

The Origins of the Kurds: An Interdisciplinary Synthesis

I. Introduction: The Quest for Kurdish Origins

The Complexity of Ethnogenesis

The question of Kurdish origins presents a profound challenge to historians, anthropologists, linguists, and geneticists alike. Far from being a singular event traceable to a specific point in time or a single ancestral group, the ethnogenesis of the Kurdish people represents a complex, protracted process unfolding over millennia within a unique and strategically vital geographical nexus. The Kurds, often described as possessing heterogeneous origins, are the culmination of thousands of years of internal evolution, assimilation of diverse peoples, and adaptation to the dynamic cultural and political landscape of the Near East. Understanding their beginnings requires moving beyond simplistic narratives and embracing an interdisciplinary approach that synthesizes evidence from multiple fields of inquiry. This report endeavors to dissect this complexity, examining the historical, geographical, archaeological, linguistic, genetic, and cultural threads that contribute to the current understanding of Kurdish origins, while acknowledging the significant debates and uncertainties that persist within scholarly discourse.

Interdisciplinary Approach

No single discipline holds the key to unlocking the full story of Kurdish origins. Historical records, often penned by non-Kurdish observers from neighboring empires or later polities, provide crucial glimpses but must be interpreted with caution, mindful of potential biases and the limitations of external perspectives. Archaeology offers tangible evidence of human occupation and cultural development in the Kurdish homeland stretching back to the Paleolithic era, revealing deep time depth and patterns of innovation and interaction. Linguistics allows for the tracing of the Kurdish language's evolution within the broader Indo-European family, revealing relationships with other Iranian languages and hinting at historical contacts and migrations. Population genetics provides powerful tools to investigate ancestry, population movements, and genetic affinities with neighboring and ancient groups, offering insights into both deep origins and more recent admixture events. Historical geography illuminates the crucial role of the mountainous environment in shaping settlement patterns, lifestyles, social structures, and interactions with external powers. Finally, cultural anthropology examines the evolution of Kurdish identity itself, including social organization, traditions, folklore, and the remarkable religious diversity that characterizes the Kurdish people. Only by integrating these diverse strands of evidence can a nuanced and comprehensive picture emerge.

Acknowledging Debates and Uncertainties

It is essential to acknowledge from the outset that definitive answers regarding Kurdish origins remain elusive, and scholarly consensus is lacking on many key points. A significant challenge stems from the scarcity of early textual evidence that unambiguously identifies a group as

"Kurdish" in the modern ethnic sense. Furthermore, the available historical materials often originate from external sources, necessitating careful critical analysis. Consequently, numerous theories regarding the etymology of the name "Kurd," the specific ancestral groups involved, the precise linguistic trajectory, and the interpretation of genetic data are subject to ongoing debate. This report will navigate these controversies, presenting competing scholarly perspectives and highlighting areas where academic agreement exists alongside those marked by significant disagreement, as requested by the user query (Query Point 7).

Geographical Context: The Zagros-Taurus Nexus

Central to any discussion of Kurdish origins is the geographical stage upon which their history has unfolded: the rugged highlands of the Zagros and Taurus mountain ranges. This vast, mountainous region, often referred to as Kurdistan ("Land of the Kurds"), stretches across the modern borders of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Armenia. It forms a distinctive ecological and cultural zone, historically acting as both a refuge and a crossroads. Archaeological evidence confirms that this area has been continuously inhabited for millennia, serving as a cradle for early agriculture and distinct cultural developments. The mountainous terrain has profoundly shaped Kurdish history, influencing traditional lifestyles, fostering specific forms of social organization, and playing a critical role in the very process of Kurdish ethnogenesis.

Roadmap

This report will proceed by first examining the etymology and earliest historical mentions of the name "Kurd." It will then delve into the historical geography and archaeology of the Zagros-Taurus region, exploring the deep roots of human settlement and the environment's impact. Subsequently, it will evaluate the proposed connections between Kurds and various ancient peoples. The linguistic origins and development of Kurdish will be analyzed, followed by a review of findings from population genetics. The evolution of Kurdish cultural identity, including religious diversity, will then be explored. Finally, the report will synthesize the evidence, discuss differing scholarly theories and ongoing debates, and offer a concluding perspective on the complex tapestry of Kurdish origins.

II. Tracing the Name "Kurd": Etymology and Early Historical Mentions

The very name "Kurd" is shrouded in historical ambiguity, with multiple theories proposed for its origin, none achieving universal acceptance. This etymological uncertainty mirrors the broader complexities surrounding the early identification and ethnogenesis of the Kurdish people. Tracing the earliest appearances of the name and related terms in historical records provides crucial, albeit often debated, clues about how and when the group currently known as Kurds came to be recognized.

Etymological Theories

Several potential linguistic roots for the ethnonym "Kurd" have been suggested by scholars, reflecting diverse historical and linguistic contexts:

1. **Cyrtii/Kurti:** One prominent theory suggests the name derives from the *Cyrtii* (Greek:

Kýrtioi), mentioned by classical authors like Strabo and Polybius as early as the 2nd century BCE. These sources describe the *Cyrtii* as skilled slingers inhabiting the Zagros Mountains. The phonetic similarity is notable, and the geographical location aligns with the Kurdish heartland. However, this connection remains uncertain, as the term *Cyrtii* might have referred to various mountain groups rather than a specific proto-Kurdish entity.

2. **Guti/Gutians:** An alternative hypothesis links "Kurd" to the ancient Gutians (Sumerian: *Gu-ti-um*), a people from the Zagros who interacted, often antagonistically, with Mesopotamian civilizations in the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE. Linguist R. Safarastian proposed a phonetic shift from *Guti* to *Gurti* through the assimilation of 'r' after 'u', a pattern observed in some Indo-European languages. While geographically relevant, the Gutians predate the clear emergence of Kurdish linguistic features by millennia, and the term "Gutian" itself became a generalized Mesopotamian designation for Zagros peoples, making a direct etymological link speculative.
3. **Corduene:** The name might also stem from Corduene (Gordyene), an ancient kingdom located south of Lake Van, corresponding to parts of modern southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq. The people of Corduene, the *Carduchi* encountered by Xenophon (discussed below), are frequently proposed as ancestors of the Kurds.
4. ****Middle Persian *kwrt*-:** ** Another line of reasoning points to the Middle Persian term *kwrt*-, meaning "nomad" or "tent-dweller". Following the Islamic conquests of Persia in the 7th century CE, this term was adopted into Arabic as *kurd* (plural *Akrād*). Early Islamic sources often used *kurd* to describe nomadic or semi-nomadic groups, particularly those inhabiting the western fringes of the Iranian plateau and the Zagros Mountains. This suggests that, at least initially in the Islamic period, the term might have carried a socio-economic or lifestyle connotation rather than a purely ethnic one. Mehrdad Izady argues that nomadic groups labeled *kurd* in medieval Arabic sources were indeed "bona fide Kurds," implying an ethnic identity even then, though this interpretation is part of the broader debate.

The existence of multiple, plausible yet unproven etymological pathways underscores the difficulty in pinpointing a single origin for the name "Kurd." It strongly suggests that the term may have had a fluid meaning in antiquity, possibly applied by outsiders (like Mesopotamians or Persians) to various mountain-dwelling or nomadic groups before it gradually coalesced and became adopted as a self-identifier (endonym) by the people themselves. The shift from a possible lifestyle descriptor (*kwrt*-) or a label for specific encountered groups (*Kardouchoi*, *Cyrtii*) to a recognized ethnic designation appears to be a gradual historical process.

