

The Enduring Narrative: Strategies of Kurdish Historical Memory Amidst Erasure and Resilience

I. Introduction: The Enduring Narrative - Kurdish Historical Memory in Context

A. The Centrality of History to Kurdish Identity

For the Kurdish people, numbering an estimated 40 million and constituting one of the largest nations without a state, history transcends academic interest; it is a fundamental pillar of collective identity, cultural survival, and enduring resistance.¹ Dispersed across the modern nation-states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, as well as a significant global diaspora, Kurds navigate a reality where their historical narrative is perpetually contested and often actively suppressed.³ The preservation, transmission, and assertion of their history are therefore intrinsically linked to their ongoing struggle for recognition, rights, and self-determination.⁶ The act of remembering becomes a means of sustaining identity in the face of forces seeking its dissolution.

B. Overview of Persistent Challenges

The Kurdish endeavor to maintain historical continuity confronts formidable and persistent obstacles. Chief among these is statelessness, which deprives Kurds of the national institutions—archives, museums, educational systems—that typically safeguard and promulgate a people's history.³ Compounding this is the division of the Kurdish homeland by borders drawn primarily by external colonial powers following World War I, formalized by agreements like the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which superseded the earlier Treaty of Sèvres (1920) that had envisioned Kurdish autonomy.³ This fragmentation isolates communities and complicates unified cultural and historical preservation efforts. Furthermore, Kurds have faced systematic state-sponsored suppression within the countries they inhabit. Policies of forced assimilation, cultural erasure, and linguicide have been implemented, particularly in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, aiming to absorb or eliminate distinct Kurdish identity.¹ The devastating impacts of recurrent political conflict, armed struggle, mass displacement, and the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage sites and materials further imperil the transmission of Kurdish history.¹¹

C. Thesis Statement

Despite these profound and persistent challenges rooted in statelessness, political division,

and systematic repression, the Kurdish people have cultivated and deployed a diverse, dynamic, and remarkably resilient repertoire of strategies to remember, retain, transmit, and actively reconstruct their historical narratives and cultural memory. These strategies span the rich tapestry of oral traditions, the painstaking development of written records and literature, the embodiment of history in cultural practices and symbols, the vital contributions of the global diaspora, and the burgeoning efforts of modern academic and institutional initiatives. The context of denial and suppression imbues the very act of remembering and transmitting history with political significance for Kurds. When states actively seek to erase Kurdish identity by banning the language, prohibiting cultural expressions like the Newroz festival or traditional clothing, destroying villages, confiscating archives, and promoting assimilationist narratives¹, any Kurdish effort to maintain their language (through Dengbêj performance or literary journals like *Hawar*), celebrate their unique culture (like Newroz), or document their past (via community archives or historical novels) inherently functions as a form of resistance. It is a counter-action against deliberate historical negation, making the preservation of memory not merely an act of cultural continuity but a profound assertion of existence and political identity.

II. The Living Voice: Oral Traditions as Primary Historical Archives

In contexts where written expression has been historically restricted or actively suppressed, oral traditions assume paramount importance as repositories and conduits of historical memory. For the Kurds, these living voices have served as indispensable archives, preserving narratives, values, and a sense of collective identity across generations.

A. The Dengbêj: Keepers of Memory and History

Central to Kurdish oral tradition is the figure of the Dengbêj. The term itself, derived from the Kurdish words *deng* (voice, but also news or word) and *bêj* (to tell, sing, or recite), encapsulates their function.¹³ Dengbêj are traditional bards, storytellers, and singers who, for centuries, have shouldered the responsibility of preserving and transmitting the history, legends, epics (*klam*, *stran*), and collective memory of the Kurdish people.¹³ Often performing *a cappella*, their primary instrument is the human voice, deployed with remarkable skill and endurance.¹³ They have been described as "living libraries," the "autobiography of society," and even the "journalists of their time," chronicling events and social realities often ignored or deliberately erased by official state histories.¹³

The Dengbêj tradition is ancient, with roots often traced to the pastoralist heritage of Kurdish society and potentially connected to older Indo-European bardic practices, such as the *gason* of the Parthian era.³⁴ Traditionally, Dengbêj wandered between villages, performing at public events and during long winter nights (*şevberk*), especially before the advent of modern media.¹³ Aspiring Dengbêj typically underwent years of apprenticeship (*şagirtî*) with a master, committing vast repertoires of tales, poems, and epics to memory.¹³ Many historical Dengbêj were illiterate, relying entirely on mnemonic skill and constant performance to retain their knowledge.¹³ Their narratives encompass a wide spectrum of human experience: epic tales of

love and war, heroism and tragedy, blood feuds and rebellions, local romances, historical events, and the social realities of Kurdish life.¹³ Famous *klam* recount stories like those of Filîtê Quto, Evdalê Zeynikê, Derwêşê Evdî, and the Battle of Zilan.³⁸

