

Boris JAMES  
*Genèse du Kurdistan.  
 Les Kurdes dans l'Orient mamelouk  
 et mongol (1250-1340)*

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Serious historical studies of the Kurds are few and far between and tend moreover to focus on the modern period. As part of the current flourishing of Ottoman studies, it is true, there has been a steady trickle of studies on the Kurds, their neighbours and the state in the Ottoman period (which for the Kurds began around 1500 CE), but hardly any work has been done on pre-Ottoman times. The most authoritative general overviews of Kurdish history, by McDowall (1996), Jwaideh (2006) and Bozarslan et al. (2021), make only the barest mention of developments before the Ottoman period<sup>(1)</sup>. The late sixteenth-century chronicle of the ruling houses of the Kurds, *Sharafname*, written in Persian by the scion of one of those families, Amir Sharaf Khan of Bitlis, is the earliest major source that has been more or less widely used. This is not for lack of earlier sources. From the beginning of the Islamic period, numerous Arabic and Persian sources contain bits of information on the Kurds, but these have rarely been studied systematically. Vladimir Minorsky's pioneering studies, published almost a century ago in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (1927a/b), have long remained without a follow-up by other scholars – until the studies by the author of the book under review here<sup>(2)</sup>.

The French historian Boris James is the first to have undertaken a systematic re-reading, interpretation and analysis of early Arabic and Persian sources mentioning Kurds as a contribution to the social and political history of the Kurds in the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Several years ago, he published a study of the emergence of the Kurds as actors on the Middle Eastern scene under Saladin, in the late twelfth century<sup>(3)</sup>. Now he is following this up with a more substantial study of the Kurds and their lands a century later, when the major regional powers were the Turkish or Bahri Mamluks, who had replaced Saladin's Ayyubid successors in Egypt and Syria, and the Mongol Ilkhanids in Iran, who conquered Mesopotamia and large parts of Anatolia and repeatedly invaded Syria.

This is a relatively well-studied period in Middle Eastern history, not least because of the quality and quantity of available Mamluk sources. James acknowledges his debt to the work by predecessors such as David Ayalon, Anne-Marie Eddé and Denise Aigle, but his special focus on the Kurds has resulted in a rather different type of work that represents a significant new contribution to Kurdish studies as well as Mamluk studies. The range of primary sources he has perused for this study is truly impressive and includes not only (Arabic and Persian) dynastic chronicles and local histories but also administrative manuals and biographical dictionaries. Close reading of texts from different years allowed him to trace the emergence and decline of certain Kurdish tribes as well as the changes of toponyms.

The title of the book, *Genesis of Kurdistan*, not only appears to hint at what Soviet anthropology called ethnogenesis, the formation of cohesive groups with a sense of distinct common identity, but overtly refers to the emergence of toponyms such as Kurdistan and its cognates (*diyar-i Akrād*, *bilād al-Akrād*) that define specific territories as Kurdish lands. In the first centuries of Islam, authors mention people named Kurds in a wide region stretching from Fars in southern Iran to upper Mesopotamia. It has been a matter of debate among scholars what the term "Kurd" meant exactly because of ambiguities in those sources: did it refer to a group defined by language and "race", to a particular type of habitat, or to a distinctive way of life such as pastoral nomadism? If I understand James correctly, his claim is that by the 12<sup>th</sup> century the people called Kurds in the sources had become a cohesive though internally

(1) David McDowall, *A modern history of the Kurds*, London, I.B. Tauris, 1996; Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish nationalist movement: its origins and development*, Syracuse, NY, Syracuse University Press, 2006; Hamit Bozarslan, Cengiz Gunes and Veli Yadirgi (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Kurds*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

(2) Vladimir F. Minorsky, "Kurdistan," and "Kurd" in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, first edition, Leiden, Brill, 1927.

(3) B. James, *Saladin et les Kurdes : Perception d'un groupe au temps des Croisades*, Paris, Institut Kurde de Paris, L'Harmattan, 2006.

differentiated ethnic group, consisting of a number of named tribes that persisted over considerable time. The Mongol invasions had pushed Kurds westward into the Zagros mountains and Armenian highlands. What had been a vast but diffuse “espace kurde” was compressed to a zone where Kurds constituted the major element of population and which came to be named for them. Older toponyms gave way to names explicitly referring to Kurds. Thus, the high mountains to the south and west of Lake Van were previously known as Zawazan or Zuzan (a name that survives in the Kurdish term for mountain pasture, *zozan*) but by the Mamluk period authors no longer use this name and speak of Bilad al-Akrad instead. James appears to consider this as indicating the consolidation of the tie between the Kurds and a territory that is theirs.