Earliest Historical Mentions

References to peoples or lands with names phonetically similar to "Kurd" appear in very ancient sources, though their direct connection to modern Kurds is often debated:

1. **Sumerian/Akkadian Records:** Sumerian cuneiform texts dating back to the 3rd millennium BCE mention a "land of Karda" or "Qarda". This region was associated with the "Qurtians," who some scholars tentatively link to the Gutians. Akkadian sources later used the term 'Kurtei' to denote inhabitants of the Zagros and eastern Taurus mountains. These early references establish a long-standing association between "Kurd"-like names and the mountainous regions bordering Mesopotamia.
2. **Xenophon's *Kardouchoi* (401 BCE):** The most frequently cited classical reference comes from the Greek historian Xenophon's *Anabasis*. During the retreat of the Ten Thousand Greek mercenaries, they encountered the *Kardouchoi* (Καρδοῦχοι) in the

mountainous region near the Centrites River (modern Botan River, near Zakho in present-day Iraqi Kurdistan). Xenophon describes them as fierce, independent mountain warriors, skilled in guerrilla tactics, who were not subjects of the Achaemenid Persian king. He notes the difficulty the Persians had in controlling them. The geographical location is squarely within the Kurdish heartland, and the name is phonetically close to "Kurd." Many scholars consider the *Kardouchoi* likely ancestors or related to the Kurds. However, some dispute this direct link, emphasizing the lack of conclusive evidence. It is speculated that the *Kardouchoi* spoke an Old Iranian language. Interestingly, the *-choi* ending is likely borrowed from Armenian, representing the Armenian plural suffix *-kh*, suggesting interaction with neighboring linguistic groups.

3. **Later Classical Sources:** Following Xenophon, other classical writers like Polybius (2nd c. BCE) and Strabo (1st c. BCE/1st c. CE) mention the *Cyrtii* (Kurti) as inhabitants of Media and surrounding mountainous areas. Historians Livy, Pliny, Tacitus, and later Procopius also use similar terms for native populations in Media and parts of Anatolia. Ptolemy, in his *Geography* (2nd c. CE), provides names of various tribes in the region that might correspond to later Kurdish groups. These references reinforce the presence of groups with "Kurd"-like names in the Zagros-Taurus region during the classical period.

Evolution of the Term's Meaning

The historical application of the term "Kurd" appears to have evolved significantly over time. Initially, as suggested by Mesopotamian and early Islamic usage, it might have been a somewhat generic exonym applied to various, often nomadic or semi-nomadic, mountain tribes inhabiting the Zagros massif and adjacent areas. Early Arab and Persian writers after the fall of the Sassanids expressed confusion, sometimes viewing "Kurd" as referring specifically to Zagros nomads, while others perceived an ethnic group but were uncertain of its origins. A pivotal moment appears to be the Islamic conquests in the 7th century CE. This period marks the earliest point at which the name "Kurd" can be dated with certainty as referring to the specific tribes in the region who were converting to Islam. This suggests a consolidation or clearer definition of the group identity associated with the name around this time. Despite this, scholarly debate continued regarding whether early mentions signified a group defined by ethnicity and language, a nomadic lifestyle, or simply the inhabitants of a specific mountainous environment. A significant contribution to understanding this evolution comes from Boris James, whose analysis of sources from the 12th to 14th centuries CE concluded that by the 12th century, the term "Kurds" was used in contemporary writings to denote a unified ethnic group, albeit one internally divided into various tribes. This indicates that over the centuries following the Islamic conquests, the term transitioned from a potentially ambiguous label to a recognized ethnonym representing a distinct people with a shared, albeit tribally organized, identity. This semantic journey, from external geographic or lifestyle descriptor to an internally recognized ethnic marker, reflects the gradual process of Kurdish ethnogenesis itself.

III. The Mountain Cradle: Geography, Archaeology, and Early Inhabitants of Kurdistan

The physical environment of the Kurdish homeland has been a defining factor throughout history, shaping the emergence and development of Kurdish culture, society, and identity. The rugged mountain ranges of the Zagros and Taurus, coupled with the archaeological evidence of

deep and continuous human occupation, provide the essential backdrop for understanding Kurdish origins.

Historical Geography: Zagros and Taurus Mountains

The traditional homeland of the Kurds, broadly termed Kurdistan, is geographically defined by the extensive mountain systems of the Zagros range, running northwest-southeast through western Iran and northeastern Iraq, and the eastern extensions of the Taurus range in southeastern Turkey. This vast territory also encompasses adjacent high plateaus, foothills descending towards the Mesopotamian plains, and portions of northeastern Syria and western Armenia. The landscape is characterized by parallel mountain ridges, deep valleys, steppelike plateaus, and volcanic cones, with elevations varying significantly. The climate is continental, marked by extreme temperature fluctuations between harsh winters and hot summers. Geopolitically, this mountainous region has historically served as a formidable barrier and borderland between the Mesopotamian lowlands to the west and the Iranian Plateau to the east.

Impact of Geography on Ethnogenesis and Culture

The unique geography of Kurdistan has exerted a profound and multifaceted influence on the development of the Kurdish people:

- **Isolation and Identity Formation:** The formidable mountain ranges fostered a degree of isolation from the major lowland centers of power and civilization. This relative seclusion likely played a crucial role in the preservation and development of distinct cultural traits, linguistic features, and ultimately, a separate Kurdish identity over millennia. The mountains served as a natural refuge, allowing populations to maintain continuity even amidst the rise and fall of surrounding empires. This geographical continuity of habitation is a key factor supporting the notion of deep indigenous roots.
- **Pastoral Nomadism as a Way of Life:** The mountainous terrain, with its limited arable land in many areas and distinct seasonal variations in pasture availability, strongly favored a pastoral or semi-nomadic lifestyle. Traditional Kurdish society revolved around the herding of sheep and goats, involving seasonal migrations (transhumance) between high summer pastures in the mountains and lower winter grazing grounds. This nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralism became a defining characteristic of Kurdish culture for centuries, although the imposition of modern national borders after World War I severely impeded these migrations, forcing a widespread shift towards settled agriculture and village life.
- **Tribal Social Structure:** The fragmented nature of the mountainous landscape, with valleys and plateaus separated by high ridges, naturally encouraged the development and persistence of tribal social structures. Tribes, typically led by hereditary chieftains known as aghas or religious leaders called sheikhs, functioned as the primary units of social, economic, and political organization. Kinship ties (patrilineal descent groups, lineages, clans) provided frameworks for mutual support, resource management (especially communal pastures), and defense within specific territories. While urbanization and modern state policies have led to processes of detribalization, tribal identification and leadership authority often remain influential, particularly in rural areas.
- **Heterogeneity and Political Fragmentation:** Paradoxically, the same geography that fostered distinctiveness also contributed to internal divisions. The difficult terrain hindered large-scale communication and integration between different Kurdish communities,

fostering linguistic (dialectal) and cultural heterogeneity. This internal fragmentation, exacerbated by the region's strategic location, made Kurdistan a perennial battleground and buffer zone between rival empires, most notably the Ottoman and Safavid (Persian) empires. The Battle of Chaldiran in 1514 and the subsequent Treaty of Zuhab in 1639 led to a formal partition of Kurdish lands between these powers, a division that foreshadowed later partitions and entrenched political disunity. External powers consistently exploited these geographical and tribal divisions through 'divide and rule' strategies, further hindering Kurdish political consolidation.

The Zagros-Taurus geography thus emerges as a critical factor with a dual legacy. It served as a protective cradle, enabling the survival and development of a distinct Kurdish culture and identity over vast stretches of time. Simultaneously, it imposed constraints that fostered internal fragmentation and rendered the Kurds vulnerable to the political machinations of more powerful neighbors, profoundly shaping both their cultural uniqueness and their long struggle for political unity.

Archaeological Record: Deep Roots in the Region

Archaeological investigations, though historically uneven and sometimes hampered by political instability, confirm the immense time depth of human occupation in the Zagros-Taurus region, providing a crucial foundation for understanding Kurdish origins.