The significance of the Dengbêj tradition for Kurdish identity and resistance cannot be overstated. In the face of relentless assimilationist policies and linguicide pursued by states occupying Kurdistan, the Dengbêj have been crucial custodians of the Kurdish language (particularly Kurmanji), culture, and historical consciousness.¹ They represent a powerful connection to the past and serve as a bridge linking historical experiences to contemporary struggles for cultural preservation and national rights.¹³ The resilience of this oral tradition lies partly in its intangible nature; while books could be burned and libraries destroyed, the living memory transmitted from master to apprentice proved far harder to eradicate.¹³

However, the Dengbêj tradition has faced immense challenges. State authorities, particularly in Turkey, have subjected Dengbêj to repression, arrest, imprisonment, and torture for their performances.¹⁴ The tradition was often stigmatized as "feudal," "backward," or inherently "Kurdish" and thus subversive.¹³ The decline of traditional village life and the rise of modern media also impacted performance contexts.⁴⁸ Despite these pressures, the tradition has shown adaptability. Efforts towards institutionalization emerged, notably with the establishment of the Mala Dengbêjan (House of Dengbêj) in Diyarbakir in 2007, supported by the municipality and the European Union, providing a dedicated space for performance and preservation.¹⁴ Similar initiatives exist elsewhere, like the Evdalê Zeynikê association in Ağrı.⁵¹ Concerns remain about transmitting the tradition to younger generations, often requiring parallel efforts in language revitalization.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Dengbêj continues to inspire contemporary Kurdish artists and writers, such as Mehmed Uzun and Mehmet Dicle, who engaged with this heritage, albeit viewing its role and relationship to modern literature through evolving lenses.¹

B. Epic Poems and Storytelling: Narrating Identity

Alongside the Dengbêj tradition, specific epic poems and folktales form cornerstones of Kurdish oral literature and historical understanding.⁵⁶ Among the most celebrated are:

- **Mem û Zîn:** A tragic romance often compared to Romeo and Juliet, recounting the impossible love between Mem of the Alan clan and Zîn of the Botan clan, thwarted by the villainous Bakr.⁵⁶ Considered by many to be the Kurdish national epic, its oral roots are deep, though it was famously rendered into a classical poetic masterpiece by Ehmedê Xanî in the 17th century.⁵⁶ Versions have been collected since the mid-19th century and exist in other languages like Neo-Aramaic and Armenian.⁵⁶
- **Dimdim:** An epic based on the historical 17th-century (some sources say 16th⁵⁶) battle at Dimdim Castle, south of Lake Urmia, where Kurds under Emir Khan Lepzerin resisted the Safavid Shah Abbas I.⁵⁶ It narrates a key moment of Kurdish resistance against imperial power.
- **Khej û Siyabend:** Another poignant romance with a tragic conclusion.⁵⁶
- **Zembilfirosh** (The Basket Seller): A long poem telling of an older woman's love for a

young basket-seller, echoing themes found in the story of Joseph and Zuleikha.⁵⁶

- **Kurdish Shahnameh:** A distinct collection of epic poems primarily in the Gorani dialect, passed down orally and partially compiled by figures like Sarhang Almas Khan in the 18th century.⁶¹ It differs from Ferdowsi's Persian *Shahnameh* in language, meter (syllabic), and includes unique characters.⁶¹

These epics and tales were traditionally recited or sung by Dengbêj, sometimes accompanied by instruments like the *tembûr*.⁵⁶ Their enduring power lies in their exploration of universal themes—love, loyalty, betrayal, heroism, resistance, fate—within a specifically Kurdish historical and cultural context. They serve not only to entertain but also to console, heal, and solidify a sense of shared identity and collective memory, particularly resonant for a people facing persistent adversity.⁵⁶

C. Folk Music: Melodies of Memory and Resistance

Kurdish folk music is an inseparable part of cultural life and historical transmission, traditionally passed down orally from generation to generation.³⁷ It functions as a vital medium for expressing the gamut of Kurdish experience: historical narratives, epic tales, love and longing, the pain of exile, the spirit of resistance, communal joy, and profound sorrow.³⁷

The music encompasses various forms, from the often unaccompanied, story-driven *klam* of the Dengbêj to lyrical *stran* (songs), melancholic *lawik* or *lawje* (laments, often for the deceased or unrequited love), and lively *dilok* or *Klamên Dilan* used for dancing (*govend* or *halay*).¹³ A rich array of traditional instruments provides melodic and rhythmic accompaniment, though the human voice is often considered paramount.⁴⁷ Wind instruments include the shepherd's flute (*Blûr* or *Kaval*), the soft double-reeded *Mey* (akin to the Armenian Duduk), and the powerful double-reeded *Zurna*, often paired with the large *Dahol* drum for outdoor festivities.⁴⁷ Percussion features the distinctive Kurdish *Daf* (a large frame drum with internal rings) and the *Darbuka* (goblet drum).⁴⁷ String instruments vary regionally, including the *Tembûr* (common in Iranian Kurdistan), the *Buzuq* (Syrian Kurdistan), and the widely used long-necked lute, the *Saz* or *Bağlama*.⁴⁷ Modern instruments like guitar and keyboard are also integrated into contemporary Kurdish music.⁴⁷

