

The *Şerefname* of Şerefhanê Bedlîsî: History, Context, and Legacy

I. Introduction

The *Şerefname* (*Sharafnama*, or *Book of Honor*) stands as a landmark achievement in the historiography of the Kurdish people. Authored in Persian and completed around 1597 by Şerefhanê Bedlîsî (also known as Sharaf al-Din Bitlisi or Sharaf Khan), the Kurdish Emir of the Principality of Bitlis, the work provides a detailed chronicle of Kurdish dynasties, ruling houses, and tribal structures primarily during the medieval and early modern periods.¹ Its creation occurred during a pivotal era marked by intense geopolitical rivalry between the Ottoman and Safavid empires, a conflict that profoundly shaped the political landscape of Kurdistan. The significance of the *Şerefname* cannot be overstated. It is widely regarded by scholars as the single most important extant work dedicated specifically to Kurdish history before the nineteenth century.¹ In a field where comprehensive historical documentation concerning the Kurds is relatively less abundant compared to that of neighboring Arab, Persian, Turkish, and Armenian traditions, Şerefhan's systematic effort to record the origins, trials, and tribulations of various Kurdish princely houses provides an invaluable, albeit complex, resource.⁹ The *Şerefname* offers a unique window into the political organization, social structures, and self-perception of Kurdish elites during a period of semi-autonomous rule under the umbrella of competing empires. Its enduring relevance is underscored by its continued invocation in contemporary discussions surrounding Kurdish identity, history, and political aspirations, making it a text of both profound historical value and persistent political resonance.² This report aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the *Şerefname*. It will begin by examining the life and career of its author, Şerefhanê Bedlîsî, tracing his experiences within both the Safavid and Ottoman spheres. Subsequently, it will delve into the turbulent historical context of sixteenth-century Kurdistan, focusing on the Ottoman-Safavid conflict and the status of the Kurdish emirates. The core of the report will offer a detailed summary of the *Şerefname*'s content and structure, followed by an analysis of its varied interpretations, its complex legacy, and its significance in both historical scholarship and modern Kurdish consciousness.

II. The Author: Şerefhanê Bedlîsî (Sharaf Khan Bidlisi)

The author of the *Şerefname*, Şerefhanê Bedlîsî, led a life deeply intertwined with the political currents and cultural milieus of the sixteenth-century Middle East. His experiences navigating the complex relationships between Kurdish principalities and the dominant Ottoman and Safavid empires profoundly shaped the perspective embedded within his historical work.

A. Birth, Lineage, and Early Life

Sharaf al-Din Khan b. Shams al-Din b. Sharaf Beg Bedlisi was born on 25 February 1543.¹ His birthplace was the village of Karahrud (or Garmrood) near Qom in central Iran, a location dictated by his father's exile from their ancestral homeland.¹ He hailed from the prominent Kurdish Rojkî (also rendered Rozakî, Rūzagî) tribe, which had served as the hereditary rulers of the Emirate (or Principality) of Bitlis, centered in the town of Bitlis southwest of Lake Van in Eastern Anatolia, intermittently since at least the ninth century.¹ Reflecting his noble lineage, he generally preferred the royal title 'Mir' or 'Emir' (Prince) rather than the tribal title 'Khan', often being known as Mir Sharaf.¹ His father was Mir Shamsaddin (Shams al-Din), the incumbent Emir of Bitlis before his exile, and his mother is reported to have been the daughter of Amir Khan Mowşellū (Musullu), a Turkic notable associated with the Safavids.¹ The circumstances of his father's exile are crucial to understanding Şeref Xan's early life. Following the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman I's Iraq campaign (circa 1533-1535), the Sultan decided to grant the governorship of Bitlis to Olāma Beg Takkalū, offering Mir Shamsaddin the district of Malatya as compensation.¹⁴ Shamsaddin refused this arrangement, effectively choosing to align himself with the rival Safavid Empire. He and his followers were subsequently welcomed by the Safavid Shah Tahmasp I, who bestowed upon him the title of Khan and granted him governorships over districts such as Sarāb, Marāgha, Damāvand, and Karahrūd in Iran.¹⁴ This political shift meant that Şeref Xan was born and spent his earliest years within the Safavid sphere of influence, away from the Rojkî heartland of Bitlis.