- **Paleolithic and Neolithic Eras:** The Zagros Mountains were home to early humans since the Lower Paleolithic. Significant Neanderthal remains have been discovered in caves like Shanidar, Bisitun, and Wezmeh, dating back tens of thousands of years. Shanidar Cave is particularly important, yielding not only Neanderthal fossils but also later burials from the Upper Paleolithic/Epipaleolithic and evidence of proto-Neolithic occupation around 10,600 years ago. Crucially, the Zagros foothills are recognized as one of the world's primary centers for the Neolithic Revolution – the transition to agriculture and settled life. Evidence for early plant cultivation (cereals, legumes) and animal domestication (sheep, goats, pigs, dogs) dates back as early as 9000 BCE at sites like Jarmo, Karim Shahr, Bestansur, and Zawi Chemi Shanidar. The domestication of sheep and goats, fundamental to the later pastoralist traditions, occurred in this region.
- **Chalcolithic: Halaf and Ubaid Cultures:** Emerging around 6000 BCE, the Halaf culture, named after Tell Halaf in Syrian Kurdistan, represents the earliest archaeological horizon demonstrating a unified and distinct material culture across the Kurdish mountain zone. Characterized by its distinctive, finely painted pottery, Halaf culture is considered indigenous to the region, likely developing out of the preceding Neolithic populations. This period saw advancements in domestic technologies like weaving and glazing. Subsequently, the Ubaid culture, originating in southern Mesopotamia, expanded into the mountains around 5400 BCE, interacting with and influencing the local Halaf traditions, resulting in a hybrid cultural phase.
- **Bronze Age: The Hurrian Sphere:** Around 4300 BCE, the Hurrian culture became dominant in the Zagros-Taurus region. The Hurrians, whose linguistic affiliations are debated but often linked to Northeast Caucasian languages, established numerous city-states and kingdoms (such as Urartu, Mitanni, Gutu, Manna, Kassites) throughout the mountains. Their influence extended widely, though primarily concentrated within the highland zones. The Hurrian period represents a significant phase in the region's history, potentially contributing foundational elements to later Kurdish culture, according to some theories (see Section IV).

- **Iron Age:** During the Iron Age, the region saw the rise of powers like Urartu (likely Hurrian-related) in the north and the increasing presence of Iranian-speaking groups, including the Medes. Archaeological sites attributed to the Median period (roughly 7th-6th centuries BCE), such as Godin Tepe and Tepe Nush-i Jan in the central Zagros, reveal monumental architecture featuring columned halls and distinctive pottery styles ("Median Buff Ware"). However, definitively identifying sites as exclusively "Median" remains challenging due to the scarcity of written records and the complex ethnic landscape.

The archaeological narrative unequivocally demonstrates that the Zagros-Taurus region was not a peripheral backwater but a dynamic center of human activity and cultural innovation for millennia before the emergence of historically attested Kurdish groups. It was a core area for the development of agriculture and pastoralism, witnessed the rise and fall of indigenous cultures like the Halafians and Hurrians, and interacted continuously with neighboring civilizations in Mesopotamia and the Iranian Plateau. This deep history provides the essential context for the ethnogenesis of the Kurds, suggesting that their origins are firmly rooted in the ancient populations of this mountain cradle.

IV. Ancestral Echoes: Evaluating Connections to Ancient Peoples

The consensus among scholars is that the Kurdish people possess heterogeneous origins, representing a synthesis of various ancient populations rather than direct descent from a single ancestral group. This section critically evaluates the evidence linking Kurds to several key ancient peoples frequently proposed as potential ancestors or contributors to Kurdish ethnogenesis, focusing on the Gutians, Lullubi, Hurrians, Carduchoi, Cyrtii, and Medes.

Indigenous Mountain Peoples: Gutians, Lullubi, and Hurrians

Several groups known primarily from Mesopotamian records inhabited the Zagros Mountains during the Bronze and early Iron Ages.

- **Gutians and Lullubi:** The Gutians (Guti) and Lullubi were prominent tribal groups in the Zagros during the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE. Mesopotamian sources, particularly from the Akkadian and Ur III periods, depict them primarily as hostile raiders disrupting lowland life. The Gutians are even traditionally blamed for the downfall of the Akkadian Empire around 2200 BCE, briefly establishing rulers in parts of Babylonia. However, the term "Gutian" (and related terms like *Qutil*) eventually became a generalized, often pejorative, Mesopotamian designation for various "barbaric" or uncivilized peoples from the Zagros highlands, sometimes even encompassing groups like the Medes in later Assyrian annals. Theories proposing a direct link between Kurds and the Gutians or Lullubi often rely on geographical proximity and the later, generalized use of the term "Gutian". Some scholars, like E.A. Speiser, explicitly suggested Kurds descended from the Gutu and Lullubi, whom they considered indigenous Zagros peoples. The potential etymological connection Gutu > Gurti > Kurd has also been noted. However, concrete evidence for linguistic or significant cultural continuity is lacking. The Gutian language is virtually unknown, and the term's generic application in later periods makes tracing specific lineages difficult. While these groups undoubtedly formed part of the ancient population landscape of the Zagros, their specific contribution to Kurdish ethnogenesis remains highly speculative.
- **Hurrians:** The Hurrians represent a more substantial and prolonged presence in the

Kurdish heartland, dominating the Zagros-Taurus mountain systems culturally and politically from roughly the late 3rd millennium BCE until their gradual assimilation by Indo-European groups in the 1st millennium BCE. They established numerous states and city-states, including Mitanni, Urartu (which had a strong Hurrian component), Gutu, Manna, and Kassites (whose ruling class had Indo-Aryan names but populace was likely Hurrian). Scholar Mehrdad Izady has forcefully argued that the Hurrians constitute the fundamental substrate of Kurdish culture, ethnicity, and even genetics, despite the later adoption of an Iranian language. He points to the survival of numerous Hurrian clan names (e.g., Bukhti, Tirikan, Bazayni) and place names (e.g., Mardin, Van, Khabur river) in Kurdistan, perceived similarities in mythology and religion (linking ancient Hurrian symbols to Yazdanism), material culture, and even tattooing motifs still used by traditional Kurds. Izady views groups like the Gutians and Kurti as Hurrian clans. However, Izady's thesis faces significant challenges and lacks mainstream acceptance. The primary obstacle is the linguistic discontinuity: Hurrian belongs to the Hurro-Urartian language family (possibly related to Northeast Caucasian languages), which is entirely distinct from the Indo-European Kurdish language. While substrate influence from Hurrian/Urartian on neighboring languages like Armenian is acknowledged, demonstrating a similar substrate in Kurdish is difficult and contested. Izady's interpretations of cultural continuity rely heavily on identifying survivals over vast periods, a methodology prone to subjectivity.

The potential contributions of these early mountain peoples highlight a central tension in Kurdish origin studies. Geographical and cultural continuity arguments, particularly strong for the Hurrians, suggest deep indigenous roots. However, the lack of clear linguistic links (especially for Hurrians) and the sparse, often biased nature of the evidence for Gutians and Lullubi make definitive connections problematic. The Hurrian hypothesis, while offering a compelling narrative of deep cultural foundation, underscores the profound impact of later linguistic shifts, likely associated with the arrival of Iranian speakers.

The Carduchoi and Cyrtii

Classical Greek and Roman sources provide accounts of specific groups encountered in the region whose names and locations resonate with modern Kurds.

- **Carduchoi (Kardouchoi):** As mentioned previously, Xenophon's *Anabasis* (401 BCE) provides a detailed account of the *Kardouchoi* inhabiting the mountains north of the Tigris, near modern Zakho. Their description as warlike, independent mountaineers living in the heart of later Kurdistan, combined with the phonetic similarity of their name, makes them the strongest candidate among classical groups for being directly related to, or ancestral to, the Kurds. The speculation that they spoke an Old Iranian language, if correct, would further strengthen the link to the Iranian-speaking Kurds. However, the evidence remains circumstantial, and some scholars urge caution against definitively equating the *Kardouchoi* with the Kurds. The exact linguistic affiliation and ultimate fate of the *Kardouchoi* are unknown.
- **Cyrtii (Kurtti):** The *Cyrtii*, mentioned from the 2nd century BCE onwards as inhabiting the Zagros, present another plausible link. Their name is one of the proposed etymologies for "Kurd," and their location aligns with the Kurdish homeland.

The existence of groups like the *Kardouchoi* and *Cyrtii* in classical antiquity, bearing names similar to "Kurd" and inhabiting the correct geographical area, provides significant, though not conclusive, evidence for the presence of proto-Kurdish or related groups in the Zagros-Taurus region during this period. They represent a potential bridge between the more shadowy figures

of the Bronze Age (Gutians, Hurrians) and the clearly attested Kurds of the early Islamic era. The ambiguity – were these distinct groups, or different names for related peoples? – reflects the fragmented political and ethnic landscape of the mountains as perceived by external observers.

The Median Hypothesis

Perhaps the most popular, yet also highly contested, theory connects the Kurds directly to the ancient Medes, an Iranian people who rose to prominence in the 8th century BCE and played a key role in the downfall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire before being incorporated into the Achaemenid Persian Empire in the mid-6th century BCE.

