

Roger Lescot (1914-1975): A Study of the Dual Career in French Orientalism and Kurdish Nation-Building

I. Profile of a French Orientalist: Biographical and Academic Foundations

A. Early Life and Linguistic Education (1914-1935)

Roger Lescot (1914–1975) was a French national who came to be a central figure in the 20th-century history of Kurdish studies, embodying the complex interplay between academic Orientalism and state diplomacy.¹ His career was forged at the nexus of rigorous scholarly training and the geopolitical imperatives of the French state during the interwar and postwar periods.

Lescot's academic foundation was built in Paris, where he pursued the elite curriculum of a classical Orientalist. In 1935, he obtained a degree in Oriental literature and Arabic, followed by subsequent degrees in Turkish and Persian.¹ This course of study represented the pinnacle of the traditional French Orientalist program, a curriculum designed to produce diplomats, administrators, and textual scholars capable of engaging with the "great" state and literary languages of the Middle East. Arabic, Persian, and Turkish were the languages of empire, high culture, and statecraft.

However, a pivotal deviation from this classical trajectory occurred in 1935, when Lescot "began to learn Kurdish".¹ This decision is a significant anomaly that signals a pre-determined path. Kurdish, at this time, was a non-state, largely non-standardized, and politically marginalized language.⁵ It was not a standard component of the prestigious academic track Lescot was on. His pursuit of Kurdish *before* his deployment to the Levant suggests that this was not a casual academic interest but a specialized preparation. This deviation indicates that the French state, already deeply entrenched in its Mandate for Syria and Lebanon, had identified the "Kurdish question" as a distinct intelligence and administrative file requiring a specialist, separate from the broader "Arab," "Turkish," or "Persian" files. Lescot was, in effect, being trained as this specialist.

B. Entry into the Levant: Fieldwork and Early Diplomatic/Intelligence Postings (1936-1938)

In 1936, Lescot was sent to the French Institute in Damascus to conduct research, placing him directly within the administrative and political framework of the French Mandate of Syria.¹ His immediate fieldwork assignments were highly revealing. He did not, as a traditional Arabist might, focus on the Sunni Arab mainstream of Damascus or Beirut. Instead, his research brought him into immediate, direct contact with specific and strategically significant minority populations.

His two primary research foci were the Yazidi communities in the Kurd Dagh and Djebel Sinjar, and the Shia communities in the south of Lebanon.¹ This was not a random academic choice but a clear reflection of Mandate-era power dynamics. French policy in the Levant was predicated on the management, and often the leverage, of the region's complex mosaic of ethnic and religious minorities. These groups were frequently seen as a political counterbalance to the rising tide of Sunni Arab nationalism, which constituted the primary opposition to French rule.

Lescot, the freshly minted specialist, was therefore dispatched to map the Mandate's most sensitive and least understood non-Sunni populations. This initial fieldwork had a dual purpose from its inception: it was simultaneously an act of state intelligence gathering and a project of scholarly ethnography. The first major product of this dual-purpose mission was his foundational 1938 academic text, *Enquête sur les Yézidis de Syrie et du Djebel Sindjar*, published in Beirut.¹ This work, which would become a cornerstone of Yezidi studies, served both as a scholarly monograph for the academic world and, implicitly, as a detailed intelligence report on a key minority group for the Mandate authorities.

II. The "Kurdish-French Connection": State Service and Cultural Patronage

A. A Dual Mandate: Officer of the Service de Renseignements and Academic "Accomplice"

Lescot's career in the Levant was defined by what French scholars have termed the "dual casquette" (dual hat) ⁸, a hybridized role of scholar and state agent. His official mission, which he shared with his colleague Pierre Rondot, was unambiguous. He was appointed by the High Commissioner to "supervise" and "observe" the burgeoning Kurdish cultural and political activities within the Mandate.¹ This was an official state function, conducted in "close

