruction reliant on interpreting fragmented historical texts, archaeological findings, linguistic clues, and the meaning embedded in surviving cultural practices.

VI. Historiography and Scholarly Discourse

The study of the pre-Islamic religious history of the Kurds and their ancestors is fraught with challenges and influenced by contemporary factors, including the politics of identity and nationalism. Understanding these historiographical issues is essential for critically evaluating claims about the past.

Challenges in Research

Several inherent difficulties complicate research into this topic. Firstly, there is a **scarcity and potential bias of sources**, particularly concerning the beliefs and practices of ordinary people as opposed to state-sponsored religions. Much of the information comes from later sources, including early Islamic historians who may have had limited direct contact with Kurdish populations or held their own biases.[8] Pre-Islamic textual evidence directly attributable to the ancestors of the Kurds is minimal.

Secondly, establishing **definitive links between ancient peoples** mentioned in historical records (such as the Guti, Lullubi, Hurrians, Medes, or Carduchoi) and modern Kurds remains challenging and often speculative.[7] While cultural and linguistic continuities are explored, direct lines of descent are hard to prove conclusively.

Thirdly, as previously discussed, the **ambiguity and historical evolution of the term "Kurd"** itself poses a significant challenge.[6] Applying the modern ethnonym backwards in time risks oversimplifying complex historical identities and affiliations.

Influence of Nationalism

Modern Kurdish nationalism, emerging particularly over the last century in response to statelessness and assimilationist pressures [6], has significantly influenced interpretations of pre-Islamic history. In seeking to forge a distinct national identity, separate from Turkish, Arab, and Persian neighbors (who are predominantly Muslim), nationalist narratives often emphasize ancient origins and pre-Islamic religious affiliations perceived as uniquely Kurdish or non-Abrahamic.[1]

Zoroastrianism, in particular, has often been promoted in this context as the "original" or "ancestral" religion of the Kurds.[1] This narrative serves to establish deep historical roots in the land and differentiate Kurdish heritage from the Islamic identity of surrounding dominant groups. Similarly, attempts to construct a unified pre-Islamic Kurdish religion, such as Mehrdad Izady's controversial concept of "Yazdânism" or the "Cult of Angels" (linking Yazidism, Yarsanism, and Alevism to an ancient Mithraic base) [26], reflect this tendency. While

Izady's theory primarily involves groups excluded from this report, it exemplifies the broader effort within nationalist discourse to define a distinct pre-Islamic religious identity, although this specific theory has been criticized by scholars like Richard Foltz as an "invented religion" owing more to modern sentiment than historical reality.[26]
These nationalist interpretations often need to be distinguished from critical scholarly assessments, which tend to emphasize the complexity, heterogeneity, and limitations of the available evidence.[3] The politicization of pre-Islamic history means that narratives about religious origins are frequently employed to assert contemporary claims to identity, territory, and historical continuity.

Scholarly Debates

Given the challenges and influences described above, several areas remain subject to scholarly debate. These include:

- The actual extent of popular adoption of Zoroastrianism among the diverse tribes of the Zagros-Taurus region, versus its status as an elite or state religion.
- The relative significance and persistence of Mithraism and other non-Zoroastrian Iranic beliefs among the ancestors of the Kurds.
- The validity and interpretation of linking specific ancient peoples and archaeological cultures (e.g., Halaf, Hurrians, Medes) directly to the ethnogenesis of the Kurds.
- The interpretation of syncretic elements found in later religious traditions (including those excluded from this report) as reliable indicators of specific pre-Islamic religious strata (e.g., Manichaean, Mithraic, or older indigenous elements).

These ongoing debates underscore the need for a critical approach to sources and a nuanced understanding that avoids simplistic or monolithic portrayals of the pre-Islamic religious history of the region. Distinguishing between verifiable historical evidence, plausible interpretations, and ideologically motivated narratives is crucial.

VII. Conclusion

Summary of Findings

The relationship between the populations ancestral to modern Kurds and non-Abrahamic religions before 2010 presents a complex and multifaceted picture, shaped by millennia of cultural interaction, migration, and political change within the Zagros-Taurus region. The analysis, strictly excluding Abrahamic faiths and related syncretic groups like Yazidism and Yarsanism, reveals several key points:

1. **Layered Heritage:** The pre-Islamic religious landscape was deeply layered, built upon indigenous foundations (including significant Hurrian and Mesopotamian influences) overlaid by a foundational Indo-Iranian religious stratum shared with other Iranic peoples. This pre-Zoroastrian base appears to have remained influential among the ancestors of the Kurds.
2. **Zoroastrianism's Role:** Zoroastrianism was a major force, particularly due to its status as the state religion of successive Iranian empires (Median, Achaemenid, Sasanian) that

ruled the region. Archaeological evidence confirms its presence. However, its universal adoption by all population segments is questionable. Evidence suggests a divergence between official state religion and popular practice, with significant portions of the population potentially adhering more closely to other Iranic traditions or older beliefs.

3. **Other Iranic Faiths:** Mithraism appears to have been a significant religious tradition in the region, potentially coexisting with or even predominating over Zoroastrianism among certain groups. Manichaeism, originating in neighboring Mesopotamia within the Sasanian milieu, also spread through the area, adding another layer to the complex religious environment, though its direct adherence among Kurdish groups specifically is less documented in the provided sources.
4. **Persistence and Transition:** Following the 7th-century Islamic conquests, these non-Abrahamic faiths gradually declined among Kurdish populations through a long process of conversion, although elements may have survived in hiding or transformed into folk practices. Cultural survivals with ancient roots, such as the celebration of Newroz, persisted long after the religious shift.
5. **Historiographical Context:** Understanding this history is complicated by source limitations, the ambiguity of ethnic labels in antiquity, and the significant influence of modern Kurdish nationalism, which often shapes interpretations of the past to serve contemporary identity needs. The narrative of Zoroastrianism as the definitive "original" Kurdish religion, prominent before 2010 and amplified since, remains historically contested.

Concluding Thoughts

The pre-Islamic religious identity of the diverse groups who inhabited the Kurdish highlands was likely far more heterogeneous and fluid than often portrayed. Rather than a single, monolithic faith, the ancestors of the Kurds participated in a dynamic religious environment encompassing ancient indigenous practices, a foundational Indo-Iranian heritage, the influence of imperial Zoroastrianism, the distinct appeal of Mithraism, and the syncretic challenge of Manichaeism. The dominance of Islam for over thirteen centuries has obscured much of this past, making definitive reconstruction difficult. Future research integrating archaeological, linguistic, and critically evaluated textual evidence may further illuminate this complex history, but must remain cognizant of the persistent interplay between historical inquiry and the construction of modern identities. The relationship between the Kurds and non-Abrahamic religions before 2010 is best understood not as a simple lineage but as participation in a rich, contested, and ultimately transformed religious world.

VIII. Works Cited

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