B. Education at the Safavid Court

Şeref Xan's life took a decisive turn when, at the age of nine (around 1551 or 1552), he was sent to the Safavid royal court in Qazvin.¹ Under the patronage of Shah Tahmasp I, a ruler known for his religious disposition, Şeref Xan received a comprehensive education alongside Safavid princes and the children of the nobility.¹ His curriculum included instruction in the Quran, the principles of Shari'a (Islamic law), piety, and ethics.¹ He was introduced to religious scholars who encouraged virtuous conduct.¹ Beyond religious studies, his education encompassed the martial skills essential for the ruling elite: archery, polo, racing, swordsmanship, and the codes of chivalry, emphasizing humanism and generosity.¹ Some accounts suggest he was also encouraged by Shah Tahmasp to learn painting.¹⁷ This upbringing provided him with a high-quality Persianate education, leading to his mastery of the Persian language, the lingua franca of culture and administration in the region.¹ This formative experience at the heart of the Safavid Empire created a complex layering in Şeref Xan's identity. While his lineage firmly rooted him in the Kurdish Rojkî tribe and the heritage of the Bitlis Emirate, his intellectual and cultural development was profoundly shaped by the Persianate environment of the Safavid court. This dual exposure – Kurdish heritage and Safavid courtly education – equipped him with the skills and perspectives necessary to navigate the intricate political landscape involving Kurdish tribal structures, regional emirates, and the overarching imperial systems of the Ottomans and Safavids. His later decision to compose his magnum opus, the *Sharafnama*, in Persian, despite its focus on Kurdish history, directly reflects this deep immersion in Persianate literary and scholarly traditions.¹

C. Career in Safavid Service

Şeref Xan entered into political and administrative life at a remarkably young age. Some sources suggest he began statesmanship duties around the age of twelve (circa 1554/1555).¹⁸ Around this time, at the request of the Rojkî tribe and following his father's retirement for personal reasons, Shah Tahmasp nominally appointed the young Şeref Xan as chief of the tribe, although he was initially sent to Shirvan under the tutelage of Shaikh Amîr Belbâsî.² He held appointments such as prince of Salyan and Mohammadabad in the district of Shirvan.¹⁸ His career progressed through military and administrative roles. He gained distinction leading forces in the Gîlân campaign around 1567/1568, successfully suppressing a rebellion led by Ahmad Khan.¹⁴ He subsequently served as governor in various regions, sometimes in partnership with Qizilbash amirs (commanders from the Turcoman tribal confederation that formed the backbone of the early Safavid military).¹⁴ He reportedly governed different areas within the Safavid realm for approximately fifteen to twenty years.¹⁶ His standing reached a peak in 1576 upon the accession of Shah Ismail II, who appointed Şeref Xan to the prestigious position of *Amir al-Umara* (Mir of Mirs, or Commander of Commanders) over all Kurdish tribes within the Safavid domains. In this capacity, he was tasked with representing Kurdish interests and concerns at the royal court.¹

D. Shift in Allegiance: From Safavid Servant to Ottoman Emir

Şeref Xan's high position within the Safavid hierarchy proved precarious. He faced growing discontent and intrigue from powerful Qizilbash factions at court, who may have viewed the influential Kurdish emir with suspicion.¹⁴ Shah Ismail II, possibly swayed by these court politics or seeking to remove a potentially powerful figure from the center, appointed Şeref Xan as governor of Nakhchivan in Azerbaijan around 1577 or 1578.¹⁴ Şeref Xan perceived this appointment negatively, viewing it as an effective expulsion and lamenting his distance from his ancestral lands in Kurdistan.¹⁸ Some sources also mention accusations of unspecified illegal acts contributing to his removal from favor.¹⁶

This period of discontent coincided with the outbreak of the major Ottoman-Safavid War of 1578-1590.²⁴ The Ottomans, likely aware of Şeref Xan's situation, saw an opportunity. Through the mediation of other Kurdish figures loyal to the Ottomans, such as Khasrawkhan (or Khusrau Pasha), the Ottoman governor of Van, contact was established.¹⁴ Exploiting Şeref Xan's grievances and his proximity to the Ottoman frontier in Nakhchivan, the Ottomans made him an enticing offer. In late 1578 (reported as December), Şeref Xan made the momentous decision to switch allegiance. Abandoning his Safavid post, he crossed the border into Ottoman territory with a retinue of approximately 400 to 600 followers.¹

He was received with honor by the Ottoman authorities. Sultan Murad III granted him the title of Emir (some sources say Khan) and, crucially, restored to him the hereditary governorship of the Emirate of Bitlis, the fief long held by his ancestors.¹ In return for this restoration, Şeref Xan became an active participant in the Ottoman war effort against his former Safavid masters. Between 1578 and 1588, he played a significant role in Ottoman military campaigns

against Persia.¹ His service was further rewarded after a successful Ottoman expedition into Georgia around 1583, when he was assigned the administration of the neighboring Muş district in addition to Bitlis.¹⁴

Şeref Xan's dramatic shift from high-ranking Safavid official to Ottoman emir underscores the pragmatic and often fluid nature of political loyalties among Kurdish leaders in the sixteenth century. His decision appears driven less by an overarching ethnic or proto-national solidarity and more by immediate political circumstances, personal grievances, and strategic opportunities. The Safavid court intrigue and his effective banishment provided the push, while the Ottoman offer to restore his hereditary lands and status provided the pull. This pattern was not unique to Şeref Xan; his own father had previously switched allegiance to the Safavids when the Ottomans initially deprived him of Bitlis.¹⁴ Such tactical maneuvering was characteristic of Kurdish emirates caught between the two powerful empires, constantly calculating how best to preserve their autonomy and hereditary rights in a volatile geopolitical environment.¹⁴