cooperation with the Service of Press and Propaganda of the Delegation of Damascus".⁹ Other sources are more blunt, identifying Lescot as working directly for "French intelligence".¹ However, the political and personal reality of his posting was far more complex. The official mission of dispassionate "observation" was quickly superseded by a strategy of active engagement and collaboration. Both Lescot and Rondot "exceeded the framework of their official mission".⁹ They did not merely watch the Kurdish activists; they began "working together with" them and were "supportive of the Kurdish cultural aims".¹ This relationship became one of profound, symbiotic intimacy. The most explicit evidence comes from the private diary of Pierre Rondot, who wrote of his and Lescot's relationship with the Kurdish nationalists: "I played their game, I held their secrets, I was their accomplice".⁹ This confession reveals the true nature of Lescot's role. The binary of "scholar" versus "spy" is a misleading oversimplification. For Lescot, scholarship was not a *cover* for intelligence work; it was the *method* of intelligence and influence. A simple "observer" ⁹ would have remained an outsider and gained little trust. A traditional intelligence agent would have been met with suspicion. But a *collaborator*—an academic partner who provided "precious assistance" ¹⁰, who shared scholarly goals, and who actively supported cultural aims ³—could gain total access. By becoming an "accomplice," Lescot was not failing his official mission; he was, in fact, fulfilling a more sophisticated one. This relationship was symbiotic. The Kurdish nationalist leaders, primarily the aristocratic Bedirkhan brothers (Celadet and Kamuran) ¹, were in exile, stripped of their former status in Turkey, and in desperate need of a patron. They required French political protection, resources (such as photographic material and printing characters for their journals ¹⁰), and, critically, the academic and political validation of a major European power. Lescot, in turn, required intimate access to the "secrets" ⁹, strategies, and political orientation of the Kurdish nationalist leadership for his Mandate and intelligence duties. His scholarship—his linguistic expertise, his ethnographic surveys, his access to Parisian publishing—became the *currency* of this exchange. He traded his academic and political capital for intelligence and influence, effectively binding the nascent Kurdish nationalist project to French patronage.

B. The 1940 Report: Bases éventuelles d'une politique kurde and Strategic Anticommunism

The "Rosetta Stone" for understanding Lescot's career—the document that explicitly links his cultural "accomplice" work to its geopolitical objective—is an internal report he submitted in January 1940. Titled *Bases éventuelles d'une politique kurde* (Eventual Bases for a Kurdish Policy), this memorandum to the Mandate authorities lays bare the strategic thinking behind his cultural engagement.⁸

The report's core proposal was for "reinforced support" for the Kurdish cultural movement.⁸

This was not a plea for cultural preservation for its own sake. The motive was explicit, pragmatic, and geopolitical: to "neutralize" Soviet propaganda.⁸

Lescot, with his ear to the ground, had identified a critical vulnerability for French interests. He argued that the cultural rights, state-sponsored publications, and Latin-alphabet standardization being granted to Kurds in Soviet Armenia were proving powerfully attractive. He warned his superiors that the USSR was effectively winning the "sympathies" of the Kurds in the Levant.⁸

His solution was for France to enter the bidding. He argued that France must compete with the Soviets by becoming a rival and superior patron for Kurdish cultural aspirations. His specific suggestions were tactical and practical: he proposed "favoring the reopening" of Kurdish cultural clubs in Djézireh and Damascus, "encouraging the publication" of Kurdish schoolbooks, and, "if possible," supporting the publication of "a newspaper or a revue".⁸

This 1940 report is a remarkable document. It confirms that Lescot's support for Kurdish culture was not mere romantic Orientalism; it was a *calculated state policy* that he himself was actively formulating. He understood that Kurdish nationalism was a potent force that was, in essence, "for sale" to a great power patron. He advised his government to use *cultural patronage* as its primary tool of soft power to ensure that this nationalism would align with French, not Soviet, interests.

Furthermore, the events surrounding the report reveal a high level of collusion between Lescot and his Kurdish collaborators. After Lescot filed his internal report in January 1940, "only three months later," Kamuran Bedirkhan—his key collaborator—submitted an *external* request to the High Commissariat "using the same type of arguments".⁸ The parallel timing and identical framing cannot be a coincidence. It points, as one source notes, to a "common strategy".⁸ Lescot was acting as the Bedirkhans' "man on the inside." He was advising them on the type of argument that would be persuasive to his superiors (i.e., anti-Soviet) while simultaneously "priming the pump" by filing an internal report that would validate and recommend their (future) request.