- **Arguments for Connection:** This hypothesis draws strength from several points. Firstly, the geographical heartland of the Medes was centered in the Zagros Mountains, particularly around Ecbatana (modern Hamadan), overlapping significantly with historical and contemporary Kurdish settlement areas. Secondly, the Median language, though poorly attested, is generally considered to have been a Northwestern Iranian language, the same subgroup to which Kurdish belongs. This linguistic affinity suggests a potential ancestral relationship. Thirdly, some archaeological findings from Median-period sites like Godin Tepe and Tepe Nush-i Jan, such as columned audience halls, show architectural traditions that persisted in the region. Assyrian records also confirm the presence of numerous Median chieftains ("city lords") ruling small polities throughout the Zagros during the 9th to 7th centuries BCE. This theory holds particular appeal for Kurdish nationalists seeking ancient, prestigious roots for their identity.
- **Counterarguments and Criticisms:** Despite these points, the Median hypothesis faces substantial criticism. Prominent scholar Martin van Bruinessen, among others, has rejected a direct line of descent, primarily citing the considerable temporal gap (roughly a millennium) between the height of Median political power (7th-6th c. BCE) and the first unambiguous historical attestations of the Kurds as a distinct group (around 7th c. CE). There is simply not enough evidence, he argues, to bridge this chronological divide. Furthermore, the Median language itself is extremely poorly documented, known only from a handful of loanwords in Old Persian and some personal and place names, making direct linguistic comparison with Kurdish impossible. Archaeological evidence specifically identified as "Median" is scarce, and the interpretation of sites like Godin Tepe and Nush-i Jan as definitively Median is debated. Compounding these issues, the very nature and extent of the "Median Empire" described by Herodotus is questioned by modern historians, with some suggesting it may have been a looser confederation or even a Greek historical construct rather than a centralized imperial state. Linguist Gernot Windfuhr proposed a more nuanced relationship, identifying Kurdish dialects as primarily Parthian (another NW Iranian language) but possessing a Median *substratum*, suggesting influence rather than direct descent.

In summary, while the Medes were undoubtedly an important ancient Iranian people inhabiting the Zagros region, the claim of direct Kurdish descent from them remains largely unsubstantiated due to significant gaps in historical, linguistic, and archaeological evidence. The geographical overlap and broad linguistic affiliation (both being NW Iranian) make the connection plausible in a general sense, perhaps suggesting Medes were *one* of the many ancestral Iranian groups contributing to the Kurdish amalgam. However, the lack of demonstrable continuity and the poorly understood nature of Median society and language prevent the acceptance of the Medes as the primary or sole ancestors of the Kurds based on

current academic standards. It often appears more as a reflection of modern identity politics than a firmly established historical fact.

V. The Linguistic Strand: Origins and Development of the Kurdish Language(s)

Linguistic analysis provides a crucial line of evidence for understanding Kurdish origins, tracing the language's position within the broader Indo-European family and exploring its relationships with other ancient and modern Iranian languages. While offering valuable insights, linguistics also reflects the complexities and debates surrounding Kurdish ethnogenesis, particularly regarding the language's precise historical trajectory and dialectal diversification.

Classification

There is broad scholarly consensus on the classification of the Kurdish language (or language group):

- **Family and Branch:** Kurdish belongs to the Indo-European language family, specifically within the Indo-Iranian branch, and further within the Iranian sub-branch.
- **Western Iranian Group:** Within Iranian, Kurdish is classified as a Western Iranian language, distinct from Eastern Iranian languages like Pashto or Ossetian.
- **Northwestern Iranian Subgroup:** The dominant classification places Kurdish within the Northwestern (NW) Iranian subgroup. This distinguishes it from Southwestern (SW) Iranian languages, the most prominent of which is Persian. Languages like Parthian and Median are also considered NW Iranian.
- **Intermediate Position/SW Influence:** Some scholars nuance the NW classification, viewing Kurdish as occupying an intermediate position between NW and SW Iranian. Martin van Bruinessen noted a "strong South-Western Iranian element" in Kurdish, and Ludwig Paul concluded that while likely NW in origin, Kurdish shares numerous traits with SW languages like Persian due to long and intense historical contact. This highlights the impact of geographical proximity and cultural interaction, particularly the pervasive influence of Persian throughout history.

A major challenge in tracing Kurdish linguistic history is the absence of known direct ancestors from the Old Iranian (c. 1000 BCE – 300 BCE) and Middle Iranian (c. 300 BCE – 900 CE) periods. The earliest extant Kurdish texts date back only to the 16th century CE. Therefore, understanding the earlier stages requires comparative reconstruction, analyzing shared features and divergences between modern Kurdish dialects and other Iranian languages, both ancient (like Avestan, Old Persian, Parthian, Middle Persian) and modern (like Persian, Baluchi, Zazaki, Gorani). This process is complicated by the continuous migrations of Iranian peoples and the resulting language contact phenomena.

Relationships and Historical Development

Several theories attempt to explain the historical development of Kurdish and its relationship to other Iranian languages:

- **Median and Parthian Connections:** As discussed previously, the Median language is too poorly attested for definitive comparison. However, Gernot Windfuhr identified Kurdish dialects as being fundamentally Parthian (a major NW Middle Iranian language) but

containing a Median substratum. This suggests that the linguistic ancestors of the Kurds might have been Parthian speakers who interacted with or absorbed Median-speaking populations. Windfuhr and Frye also proposed an eastern origin for Kurdish, linking it to dialects in eastern and central Iran. This contrasts with theories placing proto-Kurdish origins further west.

- **Persian and Baluchi Connections (MacKenzie's Theory):** David Neil MacKenzie's influential work in the 1960s significantly shaped the discussion. Based on analyzing shared phonetic developments (isoglosses) between Kurdish, Persian (SW), and Baluchi (NW), MacKenzie concluded that the speakers of these three languages must have been in closer geographical contact at some earlier stage, possibly in the central regions of Iran. His findings highlighted significant affinities between Kurdish and SW Iranian (Persian), challenging the view of Kurdish as purely NW and distinct from Persian. While highly influential, MacKenzie's model of a shared Persian-Kurdish-Baluchi linguistic unity and subsequent migrations is still debated and has been subject to refinements and critiques, particularly concerning the role of Gorani influence in differentiating Kurdish dialects.
- **Relationship with Gorani and Zazaki:** While sometimes popularly considered Kurdish dialects, most linguists classify Zazaki (spoken primarily in eastern Turkey) and Gorani (spoken in pockets in western Iran and northeastern Iraq, including Hawrami and Bajelani) as separate, albeit related, NW Iranian languages. They exhibit distinct phonological and morphological features from the core Kurdish dialects (Kurmanji, Sorani, Southern Kurdish). However, there has clearly been long-term contact and mutual influence. MacKenzie, for instance, attributed some key differences between Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji) and Central Kurdish (Sorani) – such as the presence of enclitic pronouns and loss of case distinction in Sorani – to the influence of a Gorani substratum on Sorani. This substratum hypothesis is contested by scholars like Michiel Leezenberg and Thomas Jügel, who argue for independent development or other contact influences. The Zaza-Gorani group itself is sometimes posited, though recent classifications tend to treat them separately.
- **Alternative (Fringe) Theories:** A perspective promoted by Mehrdad Izady and sources like KurdishWriting.com posits a more radical departure from mainstream linguistics. This view claims that Kurdish, while Indo-European, is *not* Iranian or Indo-Iranian, but represents an older linguistic layer in the region, possibly connected to Hurrian. It suggests that historical Kurdish variants were falsely labeled as "Anatolian" or "Indo-Iranian," while non-Indo-European languages like Hurrian were denied their true connection to Kurdish. This theory directly contradicts the overwhelming comparative linguistic evidence placing Kurdish firmly within the Iranian branch and is not supported by mainstream scholarship.

The linguistic evidence, therefore, points to a complex history for Kurdish. It is undeniably an Iranian language, primarily classified as Northwestern, but with significant historical interactions influencing its development, particularly contact with Persian and possibly Gorani. The lack of early textual evidence means that reconstructions of its origins and divergence rely on comparative methods, leading to ongoing scholarly debate regarding its precise relationship to Median, Parthian, and its geographical point of origin. The NW classification itself appears nuanced, reflecting a language shaped by its position near the historical interface between NW and SW Iranian linguistic zones.