While lacking a single formalized system like the Arabic Maqam or Persian Dastgah, Kurdish music shares elements with these neighboring traditions, often employing microtones (partial flats) and intricate, melismatic ornamentation in both vocal and instrumental lines.⁴⁷ Rhythmic structures feature common Middle Eastern dance patterns like syncopated 4/4, 9/8 (often structured 2+2+2+3), and 10/8 (often 3+2+2+3, known as *curcuna*).⁴⁷ A distinctive feature noted in some Kurmanji singing is the tendency towards long strings of rapidly articulated words on a sustained pitch, leading into emotive descending melodies.³⁷ A modern, electrified genre known as *granî*, originating around Diyarbakir and utilizing the *elektrobağlama*, has emerged as a powerful expression of Kurdish identity, particularly among youth.⁶³

Like other forms of Kurdish cultural expression, music has faced severe censorship and repression, particularly in Turkey where the Kurdish language and explicit cultural manifestations were banned for decades.³⁷ Musicians like Şivan Perwer and Weysi Varli faced

imprisonment and torture; Varli recorded traditional music secretly onto cassettes in the 1970s and 80s.⁴⁷ These illicitly distributed tapes and CDs became crucial tools for disseminating music and maintaining cultural connection across Kurdistan.⁴⁷ Recent decades have seen efforts to institutionalize and preserve Kurdish musical heritage, through cultural centers like the Dicle-Firat Cultural Center, Dengbêj houses, and archiving initiatives like the Kurdish Music and Heritage Establishment (KMHE) in Erbil, which has amassed a significant archive.³⁷ Music plays a profound role in shaping and sustaining collective memory. Following frameworks proposed by scholars like Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assmann, music functions in both "communicative memory" (shared informally within small groups, reinforcing immediate social bonds) and "cultural memory" (through canonized repertoires, ritual performances like weddings or funerals, fixing a sense of shared heritage and origin).⁶⁴ For diasporic communities, music becomes particularly potent, fostering affective connections, bridging generations, and maintaining ties to a homeland and shared past, even amidst displacement and cultural change.⁶²

The relationship between Kurdish oral and written traditions is not one of simple succession but rather of dynamic interplay. Oral forms like the Dengbêj repertoire and epic cycles such as *Memî Alan* provided foundational material and continued inspiration for the development of classical written literature, exemplified by Ehmedê Xanî's *Mem û Zîn*.⁵⁸ Modern Kurdish writers, too, have consciously drawn upon the Dengbêj tradition, recognizing it as a vital source of cultural heritage, even as their interpretations of its significance evolve within the context of contemporary literature.¹ This demonstrates a continuous dialogue, where the oral sphere nourishes the written, rather than being entirely superseded by it.

Furthermore, the remarkable persistence of these oral traditions—the Dengbêj adapting from village gatherings to institutionalized houses and diaspora stages¹⁴, folk music surviving censorship through clandestine recordings and evolving into new electrified forms like *Grani*⁴⁷—highlights their inherent resilience. Faced with state policies aimed at eradication¹³, these traditions proved adaptable, capable of operating outside state control and finding new avenues for expression in contexts of repression and displacement. Their survival underscores their effectiveness as indispensable tools of cultural continuity and resistance for a stateless people denied official channels for historical and cultural affirmation.¹³

III. Written Words, Enduring Struggles: Literature and Archives

While oral traditions have been the bedrock of Kurdish historical memory, written forms—literature, chronicles, and archival documents—have also played a crucial, albeit often fraught, role in preserving and shaping the Kurdish narrative. The development of written Kurdish, its literary expressions, and the struggle to maintain archives reflect the broader historical context of political constraints and cultural resilience.