C. The Bedirkhan Circle: Collaboration and "Creative Nation-Building"

At the heart of Lescot's work was his role as a "close collaborator" of the Bedirkhan family, the historical Kurdish aristocracy from Botan who were then living in exile in Damascus. His partnership was particularly close with the brothers Celadet (Jaladat) and Kamuran (Kâmuran) Bedirkhan.¹

This "collaboration between French orientalists and Kurdish intellectuals" ¹⁰ was more than a simple friendship or a cold intelligence transaction. It was, as described by scholar Jordi Tejel Gorgas, "integral to a new phase of creative nation-building".¹⁰ Lescot and Rondot, as representatives of French Orientalism, established deep bonds of friendship with "like-minded," "enlightened" Kurdish elites.¹⁴

The dynamic was one of mutual intellectual exchange. The Kurdish nationalists were "absorbing the findings and attitudes of European scholars" ¹⁰, learning to frame their political

aspirations in the modern, legible language of 20th-century European ethno-nationalism. This interaction, a "sort of consensual nationalist doctrine" ⁹, was instrumental in "ethnicising and delimiting a specific Kurdish identity".¹⁵

This collaboration became the primary engine for the *modernization* and *Europeanization* of Kurdish cultural nationalism. The Bedirkhans possessed the nationalist *goal* and the aristocratic legitimacy.¹⁶ Lescot, as their academic partner, provided the *modern European tools* and methodologies: the principles of descriptive linguistics, the practices of systematic ethnography, and the very conceptual model of a "national epic" and a "standard grammar" as prerequisites for a modern nation.

The product of this synthesis was a curated Kurdish identity, one that retained the "valiant, fighting" image of the Kurds but equipped it with the modern "attributes that would allow them a place in the club of modern nations".¹² This identity, co-created by the Bedirkhans and their French "accomplices," was then packaged and presented to the West as a "calling card".⁹

D. Lescot's Role in the Journals Hawar, Ronahî, and Roja Nû

Lescot's most practical contributions to this nation-building project were his work for the foundational Kurdish cultural journals published by the Bedirkhans: *Hawar* (The Call), *Ronahî* (Light), and *Roja Nû* (New Day).¹

He was not a passive supporter; he was a direct and substantive contributor. His contributions were particularly noteworthy during the second period of *Hawar* (after 1941), where he provided French translations of Kurdish folkloric texts.¹⁹ For example, he translated a "generally little-known passage" of the *Memê Alan* legend (the oral antecedent to *Mem û Zîn*), which was published in issue 36 of *Hawar*.²⁰

His role, however, extended far beyond simple translation. His own official "inquiries" and ethnographic "surveys" ⁹ provided the raw cultural material (tales, proverbs, riddles) that the journals' editors, particularly Celadet Bedir Khan, used as content.⁹ His collaboration continued as the journal *Roja Nû* was launched in Beirut, where he and Rondot once again "exceeded the framework of their official mission and provided assistance".⁹

In this capacity, Lescot functioned as a two-way "cultural broker" for the Kurdish nationalist project.

1. **Inward Flow:** He used his academic training and the resources of his Mandate position to conduct ethnographic surveys, collecting "authentic" Kurdish folklore. He then *fed* this raw cultural data *into* the nationalist project, supplying the Bedirkhans with a well-organized corpus of "national" folklore for their journals.
2. **Outward Flow:** He then selected key pieces of this culture, such as the *Memê Alan* legend ²⁰, and *translated* them into French.¹⁹ This act presented the curated culture to "western readers" ¹⁹ and the wider world, validating the Bedirkhans' claims of a rich, unique, and ancient Kurdish heritage.

Through this dual process, Lescot was simultaneously helping the Bedirkhans *define* and *standardize* Kurdish culture for their *internal* audience while *presenting* and *legitimizing* that same curated culture to the *external* European audience.