E. Later Life, Retirement, and Death

Following his defection, Şeref Xan governed the Emirate of Bitlis as an Ottoman vassal emir.¹ In 1005 AH / 1597 AD, at the age of 53 or 54, he transferred the authority and official functions of the emirate to his son, Shams al-Din (also referred to as Abulmalik or Abolma'ali Shamsaddin).¹

The precise reasons for his retirement are subject to differing interpretations based on available sources. Şeref Xan's own account, presented in the autobiographical section of the *Sharafnama*, suggests a voluntary withdrawal from political life to dedicate himself to scholarship and the writing of his history.¹⁴ This narrative portrays a statesman choosing intellectual pursuits over power. However, more recent scholarly analysis, drawing on Ottoman archival sources, presents an alternative possibility: that Şeref Xan may have been compelled to resign due to conflicts with the Ottoman central government, potentially over issues related to tax revenues or the administration of the Bitlis emirate.² This discrepancy highlights the importance of critically evaluating historical sources, including autobiographical accounts, against evidence from other perspectives.

Regardless of the exact circumstances of his retirement, it is clear that Şeref Xan devoted his remaining years in Bitlis to his scholarly project. He completed his monumental history, the *Sharafnama*, around the same year he stepped down from power, 1597.¹ He lived for several more years, passing away circa 1603-1604, according to most sources.¹ Some accounts offer slightly earlier dates, such as 1599 or 1601/02.² He was reportedly buried in Bitlis.¹⁷

Table 1: Timeline of Şeref Xan Bidlisi's Life

Year (CE / AH)	Event	Location(s)	Key Sources
1543 / 949	Born	Karahrud (near Qom)	¹
c. 1551/52 / c. 958	Enters Safavid court for education	Qazvin	¹

c. 1554/55 / c. 961	Begins statesmanship; nominally appointed Rojkî chief	Qazvin / Shirvan	2
c. 1567/68 / c. 975	Distinguished in Gīlān campaign	Gīlān	14
1576 / 984	Appointed <i>Amir al-Umara</i> of Iranian Kurds by Shah Ismail II	Qazvin	1
c. 1577/78 / c. 985	Appointed Governor of Nakhchivan; growing discontent	Nakhchivan	14
Dec 1578 / 986	Defects to the Ottoman Empire during Ottoman-Safavid War	Nakhchivan -> Van	1
1578 / 986	Appointed Emir of Bitlis by Ottoman Sultan Murad III	Bitlis	1
1578-1588 / 986-996	Leads/participates in Ottoman campaigns against Safavids	Ottoman/Safavid Front	1
c. 1583 / c. 991	Granted administration of Muş district	Muş	14
1597 / 1005	Retires, transfers Bitlis Emirate to son Shams al-Din; completes <i>Sharafnama</i>	Bitlis	1
c. 1603-04 / c. 1012	Dies	Bitlis	1

III. The Historical Crucible: Kurdistan in the 16th Century

Şeref Xan wrote the *Şerefname* during a period of profound transformation and conflict in the Middle East. The rise of the powerful Ottoman and Safavid empires in the early sixteenth century placed the geographically intermediate lands inhabited by Kurds, often referred to as Kurdistan, directly in the path of their expansionist ambitions and ideological clashes. Understanding this context is essential for interpreting both Şeref Xan's life and his historical work.

A. The Ottoman-Safavid Confrontation

The sixteenth century was dominated by the rivalry between the Sunni Ottoman Empire, centered in Istanbul, and the newly established Shia Safavid Empire in Iran.⁵ Kurdistan, stretching across rugged highlands in what is now eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, northwestern

Iran, and parts of Syria and the Caucasus, became a critical frontier zone and a frequent theater of war between these two behemoths.³³

This imperial contest was fueled by geopolitical competition for territory and influence, but it also possessed a potent religious dimension.²⁴ The Safavids, under Shah Ismail I, had declared Twelver Shi'ism the state religion, a move seen as a direct challenge by the Ottomans, who positioned themselves as the champions of Sunni Islam.³⁷ This religious antagonism permeated the conflict, influencing propaganda, shaping alliances, and sometimes leading to sectarian violence.²⁵ As the majority of Kurdish tribes adhered to Sunni Islam, this provided the Ottomans with a potential ideological advantage in seeking Kurdish allies against the Shia Safavids.¹⁰

Several major conflicts defined the century. The Battle of Chaldiran in 1514 resulted in a decisive Ottoman victory, establishing Ottoman control over much of Eastern Anatolia and initiating a pattern of Ottoman military superiority in direct confrontations.³⁸ The Peace of Amasya in 1555 provided a temporary respite and recognized spheres of influence, but hostilities resumed.²⁴ The long and grueling Ottoman-Safavid War of 1578-1590, the very conflict during which Şeref Xan switched his allegiance, saw extensive Ottoman campaigns pushing deep into Safavid territories in the Caucasus and western Iran.¹ This war concluded with the Treaty of Constantinople (or Istanbul) in 1590, which confirmed significant Ottoman territorial gains, including control over Azerbaijan, Georgia, Shirvan, and parts of Kurdistan and Luristan, though these gains would later be contested by Shah Abbas I.²⁴