A. From Parchment to Print: Early Kurdish Written Records and

Classical Literature

Although Kurdish culture remained predominantly oral for much of its history, written records in Kurdish dialects emerged over time, often influenced by the literary traditions of neighboring cultures (Arabic, Persian, Turkish).⁶⁰ The earliest definitively identified "proper text" in Kurdish is a short Christian prayer written in the Kurmanji dialect using Armenian script, dating from between 1430 and 1446.⁵⁸ Some accounts mention potential earlier Kurdish texts, such as 9th-century translations of agricultural books into Arabic by Ibn Wahshiyya⁶⁶ or the 13th-century Yezidi *Mes'haf i Resh* (Black Book), though the dating and origins of the latter are debated, with some scholars suggesting later authorship by non-Yezidis based on Arabic precursors.⁵⁸ The first substantial body of written Kurdish literature appears from the 16th and 17th centuries onwards.⁵⁸

Classical Kurmanji literature experienced a significant flourishing during this period, nurtured within the relative autonomy of Kurdish principalities (emirates) and the intellectual environment of *madrasas* (religious schools), which often continued operating clandestinely even after being officially outlawed (e.g., in Turkey after 1924).¹ Key figures who shaped this tradition include:

- **Ali Hariri** (fl. 15th century? or later, dates uncertain): An early poet whose work is mentioned, though details are scarce.⁵⁸
- **Melayê Cizîrî** (1570–1640): Considered a foundational figure, establishing a school of poetry in the Bohtan region. He composed numerous *qasidas* (odes) and *ghazals* (lyrics), influenced by Sufi mysticism, some of which remain popular.⁵⁸
- **Feqiyê Teyran** (1590–1660): Reputedly a student of Cizîrî, he also wrote *qasidas* and *ghazals* but was the first known Kurmanji poet to employ the *mathnawi* (couplet) form for narrative poems, such as *Hekāyatā Şêkê San'ani* (The Story of Sheikh San'an).⁵⁸
- **Ehmedê Xanî** (1650–1707): Arguably the most celebrated classical Kurdish poet. His magnum opus, the romantic epic *Mem û Zîn*, based on the oral epic *Memî Alan*, is often hailed as the Kurdish national epic.⁵⁶ He also authored pedagogical works like *Nûbihara Biçûkan* (New Spring for Children), a rhymed Arabic-Kurdish vocabulary for students, and a religious poem, *Eqîda Îmanê* (Faith in the Religion).⁵⁸
- **Mela Huseynê Bateyî** (born 17th C., died mid-18th C.): Known for his *Mawlud* (poem on the Prophet Muhammad's birth) and a poem on morality, which became popular even among Yezidis.⁵⁸
- Other notable 18th-century Kurmanji poets include **Şerif Xan** of Hakkari (1682–1748) and **Mûrad Xan** of Bayazid (1736–1778).⁵⁸

Parallel to Kurmanji, a distinct literary tradition developed in the Gorani dialect, primarily under the patronage of the Ardalan dynasty in what is now Iranian Kurdistan, starting around the 16th century.⁵⁸ Gorani literature is often considered the oldest written Kurdish tradition.⁵⁹ It utilized a decasyllabic meter characteristic of regional folk poetry, showing stronger indigenous roots than early Kurmanji verse, which more closely followed Arabo-Persian models.⁶⁰ Important figures in Gorani literature include:

- **Balül** (9th century): A Yarsani religious scholar and poet, considered the first well-known poet in Gorani.⁵⁸
- **Mele Perîşan** (14th century).⁵⁸
- **Khana Qubadi** (1700–1759).⁵⁸
- **Almas Khan-e Kanoule'ei** (17th–18th century): Credited with compiling parts of the *Kurdish Shahnameh*.⁵⁸
- **Mastoureh Ardalan** (1805–1848): A notable female poet and historian.⁵⁸
- **Mawlawi Tawagozi** (1806–1882): A prominent poet and Sufi.⁵⁸ Gorani served as a prestigious literary language (*koinè*) for centuries but was gradually supplanted by Sorani from the 20th century onwards.⁶⁶

The Sorani dialect emerged as a significant literary medium later than Kurmanji and Gorani, with its development gaining momentum from the late 18th and early 19th centuries, particularly in the Baban emirate centered around Sulaymaniyah.⁵⁸ Key figures who established Sorani as a literary language include:

- **Nalî** (1797/1800–1855/6): Considered the first major poet to compile a *diwan* (collection of poems) in Sorani, setting a high standard for the literary use of the dialect.⁵⁸
- **Salim** (‘Abd-al-Raḥmān Beg Şāḥebqerān, ca. 1805–69): A contemporary of Nalî who helped develop literary Sorani, using meters like *hazaj* effectively.⁵⁸ His poetry sometimes reflected historical events, like the battles of the Baban rulers.⁷⁴
- **Kurdi** (Mela Mehmûdî Saḥîb): Another early 19th-century Sorani poet.⁵⁸
- **Haji Qadir Koyi** (1817–1897): A highly influential poet known for his patriotic themes, praising Kurdish history and valor, and lamenting the neglect of the Kurdish language by educated Kurds.⁵⁸
- **Sheikh Reza Talabani** (1835–1909): Another significant post-Nalî Sorani poet.⁵⁸
- Later classical Sorani poets often showed strong Sufi influences, such as **Mahwi** (Mellâ Maḥmud, 1830–1906) and **Hareq** (Mellâ Şāleḥ, 1851–1907).⁶⁰