III. The Pillars of Lescot's Scholarship: A Critical Analysis of Major Works

Roger Lescot's scholarly legacy rests on three monumental works, each corresponding to a different pillar of Kurdish studies: ethnography (the Yezidis), linguistics (the Kurmanji grammar), and national literature (the *Mem û Zîn* epic). A chronological overview of his key publications provides a clear map of his academic career.

Table 1: Major Published Works of Roger Lescot

Year	Title	Co-Author	Description & Significance
1938	<i>Enquête sur les Yézidis de Syrie et du Djebel Sindjâr</i>	None	A foundational ethnographic study based on his 1936 fieldwork. It documents the history, beliefs, and social customs of the Yezidi communities in Syria and the Sinjar region. ¹
1940	<i>Textes kurdes, vol. 1: Contes, proverbes et énigmes</i>	None	A collection of Kurmanji Kurdish folklore (tales, proverbs, riddles) gathered during his ethnographic surveys. This material was used to supply cultural journals like <i>Hawar</i> . ¹²
1942	<i>Textes kurdes, vol. 2: Mamé Alan</i>	None	A critical edition and French translation of the Kurdish national epic. Crucially, this is a scholarly <i>compilation</i> of oral versions, not a direct translation of

			Ehmedê Xanî's 17th-century poem <i>Mem û Zîn</i> . ¹
1953	<i>La chouette aveugle</i> (translation)	Sadeqh Hedayat	A notable French translation of the seminal Persian novel <i>The Blind Owl</i> . This publication demonstrates Lescot's preeminence as a broader Orientalist, skilled in Persian literature beyond his Kurdish specialty. ³
1970	<i>Grammaire Kurde</i> (<i>Dialecte kurmandji</i>)	Celadet Bedirkhan	A posthumous (for Bedirkhan) and comprehensive grammar of the Kurmanji dialect. This work codifies the <i>Hawar</i> (Latin) alphabet and systematizes Bedirkhan's linguistic project. ¹

A. Ethnography and Theology: Enquête sur les Yézidis (1938)

Lescot's first major work, the *Enquête sur les Yézidis* ²³, remains a text of primary importance, though its conclusions are now heavily contested. Its enduring value comes from its empirical data. Based on his 1936 fieldwork in the Kurd Dagh and Sinjar, it is one of the "few Western sources on the communities of Sinjar before their resettlement from villages into collective communities under Saddam Hussein".²² This makes his ethnographic descriptions of social life and customs invaluable and non-replicable.

The primary thesis of the book, however, reflects the academic constraints of its time. Lescot, along with the Italian scholar Guidi, posited a "purely Islamic" or "exclusively Islamic" origin for the Yezidi faith.²² This thesis is now widely criticized by contemporary scholars, such as Philip Kreyenbroek, who argue that this interpretation "ignore[s] important elements of Yezidi mythology and practice which undoubtedly have ancient Iranian roots".³² The effect of Lescot's influential work was to academically mis-categorize Yezidism, placing it "within the remit of Islamic studies," where it was often dismissed as a minor, heretical curiosity rather than a complex, syncretic faith in its own right.²²

Lescot's *Enquête* perfectly illustrates the central contradiction of much colonial-era ethnography. On one hand, it features invaluable, on-the-ground empirical data-gathering. In an annex to the book, for example, Lescot published a copy of a Yezidi religious manuscript he had collected.³³ On the other hand, this data is yoked to a deeply flawed, reductionist theoretical framework. The very manuscript he published demonstrates this contradiction. He termed the document "le diplôme d'initiation de Pîr" (the initiation diploma of a Pîr).³³ Contemporary scholars of Yezidism now identify this document as a *mišûr*, a specific and important genre of Yezidi religious text.³³ This misidentification is telling: Lescot could *collect* the primary evidence, but his "Islamic origin" lens prevented him from *classifying* it correctly, blinding him to the indigenous, and likely non-Islamic, nature of the evidence he held.