The impact of this continuous warfare on the Kurdish population and their lands was often devastating. Kurdish territories frequently served as battlegrounds, supply routes, or recruitment areas. Both empires employed destructive tactics, including "scorched earth" policies and forced deportations of populations, to deny resources to the enemy or to reshape the demographics of strategic areas.³⁴ Safavid Shah Abbas I, for instance, is credited with initiating a policy of moving Kurdish tribes from Kurdistan to Khorasan in northeastern Iran to defend the frontier against Uzbek incursions.²⁴ Caught in the crossfire, Kurdish emirs and tribal leaders were constantly forced to navigate the treacherous political landscape, making tactical decisions about allegiance based on perceived threats, opportunities for gain, or direct coercion.¹⁴ The Ottomans, particularly after Chaldiran, actively cultivated alliances with Sunni Kurdish leaders, recognizing their strategic importance. Figures like the scholar and administrator Idris Bitlisi (a relative of Şeref Xan's family) played a key role in mediating the initial submission of many Kurdish emirs to Ottoman rule.² Later, the Ottomans courted Şeref Xan himself, recognizing his value as a high-profile defector and experienced commander.²⁵ The Safavids, too, employed strategies to manage their Kurdish populations, including educating Kurdish youths at court (like Şeref Xan), appointing loyal Kurds to positions of authority, and acknowledging hereditary titles under certain conditions.²⁴ The strategic location of Kurdistan, combined with the political fragmentation inherent in its system of tribal emirates, rendered it a crucial but inherently unstable buffer zone between the Ottoman and Safavid empires. Both powers sought to exert control or influence over the region to secure their frontiers, control trade routes, and gain military advantages. This

imperial competition created a dynamic where Kurdish principalities could sometimes leverage the rivalry to gain a degree of autonomy, but they remained fundamentally dependent on the goodwill or strategic calculations of their imperial overlords. The policies enacted by both empires—granting autonomy, attempting integration, seeking military alliances, or resorting to coercion and population transfers—demonstrate Kurdistan's vital importance as a contested space in the sixteenth-century geopolitical order.⁵

B. The Status of Kurdish Emirates (Principalities/Chiefdoms)

Sixteenth-century Kurdistan was characterized by a complex mosaic of Kurdish emirates (principalities or chiefdoms, often referred to by the Kurdish term *mîrnişîn*). These entities, often based on tribal affiliations and ruled by hereditary dynasties (whose leaders held titles like Mir, Beg, or sometimes Khan), possessed significant degrees of internal autonomy.² Prominent examples included the emirates of Bitlis (Rojkî), Hakkari, Botan, Soran, Baban, and Ardalan, among others.

Following the Ottoman victory at Chaldiran and the subsequent incorporation of large parts of Kurdistan into their empire, the Ottomans established a specific administrative arrangement for many of these regions, often referred to by scholars using the term *yurtluk-ocaklık* (roughly, hereditary fiefdom).²⁷ Under this system, loyal Kurdish emirs were confirmed in their hereditary rule over their traditional territories. They were granted considerable internal autonomy, managing local affairs, collecting taxes, and maintaining their own armed retinues. In return, they acknowledged Ottoman suzerainty, pledged loyalty to the Sultan, were obligated to provide military contingents for Ottoman campaigns when requested, and sometimes offered tribute or gifts.³⁵ The Eyalet (province) of Diyarbakir served as a major administrative center overseeing many of these Kurdish principalities.⁴⁶ This arrangement was a pragmatic solution for the Ottomans, allowing them to govern a geographically challenging and tribally organized frontier region with minimal direct intervention, while simultaneously securing the loyalty and military cooperation of powerful Kurdish groups against the Safavid threat.¹⁰

Despite this autonomy, the Kurdish emirates remained vassals, integrated into the broader imperial structures of either the Ottomans or the Safavids.⁵ Their political status was inherently precarious, subject to the shifting balance of power between the two empires and the changing priorities of the imperial centers.¹⁴ Loyalty could be rewarded, as in Şeref Xan's case, but perceived disloyalty or shifts in imperial policy could lead to intervention or the loss of status. Furthermore, rivalries and conflicts often existed *between* different Kurdish emirates, which the empires could exploit using "divide and conquer" tactics.³⁵

This era of Ottoman-sanctioned semi-autonomy, lasting roughly from the early sixteenth century until the centralizing reforms of the nineteenth century, has often been retrospectively characterized by Kurdish intellectuals and nationalists as a "golden age" of Kurdish self-rule, political significance, and cultural flourishing.⁹ Şeref Xan's *Sharafnama* itself documents the power and prestige of these ruling houses. However, this perception requires nuance; the autonomy enjoyed by the emirates was conditional, exercised within a framework of imperial vassalage, and largely contingent upon the ongoing Ottoman-Safavid conflict.⁹