B. Mirrors to the Past: Modern Kurdish Literature as Historical Reflection

While poetry dominated Kurdish literary output for centuries, prose genres, including the novel and short story, began to develop significantly in the 20th century, often serving as powerful mediums for exploring historical experiences and shaping national consciousness.⁵⁸ The emergence of modern Kurdish literature is closely tied to the rise of Kurdish journalism and political movements. The first Kurdish newspaper, *Kurdistan*, appeared in Cairo in 1898, edited by Mikdad Midhat Bedirxan.¹ Early journals in the late Ottoman period, such as *Rojî Kurd* (1913), published the first known Kurdish short story by Fuad Temo.¹ The historical novel, as a genre blending fictional narratives with real historical events and figures, found its place in Kurdish literature particularly from the mid-20th century onwards.⁷⁵ Writers like Ali Abdulrahman (with novels like *Khate Xanim*, 1956, and *Shar le Chiya*, 1989)⁷⁵, and more contemporary authors such as Jan Dost⁷⁵ and Sharam Qawami (*Rojava*, dealing

with recent events)⁸⁰, have used this form to resurrect "silent histories," explore pivotal moments in the Kurdish past (like uprisings, persecution, or the lives of historical figures), and foster a sense of collective identity and cultural resilience.⁷⁵ These novels often engage directly with themes of oppression, resistance, displacement, and the search for belonging, reflecting the lived experiences of Kurds under various regimes. The work *Republic of Dreams*, for instance, chronicles Kurdish family struggles from 1988 to 2022, covering genocide, displacement, and war.⁸¹

Modern Kurdish poetry also continued to evolve, moving beyond classical forms and themes to engage directly with contemporary political realities, nationalism, exile, and social critique.⁶⁸ Poets like Cigerxwîn (Sheikhmous Hasan, 1903–1984) became powerful voices of the national struggle, his verses resonating with themes of resistance and identity.⁷⁰ Other influential modern poets include Abdulla Goran (often called the father of modern Kurdish poetry), Osman Sabri, Nûredin Zaza (also a writer and politician), Hejar (Abdurrahman Sharafkandi, also a translator and linguist), Hemin Mukriyani (journalist and poet), Ibrahim Ahmad (writer and novelist), Abdulla Pashew, Bachtyar Ali (also a novelist), and the first internationally recognized female Kurdish novelist, Sara Omar.⁶⁸ The development of modern Kurdish literature was also significantly aided by the translation of European and other Middle Eastern literary works into Kurdish, which began in earnest in the 1930s, often through intermediary languages like Arabic, Persian, Turkish, or Russian.⁵⁵

The impetus behind the development of modern Kurdish literature, especially in written prose and standardized forms, appears to stem not solely from artistic evolution but also from a pressing political necessity. Facing existential threats from assimilationist state policies and the denial of their language and history, Kurdish intellectuals consciously employed literature as a tool for codifying identity, preserving cultural memory, and building national consciousness.⁸² This effort was often undertaken in exile, where freedom of expression was greater, turning literary production into a vital strategy for cultural survival and political assertion when other avenues were blocked.¹

C. The Hawar Generation and Language Standardization: Modernizing Written Kurdish

A pivotal moment in the modernization of written Kurdish, particularly the Kurmanji dialect, occurred in the diaspora following the intensified suppression of Kurdish language and culture in the newly established Republic of Turkey.¹ Kurdish intellectuals who had fled into exile played a crucial role in this process.

The journal *Hawar* (The Cry), published in Damascus from 1932 to 1943 under the leadership of Celadet Alî Bedirxan, stands as a landmark achievement.¹⁵ *Hawar's* explicit goals were to cultivate and standardize the Kurmanji dialect, promote literacy among Kurds, collect and publish folklore, and foster a modern Kurdish national identity.⁸² Its most revolutionary contribution was the introduction and propagation of a Latin-based alphabet for Kurdish, now commonly known as the Hawar or Bedirxan alphabet.⁷⁶ This alphabet, designed for phonetic consistency, became the standard script for Kurmanji in Syria and Turkey and is also used to

some extent in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁶⁶ The date of *Hawar's* first publication, May 15th, has been celebrated as Kurdish Language Day since 2006.¹⁵