B. Linguistics and Standardization: Grammaire Kurde (1970)

The *Grammaire Kurde (Dialecte kurmandji)*, published in Paris in 1970, stands as the capstone of Lescot's collaboration with the Bedirkhan family.¹³ It is explicitly co-authored by "Emir Djeladet BEDIR KHAN and Roger LESCOT".¹ This comprehensive, 372-page work provides a systematic description of the Kurmanji dialect, covering Alphabet and Phonetics, a detailed section on Morphology (including declension, grammatical categories, and verb conjugation), and a final part on Elements of Syntax.²⁹

The nature of this co-authorship is the key to the work's significance. Celadet Bedirkhan, the primary agent of the modern Kurmanji-Latin alphabet (the *Hawar* alphabet), died in 1951.¹³ His foundational linguistic work, including the *Bingehên gramera Kurdmancî* (Fundamentals of Kurdish Grammar), had been published piecemeal in his journal *Hawar*.¹⁶ The *Grammaire Kurde* was a project Lescot had *started* with Celadet, but which he "could not complete the whole work until after his death".¹⁹

Therefore, Lescot's 1970 publication is not a simple co-authored book. It is, rather, Lescot's final act as a cultural broker: the *codification* and *academic institutionalization* of Celadet Bedirkhan's life's work. Bedirkhan was the activist who created the new standard; he died before he could compile his work into a single, systematic, book-length grammar. Lescot, his surviving collaborator, took this material—the journal articles from *Hawar*¹⁹ and Bedirkhan's notes—and, applying his own rigorous academic training, *systematized* it.

The political and cultural act of this publication was profound. Lescot, the established French Orientalist, used his status to publish Bedirkhan's nationalist linguistic project with a major Paris academic press, the Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient.²⁸ This act *transformed* Bedirkhan's *activist* linguistics into a *formal* academic text. It gave the *Hawar* alphabet a permanent European imprimatur and established this grammar as the de facto standard for the academic study of Kurmanji in the West for decades.

C. Literary Preservation: Textes kurdes and Mem û Zîn (1940-1942)

Lescot's most famous scholarly contribution is his two-volume *Textes kurdes*.²⁴ The first volume, *Contes, proverbes et énigmes* (1940), was a direct product of his ethnographic surveys, collecting the oral folklore he would also provide to the Kurdish journals.¹² The second volume, *Mamê Alan* (1942), is his critical work on the Kurdish national epic *Mem û Zîn*.¹ A crucial methodological clarification is required: Lescot's 1942 publication is *not* a translation of Ehmedê Xanî's revered 1695 *literary* poem *Mem û Zîn*.³⁹ Rather, it is a scholarly *compilation* and *collation* of the *oral* versions of the story, which are known in Kurdish folklore as *Memê Alan*. Lescot "collates three versions into a single narrative"²⁵, which he then published as a "homogenized"⁴⁰ text in Kurdish (using the Latin alphabet) accompanied by a French translation.¹

This project is a quintessential example of 20th-century "creative nation-building".¹⁰ As scholars have noted, Lescot's project was "virtually identical" to the state-sponsored projects in the Soviet Union at the same time, which were also "publishing standardized versions of national epics" as part of state-directed cultural engineering.⁴⁰

A modern nation-building project requires a "national epic," but such epics, in an oral tradition, exist in multiple, fluid *versions*.²⁶ Lescot's work was not one of passive preservation. By acting as a modern editor—collating, selecting, and "homogenizing" three oral versions into one "single narrative"²⁶—he was effectively *creating* the fixed, standardized, and scholarly text that the Kurdish nationalist project required. He was, in effect, performing the very cultural consolidation that his 1940 report⁸ had advocated.

Lescot himself was aware of the deep political ironies of this project. He noted that his primary collaborators, the Bedirkhan family, were the "descendants of the former mîrs of Botan"⁴¹—the very same rulers whose "jealous, capricious" ancestor, Prince Zeyneddîn, serves as the antagonist in the epic and prevents the lovers Mem and Zîn from uniting.⁴¹

IV. Conclusion: The INALCO Chair and the Legacy of Roger Lescot

A. Founding the Kurdish Lectureship (1945)

Lescot's work in the Levant was the first phase of his career. The second phase involved institutionalizing his work, and the "Kurdish-French connection," within the French academic state itself.