The semi-autonomous status granted to the Kurdish emirates, particularly by the Ottomans, was fundamentally an instrument of imperial strategy rather than an acknowledgment of inherent Kurdish sovereignty. It was a conditional privilege, extended primarily to ensure frontier security and gain military allies in the protracted struggle against Safavid Iran.²⁷ The system functioned based on mutual, albeit unequal, obligations: the emirs provided loyalty and military service, and the Sultan legitimized their hereditary rule and granted internal autonomy.³⁵ When the strategic calculus changed – notably, when the Safavid threat diminished significantly and Ottoman centralizing policies intensified in the nineteenth century – this autonomy was systematically dismantled.⁴¹ Şeref Xan's own career path, where the restoration of his ancestral emirate was the direct reward for his defection to the Ottoman side during a critical war, perfectly illustrates the contingent and strategic nature of this autonomy.¹

C. The Emirate of Bitlis: A Case Study

The Emirate of Bitlis, Şeref Xan's ancestral domain, serves as a pertinent example of these dynamics. Ruled by the Rojkî dynasty, the emirate was centered on the strategically located town of Bitlis, southwest of Lake Van.¹ The Rojkî had a long history of rule in the area, dating back centuries.¹

During the turbulent early sixteenth century, Bitlis experienced periods under the control of the Aq Qoyunlu Turcomans (until 1495) and the Safavids (1507-1514) before aligning with the Ottomans after the Battle of Chaldiran.¹⁹ However, as previously noted, Şeref Xan's father, Mir Shamsaddin, lost control of the emirate to an Ottoman appointee around 1533-1535 and subsequently defected to the Safavids.¹ It was only in 1578, as a reward for his own defection *from* the Safavids, that Şeref Xan regained the emirate under Ottoman suzerainty.¹ Bitlis was recognized as a significant emirate, possessing considerable military capacity and playing a role in regional trade, particularly involving its Armenian minority population.¹⁹

Crucially, Bitlis, like many other Kurdish principalities of the era, was deeply embedded within the broader Persianate cultural sphere.¹⁹ Despite being under Ottoman political suzerainty for much of the period, Persian served as the language of the ruling elite, administration, bureaucracy, chancery, literature, scholarship, and diplomacy. Notable figures like Idris Bitlisi and Şeref Xan himself contributed to Persian literary production in Bitlis. This cultural orientation connected the Kurdish courts to a vast network stretching from the Balkans to Central Asia.¹⁹ Understanding this pervasive Persianate influence is key to comprehending why Şeref Xan, despite writing a history focused on the Kurds, chose Persian as his medium.

IV. The *Şerefname*: Content and Structure

Written during his years of retirement in Bitlis and completed around 1597 (1005 AH), the *Şerefname* represents the culmination of Şeref Xan's life experiences and scholarly endeavors.¹

A. Genesis and Purpose

In the *Şerefname* itself, Şeref Xan articulated his motivations for undertaking such a monumental work. He expressed a desire to rectify the neglect shown by previous historians towards the Kurds and to preserve the memory of Kurdish rulers, dynasties, tribes, and notable figures, chronicling their achievements and tribulations lest they be forgotten by posterity.¹⁰

Beyond these stated aims, scholars widely concur that the *Şerefname* served important implicit political purposes. By meticulously documenting the lineages and histories of various Kurdish ruling houses, Şeref Xan sought to assert their status and legitimize their authority, particularly that of his own Rojkî dynasty of Bitlis.¹ In an era where historical precedent and noble lineage were crucial components of political legitimacy, the *Şarafname* functioned as a powerful statement of dynastic prestige, aimed at audiences within both the Kurdish sphere and the wider Ottoman and Persianate worlds.¹ Some analyses further suggest that the work can be interpreted as a political tract implicitly defending the very system of autonomous Kurdish principalities operating under Ottoman suzerainty, a system that had defined much of the sixteenth century and Şeref Xan's own career.¹⁰

B. Language of Composition: Persian

Şeref Xan composed the *Şerefname* exclusively in Persian (Farsi).¹ This choice, while perhaps seeming counterintuitive for a history focused on the Kurds, is often described by scholars as "inevitable" given the historical and cultural context of the late sixteenth century.¹

Several factors dictated this linguistic choice. Firstly, Şeref Xan himself was a product of the Safavid court's elite educational system, where he attained fluency and literacy in Persian at a high level.¹ Secondly, Persian was the dominant language of high culture, administration, literature, and scholarship throughout the vast "Persianate world," which included the Ottoman East, Safavid Iran, Central Asia, and parts of the Indian subcontinent. Kurdish courts, including Bitlis, actively participated in this cultural sphere, using Persian for administration, correspondence, and literary pursuits.⁴ Thirdly, writing in Persian allowed Şeref Xan to reach the widest possible influential audience, encompassing not only literate Kurds but also the administrative and scholarly elites of both the Ottoman and Safavid empires, thereby enhancing the prestige and legitimacy of his dynasty and the Kurdish history he presented.¹ Evidence suggests that Persian was indeed read and written in other Kurdish courts, as Şeref Xan sent copies of his completed work to the rulers of Kilis and Ardalán.¹ Finally, while Kurdish dialects were widely spoken, a standardized written Kurdish literary language suitable for a comprehensive historical work was not as established or widely used as Persian in the sixteenth century.⁴⁰