Dialectal Landscape

Modern Kurdish is characterized by significant dialectal diversity, often described as a dialect continuum rather than a single monolithic language. The main dialect groups are:

1. **Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji):** The largest group, spoken by an estimated 15-20 million people across Turkey, Syria, northern Iraq, and parts of Iran. It is the basis for most Kurdish literature historically and uses a Latin-based alphabet (Hawar) in Turkey and Syria.
2. **Central Kurdish (Sorani):** Spoken by an estimated 6-7 million people, primarily in Iraqi Kurdistan (where it is an official language) and western Iran. It emerged as a major literary language in the 20th century and typically uses a modified Arabic script (Sorani alphabet).
3. **Southern Kurdish (Xwarîn / Pehlewani):** A group of dialects spoken in western Iran (Kermanshah, Ilam provinces) and eastern Iraq (Khanqin district). Laki and Kordali are often included but possess distinct features.

While these dialects share a common origin and contribute to a sense of shared Kurdish ethnic identity, mutual intelligibility between them can be limited, particularly between Kurmanji and Sorani, and even more so with Southern Kurdish varieties. This linguistic diversity likely reflects the historical political fragmentation and geographical isolation of Kurdish communities across the expansive and rugged terrain of Kurdistan. The lack of a unified Kurdish state throughout most of history prevented the imposition of a single standard dialect. The development of separate literary standards based on Kurmanji and Sorani in the modern era further solidifies this diversity, while also representing efforts toward language maintenance and standardization within specific regions. Some scholars note that the term "Kurdish" itself has sometimes been applied extrinsically, with speakers historically identifying more strongly with their specific dialect names (Kurmanji, Sorani, etc.).

VI. Genetic Footprints: Insights from Population Genetics

The field of population genetics offers a powerful lens through which to investigate the biological ancestry of the Kurdish people, complementing insights from history, archaeology, and linguistics. By analyzing patterns of variation in Y-chromosome DNA (Y-DNA, tracing paternal lineages), mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA, tracing maternal lineages), and autosomal DNA (reflecting overall genetic ancestry), researchers can infer historical population movements, relationships between groups, and the relative contributions of different ancestral components. While genetic data provides valuable clues, its interpretation requires careful consideration alongside other forms of evidence.

Paternal Lineages (Y-DNA)

Studies examining Y-chromosome markers in various Kurdish populations (e.g., Sorani Kurds in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq; Kurmanji and Zazaki speakers in Turkey and Georgia) have revealed characteristic patterns:

- **Predominant Haplogroups:** Several Y-DNA haplogroups are commonly found at significant frequencies among Kurds. Haplogroup **J2** (specifically subclades like J2a-M410) often appears as the most frequent lineage, reaching levels like 28% in the Sulaymaniyah Sorani sample. Haplogroup **J1** (e.g., J1-M267) is also prominent (e.g., 14%

in Sulaymaniyah). Both J1 and J2 are widespread across the Near East, Caucasus, Anatolia, Southern Europe, and North Africa, and are strongly associated with the Neolithic expansion of agriculture from the Fertile Crescent. Other notable haplogroups include **E1b1b** (e.g., 16.5% in Sulaymaniyah), with deep roots in Northeast Africa and the Near East; **G2a** (e.g., 10.8% in Sulaymaniyah), another lineage linked to early Neolithic farmers in Anatolia and the Caucasus; **R1b** (e.g., 7% in Sulaymaniyah), common in West Asia and Europe with complex origins; and **R1a** (e.g., 7.6% in Sulaymaniyah), a haplogroup frequently associated with the Bronze Age migrations of Indo-European speakers from the Pontic-Caspian steppe or Central Asia into Europe and South/West Asia.

- **Diversity:** Studies generally indicate substantial Y-STR haplotype diversity within Kurdish populations, suggesting a relatively large and non-isolated population history for the core groups.
- **Population Affinities:** Pairwise genetic distance analyses based on Y-DNA consistently place Kurdish groups within the broader West Asian genetic landscape. For example, Sorani Kurds from Sulaymaniyah cluster closely with populations from Qatar, Lebanon, Iraqi Arabs, Iran, Greece, Azerbaijan, and Turkey. They show greater genetic distance from European populations (like Danes and Swedes) and Africans (Ethiopians). A study comparing Kurmanji and Zazaki groups found they were most similar to other West Asian groups and most distant from Central Asians based on Y-DNA. Notably, this same study found these Kurdish groups showed a closer Y-chromosome relationship to Caucasian populations (like Georgians, Armenians) than to European groups.

Maternal Lineages (mtDNA)

Analysis of mitochondrial DNA, inherited solely through the maternal line, provides complementary insights:

- **West Eurasian Ancestry:** The overwhelming majority of Kurdish mtDNA lineages fall within the broad West Eurasian haplogroup pool, typical of populations in Europe, the Near East, and the Caucasus. Studies emphasize the homogeneity of Kurdish mtDNA with this wider pool.
- **Specific Lineages and Interpretations:** Research has highlighted the presence of specific mtDNA haplogroups with potential historical significance. Very old lineages belonging to haplogroup **U5**, associated with Paleolithic/Mesolithic European hunter-gatherers, have been found at notably high concentrations among Kurds, Armenians, and Azeris, while being rare elsewhere in the Near East. This has been interpreted as possible evidence for ancient links to European populations or substantial back-migration from Europe into the Near East. Additionally, high frequencies of haplogroups commonly associated with the spread of Neolithic farmers, such as haplogroup **H** (e.g., 37.1% in one study), and hunter-gatherer lineages like **U** (e.g., 13.8%) have been observed. This suggests continuity from local hunter-gatherer populations who adopted agriculture and admixed with incoming Neolithic groups.
- **Population Affinities:** mtDNA comparisons have sometimes yielded different patterns than Y-DNA. The same study that found Kurdish Y-DNA closer to Caucasians than Europeans found the opposite pattern for mtDNA, with Kurdish maternal lineages showing closer affinities to European groups than to Caucasians. This suggests potential differences in the origins or migration histories of male and female ancestors contributing to the Kurdish gene pool.

- **Population Structure:** Some studies have noted variations in mtDNA diversity among different Kurdish subgroups. For instance, lower diversity in the Havrami (Gorani-speaking) group might suggest isolation or genetic drift due to smaller population size, while similar patterns in a Kurmanji group might reflect drift or specific migration events. Analysis of Georgian Kurds suggested a genetic bottleneck occurred during their migration to the Caucasus, with little subsequent admixture with local populations.

Autosomal DNA (Overall Ancestry)

Studies analyzing hundreds of thousands of markers across the entire genome (autosomal DNA) provide a comprehensive picture of overall ancestry. While specific autosomal studies were less represented in the provided snippets, the clustering patterns observed in Y-DNA and mtDNA analyses strongly imply that autosomal data places Kurds firmly within the genetic continuum of West Asia. They typically show affinities with neighboring populations such as Iranians, Turks, Armenians, Assyrians, and peoples of the Caucasus. Autosomal studies also generally confirm findings from uniparental markers (Y-DNA and mtDNA) showing that patrilocal societies (where women typically move to their husband's residence) like the Kurds often exhibit greater geographical structuring in male lineages compared to female lineages.