Upon his return to France after the war, in 1945, Lescot "offered to teach Kurdish" at the prestigious École Nationale des Langues Orientales Vivantes (INALCO), today known as the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales.⁷ This was not a minor event. "Upon

his initiative," a "chair for Kurdish lectures" was created.¹ Lescot served as the first lecturer for this new course.¹⁵ This act marked the first major institutional home for Kurdish studies at a university level in Paris, elevating the language from a simple intelligence file to a legitimate academic discipline.⁷

This move cannot be understood in isolation. The creation of the INALCO chair in 1945 was the direct institutional *outcome* of Lescot's 1940 strategic report. In that report, he had argued that France *must compete* with the USSR's cultural patronage of the Kurds.⁸ In 1945, with France liberated and the Cold War beginning, he acted on his own recommendation. He used his academic and political capital to create a permanent, state-funded institution for Kurdish studies in the French capital, a major victory for the Bedirkhans' nation-building project.

B. The Transition to Kamuran Bedir Khan (1947-1948)

Lescot's tenure as the first lecturer of Kurdish at INALCO was brief, lasting only from 1945 to 1947.¹ His next move solidified his transition from the "dual casquette" to a full-time state actor. He left his academic post to "take up diplomatic work as a French diplomat in Cairo".¹ He would later serve as a French Ambassador, fully completing his journey as a state functionary.⁷

But his final act in the Kurdish academic sphere is perhaps his most significant. He "trespassed" (passed) the INALCO position he had created to his long-time collaborator, Kamuran Bedir Khan.¹

Kamuran Bedir Khan took over the lectureship in 1948¹⁵ and held the position for over two decades, until 1970.⁴² This 1947 handover is the capstone of Lescot's entire "Kurdish-French connection." It is the ultimate physical manifestation of his dual-function strategy.

1. Lescot, acting as an agent of the French academic *state*, uses his power to *create* the institution (the INALCO chair).¹
2. He then *hands the keys* to this state-sanctioned institution to Kamuran Bedir Khan, his primary Kurdish nationalist "accomplice" from the Mandate days.¹

This single act "laundered" the nationalist activist (Kamuran) into a legitimate, Paris-based academic. It permanently *institutionalized* their personal and political alliance, ensuring that the *Bedir Khan* version of Kurdish culture—the *Hawar* alphabet, the *Mamé Alan* epic, the anti-Soviet political alignment—would be the official version taught in Europe for the next generation.

C. Final Assessment: A Career of Synthesis and Contradiction

Roger Lescot, along with Pierre Rondot, is rightly considered to be at the "origin of contemporary French Kurdish Studies".⁷ His career demonstrates, with high-resolution clarity, that the roles of "scholar" and "intelligence agent" were, in the context of 20th-century

French Orientalism, not contradictory but *mutually constitutive*.

His scholarship provided the access, trust, ethnographic data, and "soft power" that made his political work possible. Inversely, his political work provided the strategic impetus, the state resources (via the Mandate), and the institutional support (via INALCO) that made his scholarship possible. One could not have existed without the other.

His *Enquête sur les Yézidis*³² was groundbreaking fieldwork enabled by a Mandate intelligence posting.¹ His *Grammaire Kurde*¹⁹ was the academic codification of a decade-long collaboration with nationalist "assets".⁸ His *Mamé Alan*⁴⁰ was an act of "creative nation-building" that perfectly mirrored the state-level cultural engineering projects of his time. And his ultimate legacy at INALCO¹ was the direct institutionalization of his political alliances.

Ultimately, Roger Lescot is the "Kurdish-French connection"¹⁴ embodied. He was a genuine and rigorous scholar who produced foundational work that is still indispensable. He was also a savvy state strategist who successfully used that scholarship to bind the Kurdish national movement, at its critical 20th-century moment of formation, to French cultural and geopolitical interests.

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