Therefore, Şeref Xan's decision to write in Persian should not be interpreted as a denial of his Kurdish identity but rather as a pragmatic and strategic choice rooted in the linguistic realities of power, culture, and communication in his time. It enabled him to position Kurdish history within the esteemed Persianate intellectual tradition and to engage effectively with the regional powers and elites whose recognition mattered.

C. Structure and Content

The *Şerefname* is generally described as consisting of an introduction (*muqaddima*), four main parts or sections (sometimes referred to as *şahîfa* or books), and a conclusion (*khatima*).¹ Some sources mention a division into two larger volumes, the first focusing on Kurdish history and the second on the history of Ottoman and Iranian rulers contemporary to the author.¹⁷ The work's primary focus, however, is unequivocally the history of Kurdish dynasties, tribes, rulers, and territories.

The commonly accepted structure of the main body is as follows:

- **Part 1:** Discusses five Kurdish dynasties that achieved the status of royalty (*Saltanat*) or claimed independence. These typically include the Marwanids of Diyarbakir (Amed), the Hasanwayhids of Dinavar and Shahrizor, the Fadluyids (Fazlawayhids) who ruled Great Luristan, the Atabegs of Little Luristan, and, most prominently, the Ayyubid dynasty founded by Saladin (Salah al-Din Ayyubi).¹
- **Part 2:** Details the histories of Kurdish rulers who did not claim full royalty but exercised significant sovereign powers, symbolized by striking their own coins and having the *khutba* (Friday sermon, a prerogative of independent Muslim rulers) recited in their names.⁵
- **Part 3:** Chronicles the histories of other hereditary governors, ruling families, and princes (Mirs or Begs) who held authority in various regions of Kurdistan.¹
- **Part 4:** Provides a detailed history of the Emirs of Bitlis, focusing specifically on Şeref Xan's own Rojkî ancestors and lineage. This section is particularly valuable as it includes Şeref Xan's autobiography, offering personal insights into his life and career.¹

The introduction reportedly contains Şeref Xan's reflections on the characteristics of the Kurdish people (sometimes critically, mentioning traits like disunity or lack of foresight)²⁰, his rationale for writing the history, and a definition of the geographical boundaries of "Kurdistan" as he understood them in the late sixteenth century.¹¹ The conclusion likely summarizes the work and offers final remarks.

The *Şerefname*'s scope is broad, covering Kurdish history from mentions of pre-Islamic ancestors and legends up to Şeref Xan's own time in the late 1590s, with a strong emphasis on the medieval and early modern periods.³ It provides accounts of Kurdish life, social structures, and the histories of various principalities across a wide geographical area, including Eastern Anatolia, Mesopotamia, the Caucasus, and western Iran.¹ However, the work is not exhaustive. Some scholars have noted the absence of certain prominent Kurdish groups, such as the Milan tribal confederation, raising questions about the completeness of Şeref Xan's knowledge, the geographical limits of his focus, or potential political reasons for omission.⁵² There are also indications that some chapters may have been left incomplete.⁵²

Table 2: Outline of *Şerefname* Sections (Based on Common Descriptions)

Section	General Theme	Examples of Dynasties/Rulers	Key Sources

		Covered	
Intro	Author's motivations, Kurdish traits, Kurdistan geography	N/A	¹¹
Part 1	Dynasties claiming Royalty (<i>Saltanat</i>)	Marwanids, Hasanwayhids, Fadluyids (Great Lur), Little Lur Atabegs, Ayyubids	¹
Part 2	Rulers exercising Sovereign Rights (Coinage, Khutba)	Specific examples vary in secondary descriptions	⁵
Part 3	Other Hereditary Governors and Princes	Various regional ruling families	¹
Part 4	History of the Emirs of Bitlis (Rojkî Dynasty)	Şeref Xan's ancestors; includes his autobiography	¹
Concl.	Final remarks	N/A	

D. Sources and Methodology

In compiling his history, Şeref Xan drew upon a range of sources available to him. He explicitly relied on earlier written historical works composed in Arabic and Persian, integrating information from established Islamic historiographical traditions.² In addition to these textual sources, he incorporated information gathered from eyewitness accounts, leveraging his own extensive political and military career and his network of contacts among Kurdish elites.¹⁴ His methodology generally aligns with the conventions of traditional Islamic historiography, which often emphasizes political events, military campaigns, and dynastic succession narratives.²⁰ However, some scholars note that his introductory discussion of perceived Kurdish ethnic or social characteristics represents a departure from, or addition to, this standard approach.²⁰

As with any historical work, particularly one written by a political actor about his own people and lineage, the *Şerefname* must be read critically, acknowledging potential biases. As discussed earlier, Şeref Xan's political allegiance clearly shifted towards the Ottomans, and this pro-Ottoman perspective likely influenced his presentation of events involving the Ottomans and Safavids.¹⁰ His aim of legitimizing Kurdish ruling houses, especially his own, may have led to embellishments or selective presentations of their histories.² His characterizations of Kurdish traits, such as alleged disunity or irrationality²⁰, also require careful contextualization and should not be accepted uncritically as objective ethnographic description.