Interpreting Genetic Data: Indigenous Substrate and Admixture

Synthesizing the genetic evidence leads to a model of Kurdish origins characterized by both deep indigenous roots and subsequent layers of admixture:

- **Indigenous Neolithic Foundation:** The high prevalence of Y-DNA haplogroups J1, J2, G2a, and E1b1b, along with mtDNA haplogroups like H and U, strongly points to a primary ancestry derived from the indigenous populations of the Northern Fertile Crescent and the Zagros/Taurus mountains – the very region where agriculture originated. This suggests that the ancestors of the Kurds were deeply rooted in the region since at least the Neolithic period. Some researchers explicitly argue that Kurds represent descendants of the first Neolithic shepherds and farmers of the Kurdistan highlands.
- **Indo-European/Iranian Admixture:** The presence of Y-DNA haplogroup R1a (specifically R1a1) provides genetic evidence consistent with the arrival of Indo-European speakers, likely carrying Iranian languages, into the region, probably migrating from Central Asia or the Pontic-Caspian steppe during the Bronze or Iron Age. This genetic input aligns with the linguistic evidence that Kurdish is an Iranian language. The model proposed by some researchers involves an indigenous Neolithic population being "linguistically Iranianized" by incoming elite groups associated with R1a1. This suggests a process of language replacement and genetic admixture, where the incoming groups contributed paternally but the indigenous maternal lineages (reflected in mtDNA) largely persisted.
- **Complex Admixture History:** The discrepancy sometimes observed between paternal and maternal affinities (Y-DNA closer to Caucasus/West Asia, mtDNA closer to Europe) hints at a complex demographic history. Sex-biased admixture, where migrating males contribute disproportionately to the gene pool compared to females, is a common pattern in human history, often associated with elite dominance or patrilocal social structures. This could explain the differing signals from Y-DNA and mtDNA regarding European vs. Caucasian connections.

In conclusion, genetic data paints a picture of Kurds as a primarily West Asian population with deep roots tracing back to the Neolithic inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent highlands. This

indigenous foundation was subsequently overlaid and admixed with later arrivals, most notably Iranian-speaking groups associated with Indo-European migrations. This genetic narrative of an ancient indigenous substrate combined with later admixture aligns remarkably well with the linguistic evidence of an Iranian language spoken by a people with millennia-long ties to the Zagros-Taurus region.

Table VI.1: Major Y-DNA and mtDNA Haplogroups in Kurdish Populations

Haplogroup	Type	Typical Frequency Range (%)	Associated Populations/Regions	Potential Historical Interpretation	Supporting Snippets
J2	Y-DNA	15-30+	Near East, Caucasus, Anatolia, Balkans, Southern Europe, N. Africa	Neolithic farmers (Fertile Crescent origin), Bronze Age expansions	
J1	Y-DNA	10-20	Near East (esp. Semitic speakers), Caucasus, N. Africa, Europe	Neolithic farmers, later expansions (e.g., Arabian Peninsula)	
E1b1b	Y-DNA	10-20	Near East, North Africa, Horn of Africa, Balkans, Southern Europe	Northeast African origin, spread with Neolithic/later movements	
G2a	Y-DNA	5-15	Caucasus, Near East, Anatolia, Southern Europe	Neolithic farmers (Anatolia/Caucasus origin)	
R1a	Y-DNA	5-15	Eastern Europe, Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia, Scandinavia	Indo-European migrations (Bronze Age, e.g., Corded Ware, Andronovo), later Slavic/Turkic movements	
R1b	Y-DNA	5-15	Western Europe, West Asia, Central Asia	Complex history, Paleolithic European roots, Neolithic/Bronze	

Haplogroup	Type	Typical Frequency Range (%)	Associated Populations/Regions	Potential Historical Interpretation	Supporting Snippets
				Neolithic Age expansions in West Asia	
H	mtDNA	20-40	Europe, Near East, Caucasus, North Africa	Major West Eurasian lineage, associated with Neolithic expansion from Near East	
U (esp. U5)	mtDNA	10-20 (U total); U5 higher in Kurds	Europe, Near East, North Africa; U5 peak in Europe	Ancient West Eurasian lineage; U5 linked to Paleolithic/Mesolithic European hunter-gatherers	
T	mtDNA	Variable	Europe, Near East, North Africa, Horn of Africa	West Eurasian lineage, likely spread with Neolithic	(implied)
K	mtDNA	Variable	Europe, Near East, North Africa	West Eurasian lineage, subclade of U8, Neolithic associations	(implied)
J	mtDNA	Variable	Europe, Near East, North Africa	West Eurasian lineage, associated with Neolithic expansion	(implied)

Note: Frequency ranges are approximate based on cited studies and vary between specific Kurdish subgroups. Interpretations are based on current phylogeographic understanding.

VII. The Making of a People: Cultural Evolution and Religious Diversity

Beyond linguistic and genetic threads, the origins of the Kurds are deeply entwined with the evolution of their distinct cultural identity and social structures, shaped significantly by their mountainous environment and a history marked by both internal cohesion and interaction with powerful neighbors. A particularly salient feature of Kurdish cultural history is its remarkable

religious diversity, which stands as both a testament to historical complexities and a defining element of Kurdish identity itself.

Emergence of Kurdish Cultural Identity

The development of a distinct Kurdish cultural identity was a gradual process, emerging from the interplay of ancient indigenous traditions, influences from neighboring civilizations, and adaptations to the specific conditions of the Zagros-Taurus highlands.

- **Social Organization:** As previously discussed, the tribal system, led by aghas (secular chieftains) and sheikhs (religious leaders), formed the bedrock of traditional Kurdish society, particularly among pastoralist groups. Patrilineal kinship structures (lineages, clans) organized social relations, resource management, and political allegiances. While modernization, urbanization, and state policies have led to significant detribalization in many areas, these traditional loyalties and leadership patterns often persist, sometimes transforming into modern political factionalism. The extended family remains a crucial social unit.
- **Folklore and Traditions:** Kurdish culture possesses a rich tapestry of folklore, mythology, and traditions transmitted orally for centuries. Origin legends, such as the myth of Kaveh the Blacksmith overthrowing the tyrannical Zahak (linked to the Newroz celebration) or tales tracing Kurdish ancestry to King Solomon's servants or jinn, offer insights into historical self-perception and cultural values. Newroz, the ancient Iranian New Year festival celebrated at the spring equinox, holds particular significance as a potent symbol of Kurdish identity and renewal across Kurdistan. Classical Kurdish poetry, often following Perso-Arabic models but expressed in Kurdish, flourished from at least the 16th-17th centuries (e.g., Ahmad Khani).

Religious Landscape: A Mosaic

While the majority of Kurds today are Muslims, primarily adhering to the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam since their conversion beginning in the 7th century CE, the religious landscape of Kurdistan is far more complex and diverse. This religious heterogeneity is a defining characteristic of the Kurdish people and their history.

- **Islam:** Sunni Islam (Shafi'i madhhab) is the predominant faith among Kurds. Sufi orders, particularly the Naqshbandi (especially the Khalidiyya branch, prominent since the 19th century) and the Qadiri, have historically played, and continue to play, a significant role in Kurdish religious and social life, often intertwined with tribal leadership and political movements. Shia Islam is also present, particularly among Kurds in the southern and eastern parts of Kurdistan in Iran (e.g., Fali Kurds, parts of Kermanshah) and smaller communities in Turkey. Some scholars argue that despite secular nationalist narratives sometimes downplaying its role, religion remains a deeply ingrained aspect of Kurdish identity and society. Recent decades have also seen the emergence of Kurdish Islamist movements, sometimes blending religious and nationalist ideologies.
- **Indigenous/Syncretic Faiths (Yazdanism Complex):** Beyond mainstream Islam, Kurdistan is notable for being the homeland of several distinct religious traditions often grouped by some scholars under the umbrella term "Yazdanism" or "Cult of Angels". This term posits a shared origin or substrate in ancient, pre-Islamic Iranian/Kurdish beliefs, later syncretized with elements from Islam (especially Sufism and Shiism), Christianity, and other traditions. While the validity and precise nature of "Yazdanism" as a unified

ancient religion is debated, the distinct faiths commonly associated with it – Yazidism, Yarsanism, and Alevism – represent crucial elements of Kurdish religious diversity.