Hawar and associated publications from the same intellectual circle, such as *Ronahî* (Light, 1941–1943), *Roja Nû* (New Day, 1943–1946, edited by Kamuran Bedirxan in Beirut), and *Stêr* (Star, 1943), featured a rich diversity of content.⁵⁵ They published original Kurdish literature (poetry, short stories, plays), extensive research on Kurdish folklore, history, and grammar, translations of world literature (e.g., Victor Hugo, Omar Khayyam), classical Kurdish texts (e.g., Melayê Cizîrî), glossaries, and even religious texts from different traditions (Quranic exegesis, Bible excerpts, Yezidi prayers), reflecting a liberal outlook aimed at unifying Kurds across religious and regional divides.⁸² Key writers associated with the *Hawar* school, besides the Bedirxan brothers (Celadet and Kamuran), included Qedrî Can, Cigerxwîn, Osman Sebrî, and Nûredin Zaza.⁸² The influence of the *Hawar* school extended beyond its immediate publications, impacting later journals like *Gelawêj* (1941), which applied similar principles to the Sorani dialect in Iraqi Kurdistan, and *Nûdem* (1992–2001), a major literary journal published by the diaspora in Sweden.⁷⁶

D. Archives Under Pressure: Challenges of Creation, Preservation, and Access

The preservation of written historical records presents unique challenges for the Kurds. Lacking a unified state, they have no central national archive or library dedicated to systematically collecting and preserving their documentary heritage.⁸ Historically significant documents pertaining to Kurds are often scattered across the state archives of the countries they inhabit (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria) or former colonial powers (Britain, France, Russia), access to which can be politically fraught or restricted.⁹² While early Kurdish chronicles exist, such as the seminal *Sharafnâme* (History of the Kurdish Nation) written in Persian by the Bitlis governor Sharaf Khan Bidlisi in the late 16th century (and later translated into Ottoman Turkish in the 17th century)⁹³, the systematic collection and preservation of Kurdish historical documents have been severely hampered.

A significant portion of Kurdish manuscripts, personal papers, organizational records, and published materials has been lost or destroyed over the past century due to state repression, political conflict, censorship, forced displacement, and deliberate destruction.⁸ Accounts of such losses are common in Kurdish historiography and literature.⁸ Examples range from the destruction during the Anfal genocide in Iraq²⁵ and the Iran-Iraq war²⁶, to the devastation caused by ISIS³⁰, and the confiscation of materials from Kurdish institutions, such as the seizure of archives from the Mezopotamien publishing house in Germany in 2019.⁹² Efforts to preserve remaining materials face numerous obstacles: chronic lack of funding, insufficient technical expertise, inadequate storage facilities vulnerable to environmental damage, political instability, security risks, and difficulties in obtaining permissions from owners or authorities.⁹⁴ Many unique manuscripts and documents are fragile and physically deteriorating.⁹⁴

Despite these difficulties, recent decades have witnessed what some scholars term an

"archival turn" in Kurdish Studies, marked by a growing awareness of the importance of archives and increased efforts, often led by community members, activists, and academics, to locate, preserve, and provide access to Kurdish historical records.⁸ Key initiatives include:

- **Private Archives:** Collections amassed by individuals involved in Kurdish political and cultural life, often donated to institutions in the diaspora. The Omar Sheikhmous Archive at the University of Exeter, containing over 10,000 documents related to Kurdish political parties, student groups, and cultural figures across Kurdistan and Europe, is a prime example.⁸
- **Digitization Projects:** Recognizing the vulnerability of physical materials and the need for wider access, digitization has become a crucial strategy. Examples include projects funded by the Endangered Archives Programme (EAP)⁹⁴, the extensive digitization work undertaken by the Kurdistan Center for Arts and Culture (KCAC) in Iraqi Kurdistan, which travels with mobile scanning equipment⁹⁶, and the Kurdish Digital Archive project at the University of Exeter, collaborating with institutions in Kurdistan as part of the Digital Archive of the Middle East (DAME).⁹⁸
- **Institutions in Kurdistan:** Centers like the Kurdish Heritage Institute (KHI) and the Zheen Centre for Documentation and Research, both in Sulaymaniyah, are actively involved in collecting and preserving materials, often collaborating with international partners.⁹⁹ The Kurdish Music and Heritage Establishment (KMHE) focuses specifically on musical archives.³⁷
- **Online Platforms:** The internet provides a vital space for creating accessible archives. Notable examples include Kurdipedia, which aims to archive past and present history⁸¹, the Kurdistan Memory Programme (KMP), focusing on multimedia documentation of modern history, particularly oral testimonies related to genocide and conflict²¹, and resources like Partipedia documenting political entities.¹⁰³

The precarious condition of Kurdish archives—marked by historical loss, dispersal, ongoing threats, and recent grassroots recovery efforts—mirrors the broader Kurdish predicament. The very act of archiving, of collecting, preserving, and making accessible the documents of Kurdish history, becomes a form of resistance against states that have actively sought to control, manipulate, or erase the Kurdish narrative.⁵ Building these archives, especially digital ones that transcend borders, represents a crucial struggle to reclaim ownership of the past and ensure its transmission despite formidable obstacles.