V. Significance, Interpretation, and Legacy

The *Şerefname* occupies a unique and enduring position in Kurdish history and cultural memory. Its significance extends beyond its value as a historical source, deeply influencing modern Kurdish identity and political thought, while also generating considerable scholarly debate.

A. Foundational Text for Kurdish History

The *Şerefname* is almost universally acknowledged by historians as the single most crucial indigenous written source for Kurdish history prior to the modern era.¹ In a historical landscape where systematic chronicles focusing specifically on the Kurds are rare compared to those of neighboring peoples, Şeref Xan's work provides an unparalleled repository of information.⁹ It details the lineages and actions of numerous Kurdish dynasties and tribal leaders, describes the political geography of the region (including his definition of "Kurdistan"), and offers glimpses into Kurdish society and life during the pivotal sixteenth century.¹ For these reasons, it is often considered the foundational text of Kurdish historiography.²⁰

B. The *Şerefname* and Kurdish Nationalism

From the late nineteenth century onwards, with the rise of modern national consciousness among Kurdish intellectuals, the *Şerefname* acquired immense symbolic importance.⁹ It became a cornerstone for constructing a modern Kurdish national narrative.² Kurdish nationalists have frequently cited it as evidence of a long-standing, distinct Kurdish identity, a historical claim to territory, and a continuous desire for self-determination.²

The *Şerefname*'s detailed accounts of powerful Kurdish principalities ruling significant territories, albeit often as vassals, provided historical precedent for aspirations of autonomy or independence. The era of the semi-autonomous emirates described by Şeref Xan came to be viewed, particularly in nationalist discourse, as a "golden age" of Kurdish political existence.⁹ Şeref Xan himself was elevated from a sixteenth-century emir and historian to a national patriotic hero, celebrated as an embodiment of Kurdish spirit and historical consciousness.¹⁰ His name adorns cultural centers and institutions in Kurdish regions today.¹⁰ The text served as an essential historical resource for pioneers of the Kurdish cultural and political movements in the late Ottoman period and continued to hold great symbolic weight throughout the twentieth century and into the present.⁹ Consequently, the publication and translation of the *Şerefname* have sometimes been politically charged acts, occasionally meeting with resistance or controversy in states with significant Kurdish populations concerned about its potential to foster separatist sentiment.¹⁰

C. Academic Debates: Ethno-Politics vs. Anachronism

While acknowledging the *Şerefname*'s historical importance, contemporary academic scholarship generally approaches its relationship with modern nationalism critically.⁹ Many historians caution against interpreting the work through the lens of twentieth- or twenty-first-century nationalism, arguing that such readings impose anachronistic concepts

onto the sixteenth-century context.⁴⁰ Ideas of the nation-state, popular sovereignty, and ethnically defined national identity as understood today were not the prevailing frameworks in Şeref Xan's time.⁹

A more nuanced interpretation, favored by many scholars, views the *Şerefname* not as a work of modern nationalism, but as a manifestation of early modern Kurdish "ethno-politics".⁹ This perspective recognizes that while a modern national identity may not have existed, Şeref Xan's work does reflect a consciousness of shared Kurdish identity (based on lineage, language, territory, and custom), and it represents a political act aimed at asserting the status and history of Kurdish elites within the complex power dynamics of the time. It was politics conducted through an ethnic lens, but within the prevailing structures of dynastic rule, tribal organization, and imperial rivalry.

Crucial to this contextualized reading is the acknowledgment of the *Şerefname*'s often-overlooked pro-Ottoman bias.⁹ Written after Şeref Xan had entered Ottoman service and received the Bitlis emirate from the Sultan, the text frequently presents events from a perspective favorable to the Ottomans. Şeref Xan commends the Ottoman Sultan as a champion of Sunni Islam against the "heretical" Safavids and portrays the Kurds as loyal subjects of the Ottoman Empire.⁴⁰ This bias reflects the political realities of his patronage and personal history. Therefore, the *Şerefname* should be understood not just as a history of the Kurds, but also as a product of its author's specific political agenda – legitimizing his dynasty, defending the system of Ottoman-sanctioned emirates – and the broader climate of Ottoman-Safavid competition.²