Many Kurds served as soldiers in Saladin’s campaigns against the Crusaders and settled in Syria and Egypt under Ayyubid rule. Among the military and bureaucratic elite, Kurds were well-represented. It was not only military men who took the road to the West: men of learning also followed to Damascus and Cairo. Unlike Turks and Arabs, who were mostly Hanifi, Kurds were firmly committed to the Shafi’i school of law. Under Ayyubid patronage, Kurdish ‘ulama gained such influence in Damascus that the Shafi’i school became the dominant one there – a testimony to the fact that there must already have been a well-developed tradition of Islamic learning in Kurdistan itself, where these ‘ulamā’ had been trained. An important part of James’ study focuses on the Kurds in these major Arab cities.

It is widely accepted among historians that under the Bahri Mamluks, who overthrew the Ayyubids in 1250, the Kurds lost whatever privileged position they had had, but James shows that this process took time and that until the end of the century Kurds continue to be mentioned among the troops. He pays special attention to one Kurdish tribal group, the Shahrazuriyya, who are frequently mentioned as rowdy mercenaries in Egypt. The Mamluks also made an end to the privileged position of the Shafi’i school but this too did not immediately marginalize Kurdish ‘ulamā’. In Mamluk times it was, however, not primarily Kurdish legal scholars who receive notice but Sufi shaykhs, who may have been closer to the common people and owed their prominence to their large following.

Among the Sufis, one remarkable community stands out in the sources: the ‘Adawiyya Sufi order, named after the twelfth-century Shaykh ‘Ādi b. Musāfir, which was the probable progenitor of the later Yezidi religion. In the period under consideration,

the ‘Adawiyya were definitely Sunni Muslims but may already have inclined towards heterodoxy. They had *zawiya* (lodges) in Mosul, Erbil, Syria and Egypt. James, perhaps reading more into the sources than is warranted, suggests they were a sort of secret society with great influence among the Kurdish military and educated elite and for a period functioned as the vehicle of Kurdish self-assertion resisting marginalization in Mamluk society. Be that as it may, the information he culled from various sources represents a significant contribution to our knowledge of Kurdish Sufism and the history of Yezidism.

Much of James’ arguments is based on his prosopographical study of 474 persons in the biographical dictionaries and chronicles of the period who could be identified as Kurds. Most of these were military men, but more than a third were men of learning (including Sufis). A high proportion of the Kurdish military commanders mentioned in Mamluk sources were active in Ilkhanid territory (i.e., in Kurdistan, in most cases), indicating a Mamluk strategy of relying on local allies in the struggle against the Mongols. This strategic interest may account for the fact that Mamluk sources are the earliest ones that provide us with detailed information on Kurdish tribes and their habitat – most notably the work *Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amsār* by Shihāb al-Dīn al-‘Umārī, who worked in the Mamluk chancery in Cairo. Minorsky already relied heavily on this work (which had not yet been published then but is now available in several editions); James also frequently refers to al-‘Umārī’s work and moreover summarizes his information on Kurdish tribes in the form of a series of maps showing their territories (Annex, p. 445-459).

It is perhaps somewhat surprising that the sources from the Ilkhanid side – James refers to the major Persian chronicles and administrative manuals of the period – do not show the same interest in conditions on the ground and appear generally much less informative on Kurdish affairs. James’ final chapter, dealing with the Kurdish lands under Mongol rule (p. 345-377), therefore depends heavily on Arabic (i.e., Mamluk) sources, besides a number of important Syriac chronicles that document the experience of local Christian communities. The chapter is interesting because it brings out the various ways in which the tribal elite accommodated with or resisted the conquerors as well as their dealings with the rival empire to the West – a pattern of seeking maximal leverage by deftly playing on imperial rivalries that was to remain characteristic of Kurdish tribal politics well into the modern period.

The entire book is packed with very detailed information, which makes it not easy to read. It is worth the effort, however, and the reader is rewarded with many new insights. In the historiography of the Kurds it represents a milestone, shedding important new light on the Kurds' appearance as a significant group in Middle Eastern society and politics. Historians of the Mamluks will also do well to carefully consider James' arguments on the significance of the Kurdish factor in culture and politics of the period, which seem to convincingly challenge some established views.

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