- **Yazidism:**

- *Origins and Development:* Yazidism emerged as a distinct faith through a complex syncretic process in the Kurdish mountains of northern Iraq. Its roots likely lie in ancient local/Iranian beliefs that persisted in the region. These beliefs blended with Sufi mysticism introduced by Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, an Umayyad descendant who founded the Adawiyya Sufi order in the valley of Lalish in the early 12th century. While Sheikh Adi himself was likely orthodox Muslim, his followers increasingly integrated local traditions, leading to a distinct Yazidi community by the mid-12th century. The name "Yazidi" is debated: some link it to the Umayyad Caliph Yazid I (whom Yazidis venerate, though rejecting a direct link in name origin), while others derive it from Old Iranian *yazata* ("divine being") or Kurdish *Ez dā* ("God created me"). Yazidism shares features with Yarsanism and Alevism, possibly pointing to a common ancient West Iranian religious stratum distinct from Zoroastrianism.
- *Core Beliefs:* Yazidism is monotheistic, believing in one supreme God (Xwedê) who created the world but entrusted its care to seven holy beings or Angels (Haft Sîr / Heft Sur, "the Seven Mysteries"). The preeminent angel is Malak Taus (Tawûsî Melek), the Peacock Angel, often represented by bronze peacock effigies (*sanjaq*). The misidentification of Malak Taus with Satan by outsiders has led to the erroneous and harmful label of "devil worship". Other core beliefs include reincarnation (*kiras guhorîn* - "changing the shirt"), a distinct creation myth (Yazidis descended from Adam alone, not Eve, fostering endogamy), and a strong emphasis on orthopraxy (correct practice and ritual) over orthodoxy (correct belief). Sacred texts include the *Kitêba Cilwe* (Book of Revelation) and *Mishefa Reş* (Black Book), though their authenticity as ancient texts is debated, they likely reflect genuine oral traditions. Lalish remains the holiest pilgrimage site.
- *Kurdish Identity:* Yazidis are overwhelmingly Kurdish speakers (primarily Kurmanji) and identify culturally as Kurds. Their faith is often considered by both Yazidis and some Kurdish nationalists as the "original" or an ancient Kurdish religion, predating Islam. This distinct religious identity has subjected them to centuries of persecution by neighboring Muslim powers and, tragically, genocide by ISIS in the 21st century.

- **Alevism (Kurdish Alevis):**

- *Origins and Development:* Alevism is a broad syncretic tradition that primarily developed in Anatolia from the 13th century onwards. It blends mystical Islam (Sufism, with strong links to the Bektashi order founded by Haji Bektash Veli), heterodox Shia beliefs (profound veneration of Ali and the Twelve Imams), and elements of pre-Islamic Turkic shamanism and local Anatolian folk traditions. The Kızılbaş ("Red-Heads") movement, tribal supporters of the Safavid order in the 15th-16th centuries, were crucial precursors to modern Alevism. Following Ottoman-Safavid conflicts, Anatolian Kızılbaş/Alevis became isolated and developed distinct secretive practices (*taqiya*). The term "Alevi" gained currency in the early 20th century as a collective, less pejorative term.
- *Kurdish Alevism Specifics:* While most Alevis are ethnically Turkish, a

significant minority (estimated around 20% of Alevis) are Kurds, concentrated primarily in eastern Turkey, particularly the Dersim (modern Tunceli) region. They speak Kurdish dialects (Kurmanji and/or Zazaki/Kirmancki). Kurdish Alevism exhibits distinct features compared to Turkish Alevism: a greater emphasis on the poet Pir Sultan Abdal over Haji Bektash Veli; beliefs often more rooted in nature veneration; and a unique system of hereditary sacred lineages (*ocax* or *ocak*) like Babamansur, Axûçan, Kureşan, etc., which structure religious authority (roles like *rêber*, *pîr*, *murşîd*). Some Kurdish Alevis perceive connections to Yarsanism and Yazidism, and many in the Dersim region emphasize pre-Islamic roots, sometimes identifying as Zoroastrian or simply Rêya Heqî ("Path of Truth/God") rather than Muslim.

- *Identity*: Kurdish Alevis navigate a complex intersection of religious, ethnic, and linguistic identities. They have faced dual discrimination in Turkey, both as Kurds and as Alevis. The secularist Turkish Republic initially offered some respite from Sunni persecution, leading some Kurdish Alevis to assimilate towards Turkish identity. However, since the 1980s, a significant "Alevi revival" has occurred, involving the public performance of rituals (*cem*), building of *cemevis* (worship houses), and active redefinition and assertion of Alevi identity, often intertwined with leftist politics or Kurdish nationalism (particularly support for the PKK among some).

○ **Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq / Kaka'i):**

- *Origins and Development*: Yarsanism (meaning "Group/Land of Friends") or Ahl-e Haqq ("People of Truth") is a syncretic faith founded by Sultan Sahak in the late 14th or early 15th century, primarily in the Zagros region of western Iran (near Kermanshah and Halabja). Its adherents in Iraq are often known as Kaka'i. The faith likely developed from a blend of ancient local traditions, Sufism, and Ghulat (extremist) Shia influences, particularly the veneration of Ali. Sultan Sahak is considered the primary divine manifestation (*mazhariyyat*) of the current historical epoch.
- *Core Beliefs*: Key tenets include belief in one God manifesting through successive incarnations (*mazhariyyat*), including Ali and Sultan Sahak; the transmigration of the soul (*dunaduni*); the existence of an inner (*batin*) and outer (*zahir*) reality; the importance of the *Haft Tan* ("Seven Persons," divine emanations including Benjamin, David, Pir Musi, Baba Yadegar); and the central communal ritual known as the *jam* or *jem*, involving music (especially the sacred *tanbur* lute), chanting, and shared meals. Their primary sacred scripture is the *Kalâm-e Saranjâm* ("Discourse of the Conclusion"), composed primarily in the Gorani language. Yarsanism traditionally features a hereditary priestly class (Sayyeds) divided into lineages (*khandan*) who guide the laity (*morids*).
- *Kurdish Identity*: Yarsanism is intrinsically linked to Kurdish identity; its followers are predominantly ethnic Kurds belonging to specific tribes like the Guran, Kalhor, Sanjabi, Zangana, and Jalalvand. The Gorani language, closely related to Kurdish dialects, serves as the sacred liturgical language, even for communities who now speak other Kurdish dialects like Sorani or Southern Kurdish. The faith is geographically centered in Kurdish regions of Iran and Iraq. While some see connections to esoteric Islam, many Yarsanis consider their faith distinct and pre-Islamic in its core, sometimes viewing

Islam as a deviation. They face discrimination as a religious minority, particularly in Iran.

- **Other Minorities:** Historically, Kurdistan was also home to significant communities of Christians (Assyrians/Syriacs and Armenians) and Jews (Kurdistani Jews). While most Jews emigrated (mainly to Israel) in the mid-20th century, Christian communities persist, albeit diminished by conflict and emigration. Their historical presence contributed to the region's diversity and involved cultural exchange with Kurdish populations. The Shabak, a distinct group living near Mosul, also add to the complexity; their ethnic and religious identity is debated, with connections proposed to Yarsanism, heterodox Turkoman cults, and Shia Islam.

The enduring presence of this remarkable religious diversity – encompassing Sunni and Shia Islam, Sufi orders, and the distinct traditions of Yazidism, Alevism, and Yarsanism, alongside historical Christian and Jewish communities – is a fundamental aspect of Kurdish history and identity. It suggests that the Zagros-Taurus mountains served as a region where diverse beliefs could coexist and syncretize, perhaps resisting the religious homogenization often imposed by lowland empires. This complex religious tapestry has undoubtedly shaped Kurdish culture, society, and politics, contributing both to internal richness and, at times, to lines of division exploited by external forces. Understanding Kurdish origins necessitates acknowledging this deep-seated religious pluralism.

VIII. Synthesizing the Evidence: Scholarly Perspectives and Ongoing Debates

The quest for Kurdish origins, as explored through the lenses of history, archaeology, linguistics, genetics, and cultural anthropology, reveals a complex and multifaceted picture rather than a simple, linear narrative. Synthesizing the diverse strands of evidence allows for the identification of areas of broad scholarly consensus, alongside significant points of ongoing debate and differing interpretations.

Recap of Major Theories and Prevailing Model

The most widely supported perspective among scholars today posits a **heterogeneous origins model** for the Kurdish people. This model suggests that the Kurds are the result of an amalgamation process occurring over millennia within the Zagros-Taurus mountain region. It involves:

1. **An ancient indigenous substrate:** Comprising populations native to the highlands since at least the Neolithic period, potentially including descendants of groups known from archaeological and early historical records like the Halafians, Hurrians, Gutians, Lullubi, and possibly the Carduchoi. Genetic evidence strongly supports this deep regional ancestry.
2. **An overlay of Iranian-speaking groups:** Beginning perhaps in the late 2nd or early 1st millennium BCE, various waves of migrating Indo-European tribes speaking Northwestern Iranian languages arrived in the Zagros region. These groups, likely related to or including peoples known as Medes and Parthians, gradually assimilated the pre-existing populations linguistically and culturally. Genetic markers like Y-DNA R1a provide potential evidence for this admixture.