The contrasting uses of the *Şerefname* over time vividly illustrate how historical narratives can be shaped and repurposed to serve different ends. Şeref Xan employed history as a tool for navigating sixteenth-century imperial politics, asserting dynastic claims, and perhaps defending a particular political order. Centuries later, modern nationalists seized upon the same text, emphasizing elements that supported a narrative of timeless Kurdish nationhood, historical continuity, and resistance, while often downplaying or reinterpreting aspects like the pro-Ottoman stance or the complexities of vassalage.⁹ This demonstrates the constructed nature of historical interpretation and its susceptibility to the political and ideological needs of the present.¹⁰

D. Politicization and Modern Interpretations

Given the unresolved political status of Kurds in the Middle East (the "Kurdish Question"), the *Şerefname* remains a politically sensitive text.² Its interpretation is often contested, particularly concerning its implications for Kurdish national identity and historical claims. Modern translations and interpretations have sometimes become focal points of controversy. For instance, the 2005 English translation by Mehrdad R. Izady, titled *The Sharafnama: Or the History of the Kurdish Nation*, has drawn significant criticism from some scholars.⁴⁰ Critics argue that the title itself imposes a modern nationalist concept ("Kurdish Nation") not present in the original, and that Izady's accompanying commentaries anachronistically attempt to fit Şeref Xan into a twentieth-century nationalist mold, distorting the sixteenth-century context. Izady has also been accused of factual errors and misinterpretations, and even of fabricating

concepts like a supposed ancient pan-Kurdish religion ("Yazdanism"), allegedly as part of a broader modern Kurdish nationalist project to rewrite the history of the region.⁴⁰ These controversies highlight the ongoing politicization of Şeref Xan's work and the challenges of separating historical analysis from contemporary political agendas.

E. Translations and the Need for Critical Editions

The *Şerefname*'s importance is reflected in its translation into numerous languages over the centuries. Early efforts included German translations by H. A. Barb in the 1850s.⁸ The first major edition of the Persian text was published alongside a Russian translation by Vladimir Veliaminov-Zernov in St. Petersburg (1860-62).⁷ François Charmoy produced a French translation, also published in St. Petersburg (1873-75).⁴ The work has also been translated into Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, modern Turkish, English (partially by Izady), and Kurdish (notably a Kurmanji translation by Mahmoud Bayazidi completed in 1858 but published much later, and a Sorani translation by Abdurrahman Sharafkandi in 1972).³ Significantly, Turkish translations were also produced within Kurdish princely courts as early as the seventeenth century, reflecting a shift towards Turkish as an administrative language in Ottoman Kurdistan while Persian retained its prestige.²

Despite its foundational status and the existence of these translations, a definitive, modern critical edition of the *Şerefname* based on a comprehensive study of all known manuscripts is still lacking.⁷ The Veliaminov-Zernov edition, though pioneering and still the standard reference, was based on a limited number of manuscripts (around six) and does not feature the detailed critical apparatus (notes on textual variants, sources, etc.) expected of modern scholarly editions.⁸ Recognizing this gap, scholars have repeatedly called for, and sometimes initiated projects aimed at, producing a new critical edition. Such an edition, utilizing the dozens of extant manuscripts scattered in libraries worldwide (one project aimed to use 36 manuscripts⁸), would provide a more reliable and rigorously established Persian text, serving as a crucial foundation for future research and translation.⁸

VI. Conclusion

The *Şerefname* stands as an indispensable monument in the landscape of Kurdish history. Authored by the Emir of Bitlis, Şerefhanê Bedlîsî, in the closing years of the sixteenth century, it offers an unparalleled chronicle of Kurdish dynasties, political structures, and societal glimpses during a critical period shaped by the competing ambitions of the Ottoman and Safavid empires. Its systematic approach and broad scope grant it a unique status as the cornerstone of pre-modern Kurdish historiography, preserving invaluable information that might otherwise have been lost.

The author, Şeref Xan, embodies the complexities of his era. A Kurdish nobleman by birth, educated in the high Persianate culture of the Safavid court, he navigated a life marked by shifting political fortunes and allegiances. His career reflects the pragmatic realities faced by Kurdish elites caught between powerful empires, while his decision to dedicate his later years to writing the *Şerefname* reveals a deep commitment to preserving the history and

legitimizing the status of the Kurdish ruling houses, particularly his own Rojkî lineage. His choice of Persian as the language of composition further highlights the interconnected cultural and political world he inhabited.

The legacy of the *Şerefname* is multifaceted and contested. It remains a vital primary source for historians studying the early modern Middle East, Kurdish society, and Ottoman-Safavid relations. Simultaneously, it has been profoundly influential in the development of modern Kurdish national consciousness, serving as a foundational text for narratives of historical identity, continuity, and political aspiration. This dual legacy underscores the importance of engaging with the *Şerefname* critically, acknowledging its sixteenth-century context, the author's specific political position and potential biases, and the layers of interpretation that have accrued over centuries. The ongoing need for a comprehensive critical edition further emphasizes the text's enduring significance and the scholarly commitment required to fully understand its complexities. The *Şerefname* continues to be not only a window into the Kurdish past but also a mirror reflecting the ongoing dialogue about Kurdish identity and history in the present.

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