IV. History Embodied: Cultural Practices, Symbols, and Landscapes

Beyond oral recitations and written texts, Kurdish historical memory is deeply embedded within the fabric of cultural life—in recurring rituals, potent symbols expressed through clothing and crafts, and the enduring significance attached to specific places and landmarks. These embodied forms of memory serve as tangible links to the past and powerful assertions of identity, often gaining heightened importance precisely because they have been contested or suppressed.

A. Newroz: The Fire of Renewal and Resistance

Newroz, celebrated annually on or around the spring equinox (March 21st), marks the Kurdish New Year and the arrival of spring.¹⁰⁴ Its roots are ancient, often linked to Zoroastrian traditions celebrating the victory of light over darkness and the renewal of nature.¹⁰⁴ For Kurds, Newroz carries profound symbolism: it represents rebirth, hope, freedom, and the transition from the harshness of winter (often metaphorically linked to oppression) to the light and life of spring.³¹

Central to the Kurdish understanding of Newroz is the legend of Kawa the Blacksmith (Kawayê Hesinkar). As recounted in sources like the *Shahnameh* and the *Sharafnameh*, and adapted in Kurdish folklore, Kawa led a popular uprising against a tyrannical king named Zahhak (or Dehak, Birosab), who demanded daily sacrifices of youths.³² After defeating the tyrant, Kawa lit bonfires on the mountainsides to signal the victory and the dawn of a new era of freedom.³² This narrative firmly establishes Newroz in the Kurdish consciousness as a celebration of liberation from oppression.³²

The lighting of bonfires on the eve of Newroz (or March 20th) remains the most potent and widely practiced ritual, symbolizing Kawa's victory fires and the cleansing power of light.³² Jumping over the flames is a traditional act of purification and celebration.¹⁰⁴ Festivities typically involve large public gatherings, often in natural settings, featuring traditional Kurdish dancing (*Halparke* or *Govend*), singing, music, poetry recitations, the wearing of new or traditional Kurdish clothing (*cil û bergên kurdî*), sharing special foods, and family visits.¹⁰⁴ It is also a time for reconciliation and resolving conflicts from the past year.¹⁰⁵

From the mid-20th century onwards, Newroz became increasingly politicized, transforming into a powerful symbol of Kurdish national identity, resilience, and resistance against assimilationist policies in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.³¹ Governments, perceiving the celebration as a manifestation of Kurdish nationalism and a threat to state unity, frequently banned or severely restricted public Newroz gatherings.³¹ This suppression forced Kurds to celebrate clandestinely or led to violent confrontations with security forces, resulting in arrests, injuries, and deaths (e.g., Suleiman Adi in Syria, 1986).³² Acts of defiance during Newroz gained immense symbolic weight, most notably the self-immolation of imprisoned Kurdish activist Mazlum Doğan on Newroz eve 1982 in Diyarbakir prison, an act that reignited the celebration as a potent symbol of resistance and earned him the title "Kawa of the modern era".³² Consequently, participation in Newroz celebrations, particularly wearing traditional or symbolic attire like khaki clothing, often carries explicit political meaning as an assertion of identity and defiance against state control.³¹ The cultural and historical significance of Newroz is further cemented by its mention in the works of classical Kurdish poets like Melayê Cizîrî and Ehmedê Xanî, as well as modern poets like Pîremêrd.³²

B. Threads of Identity: Traditional Clothing and Its Meanings

Traditional Kurdish clothing (*cil û bergên kurdî*) serves as a vibrant and immediately recognizable emblem of Kurdish cultural heritage and national identity.³³ Donning these

garments, especially during national celebrations like Newroz or significant life events like weddings, is a conscious act of cultural affirmation and pride.³¹

Kurdish attire exhibits considerable diversity across the regions of Kurdistan, reflecting adaptations to local environments (mountainous vs. plains), tribal affiliations, and evolving traditions.¹¹⁴ Some observers claim the ability to discern a Kurd's region of origin based on the specific style of their clothing.¹¹⁷ Despite variations, common elements exist.

For women, the ensemble typically features bright colors and intricate embellishments.¹¹³ Core components often include:

- A long dress (*kerās, kiras fistan, jli kurdî*), sometimes made of sheer or luxurious fabrics like silk or velvet, often adorned with sequins or embroidery.¹¹³
- Underneath, balloon-shaped trousers (*darpe, şalvar*) fitted at the ankles, or sometimes shorter underdrawers (*toneka*).¹¹⁶
- Over the dress, a short jacket or vest (*kavā, yelk, salta, sokma, jelezqa*), often heavily embroidered or made of velvet.¹¹² Sometimes a longer coat (*koter, qevā, sāya*) is worn, especially in winter.¹¹⁶
- A wide belt or sash (*peshtwen*), sometimes made of cloth or featuring metal, even gold, elements.¹¹²
- Headwear varies greatly, including decorated caps (*klaw, kolū*) often held by a chin chain with coins, wrapped scarves (*dasmāl, kalāgî*), or elaborate turban-like arrangements (*pushin*), sometimes incorporating the historically significant *Kesrewan* scarf (woven with seven colors).¹¹² Jewelry is an important accessory.¹¹⁷