This synthesis accounts for both the deep archaeological and genetic roots of Kurds in their

homeland and their linguistic affiliation within the Northwestern Iranian language group. Theories emphasizing a single primary origin, such as direct and sole descent from the Medes or the Hurrians, while highlighting potentially important ancestral components, are generally considered insufficient to explain the full complexity of Kurdish ethnogenesis due to evidential gaps or contradictions (e.g., linguistic discontinuity for Hurrians, temporal gap for Medes).

Areas of Consensus

Despite ongoing debates, several points command broad scholarly agreement:

- **Linguistic Classification:** Kurdish belongs to the Northwestern Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family.
- **Geographical Homeland:** The Kurds have deep, continuous historical roots within the Zagros and Taurus mountain ranges.
- **Heterogeneous Origins:** Kurdish ethnogenesis involved the blending of multiple ancestral populations over a long period.
- **Genetic Profile:** Kurds genetically cluster with other West Asian (Near Eastern, Caucasian, Anatolian) populations, reflecting deep regional ancestry with subsequent admixture.
- **Religious Diversity:** The Kurdish population historically encompasses significant religious diversity beyond the Sunni Muslim majority, including distinct faiths like Yazidism, Alevism, and Yarsanism.

Areas of Disagreement/Debate

Significant areas of academic contention remain:

- **Identity of Pre-Iranian Substrate:** The precise identity, linguistic affiliation, and specific cultural contributions of the pre-Iranian populations (Gutians, Lullubi, Hurrians, Halafians, etc.) that formed the substrate remain debated, particularly the controversial but detailed claims regarding Hurrian continuity.
- **The Carduchoi Link:** While geographically and phonetically plausible, the direct equation of Xenophon's *Kardouchoi* with proto-Kurds is not universally accepted.
- **The Median Connection:** The extent and nature of the relationship between Medes and Kurds is highly debated, hampered by the temporal gap, lack of Median textual evidence, and questions surrounding the Median polity itself.
- **Proto-Kurdish Origins and Migration:** The exact geographical origin point of the proto-Kurdish language (the NW Iranian dialect(s) that became Kurdish) and the routes and timing of its spread are contested (e.g., MacKenzie's central Iran hypothesis vs. Windfuhr's eastern origin).
- **Interpretation of Genetic Data:** While the broad picture is clear, the specific interpretations of certain genetic markers (like the frequency and origin of R1a subclades) and the differing signals from Y-DNA and mtDNA regarding affinities (e.g., European vs. Caucasian links) are subject to ongoing research and refinement.
- **Nature of Minority Religions:** The classification of Yazidism, Yarsanism, and Alevism (as distinct religions, forms of Islamic heterodoxy, or survivals of a pre-Islamic Yazdanism) and their precise historical relationship to each other and to mainstream Islam remain points of discussion among scholars and within the communities themselves.
- **Timeline of Ethnogenesis:** Pinpointing the exact period when a distinct "Kurdish" ethnic identity solidified is difficult, though evidence suggests significant consolidation by the

12th century CE. The mechanisms driving this process (e.g., shared language, conversion to Islam, resistance to external powers, development of shared cultural practices) are complex.

Key Scholarly Contributions

The study of Kurdish origins has been shaped by the contributions of numerous scholars across disciplines:

- **Linguistics:** D.N. Mackenzie's work on dialect classification and the relationship between Kurdish, Persian, and Baluchi remains foundational. Gernot Windfuhr offered alternative perspectives on the Parthian/Median connection and origins. Ludwig Paul and others continue to refine models of West Iranian language relationships.
- **History and Anthropology:** Martin van Bruinessen provided critical analyses of the Median hypothesis, Kurdish social structures, nationalism, and the role of religion. Mehrdad Izady proposed the influential, though controversial, theory emphasizing Hurrian origins. Early Islamic historians like al-Masudi and classical authors like Xenophon provide essential, albeit interpreted, source material.
- **Genetics:** Numerous recent studies (often collaborative efforts, e.g., involving researchers like Comas, Richards, Quintana-Murci, Nasidze, and recent Iraqi Kurdish projects) have generated crucial data on Y-DNA, mtDNA, and autosomal markers, significantly advancing understanding of population affinities and admixture.
- **Religious Studies:** Scholars like Philip Kreyenbroek, Khanna Omarkhali, and others have focused on the specific histories, beliefs, and modern transformations of Kurdish religious minorities like the Yazidis, Yarsan, and Alevis, highlighting the importance of oral tradition, scripturalization, and diaspora identity.

The ongoing nature of research, particularly in archaeology within previously inaccessible regions of Iraqi Kurdistan and the ever-advancing field of population genetics, promises to continue shedding light on these complex questions. The study of Kurdish origins exemplifies a dynamic field where interdisciplinary dialogue is essential, and where definitive answers often remain elusive, reflecting the intricate historical tapestry of the region.

IX. Conclusion: Understanding Kurdish Origins in Context

The investigation into the origins of the Kurdish people reveals a story not of simple beginnings, but of profound historical depth, intricate cultural weaving, and remarkable resilience within a challenging geographical and political landscape. Synthesizing the evidence from diverse fields—history, archaeology, linguistics, genetics, and cultural anthropology—leads to several key conclusions.

Firstly, the notion of a singular origin point or a monolithic ancestral group for the Kurds must be discarded. The evidence overwhelmingly points towards **heterogeneous origins**, a long-term process of ethnogenesis involving the amalgamation of various populations within the Zagros-Taurus mountain region. This process likely involved an ancient foundation of indigenous peoples, inhabiting the highlands since at least the Neolithic era and possibly descending from groups like the Hurrians or other early mountain dwellers, who were later assimilated and linguistically unified by waves of migrating Northwestern Iranian-speaking tribes beginning in the Iron Age.

Secondly, the **Zagros-Taurus mountains** emerge as the undeniable cradle of Kurdish identity. This region provided not only the physical space for Kurdish ethnogenesis but also acted as a crucial factor shaping it. Its rugged terrain fostered both cultural continuity through relative isolation and internal diversity through fragmentation. It served as a refuge where ancient traditions and distinct religious practices could persist, while also being a contested borderland that exposed its inhabitants to constant interaction and pressure from surrounding empires.

Thirdly, the **Kurdish language**, classified as Northwestern Iranian but showing complex relationships with neighboring languages, stands as a testament to this history of interaction and assimilation. Its development reflects the linguistic transformation of the region by Iranian speakers, while its dialectal diversity mirrors the geographical and political fragmentation of the Kurdish people.

Fourthly, **genetic studies** corroborate this narrative of deep indigenous roots combined with later admixture. Kurds share a primary genetic heritage with other West Asian populations, tracing back to the Neolithic Fertile Crescent, but also show clear evidence of gene flow associated with later migrations, including those potentially linked to Indo-European expansions. Finally, the remarkable **religious diversity** found among Kurds—encompassing Sunni and Shia Islam, Sufism, Yazidism, Alevism, and Yarsanism—is not an anomaly but a core feature reflecting the complex history of syncretism, interaction, and resistance within their mountain homeland.

In essence, the prevailing model suggests that the Kurdish people emerged from the gradual fusion of ancient, indigenous Zagros-Taurus populations with incoming Northwestern Iranian groups. This fusion resulted in a distinct people characterized by their unique linguistic heritage, deep connection to their mountainous homeland, complex social structures, and diverse cultural and religious expressions.

Understanding Kurdish origins, therefore, is not about finding a single starting point, but about appreciating a **dynamic and continuous process of becoming**. Kurdish identity has been forged and reformed over millennia through adaptation, interaction, assimilation, and resistance within the specific crucible of their historical geography. The complexities and ongoing debates surrounding their origins are not signs of a lack of history, but rather reflections of the richness, depth, and often contested nature of the Kurdish experience. Recognizing this intricate past is crucial for comprehending the unique position and enduring presence of the Kurdish people in the historical and contemporary landscape of the Middle East.

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