For men, traditional attire often includes:

- Very baggy trousers (*shal, şal û şepik, şalvar jafî*), usually tapered at the ankle, allowing for ease of movement.¹¹⁴ The *shal* garment, particularly associated with regions like Bahdinan and Hawraman, is made from specific wool woven through a meticulous process.¹¹⁴
- A shirt (*korvās, şev*), often collarless, worn with a vest or jacket (*salta*).¹¹⁶
- A wide sash or belt (*peshtwen*) wrapped around the waist, historically used to carry items like daggers.¹¹⁵
- Headwear typically consists of a skullcap wrapped with a turban (*cemedanî, jamadanî*), with styles varying by tribe and region.¹¹³

Historically, the colors, quality of fabrics, and amount of jewelry worn could signify social status, age (older women traditionally wore more muted colors¹¹⁷), marital status, or specific occasions like weddings (red veil for virgin brides¹¹⁹), mourning (darker colors¹¹⁹), or return from pilgrimage (orange scarf¹¹⁹). The clothing itself connects wearers to their ancestors and embodies cultural values and aesthetics, often drawing inspiration from the natural landscape of Kurdistan.³³

Traditional Kurdish dress faces challenges from modernization, globalization (adoption of Western styles), economic pressures affecting artisanal production, and assimilationist policies that have historically discouraged or banned its use.³³ However, there is a noticeable resurgence of interest, particularly among younger generations and the diaspora, especially

during cultural festivals.¹¹² Designers are reviving classic styles, and efforts are being made to preserve the craftsmanship involved.¹¹² The clothing remains a potent symbol, and attempts by neighboring cultures to appropriate Kurdish designs further underscore its political significance as a marker of distinct identity.³³

C. Woven Narratives: Motifs in Art and Crafts

Kurdish artistic traditions, particularly the intricate art of carpet and kilim weaving (*gelim*), serve as another vital medium for encoding and transmitting historical memory, cultural values, and collective identity.²² Primarily the domain of women, weaving is a craft passed down through generations, deeply embedded in the social and economic life of Kurdish communities, especially those with nomadic or pastoralist roots.²²

Kurdish rugs and kilims possess distinct characteristics, although they also demonstrate adaptability by incorporating and modifying designs from neighboring cultures (Caucasian, Persian, Turkoman).²³ Key features often include the use of high-quality local wool (often from fat-tailed sheep), hand-spinning, natural dyes derived from local plants (yielding vibrant colors, especially reds and blues, but also pinks and oranges), symmetrical (Ghiordes/Turkish) or asymmetrical (Senneh/Persian) knots depending on the region, specific border patterns, and thick braided warp ends.²² Weaving is typically done on horizontal looms within homes or community settings.¹²²

The designs woven into these textiles are rich with symbolism and meaning, transforming the carpets into "woven history" or "embroidered memory".²² Patterns are often bold and geometric (hexagons, diamonds, zigzags, S-shapes), reflecting nomadic heritage and the surrounding natural environment (stylized animals, plants like the burdock, flowers, trees, water motifs).²² Specific motifs carry layers of meaning, often rooted in ancient beliefs and traditions:

- **Fertility and Abundance:** *Bereket* motif combining ram's horns (*koçboynuzu*) and female figures (*elibelinde*), stylized plants (pomegranate, wheat), the *Pıtrak* (burdock) plant.¹²⁷ Pomegranate flowers may link to the ancient goddess Anahita.¹²³
- **Marriage and Family:** *Saçbağ* (hair band), *Küpe* (earring), *Sandıklı* (trousseau chest), *Bukağ* (fetter symbolizing union and devotion).¹²⁷ Carpets were traditionally woven by young women for their dowries.¹²²
- **Protection:** *El*, *Parmak*, *Tarak* (Hand, Finger, Comb motifs, number five) against the evil eye; *Muska* (amulet), *Nazarlık* (evil eye bead), *Ğöz* (stylized eye), *Haç* (cross motif dividing the evil glance).¹²⁷
- **Life and Spirituality:** *Su Yolu* (running water), *Ibrik* (ewer symbolizing purity, purification, sometimes pregnancy), *Yıldız* (star, symbolizing happiness, fertility, possibly linked to mother goddess figures).¹²⁷ Arch or door motifs may represent passage between worlds or regeneration.¹²⁸
- **Mythology and Folklore:** Representations of mythical figures like Shahmaran (Queen of Snakes, symbol of luck and strength, common among Yezidis), or dragon motifs possibly linked to ancient legends like Garshasp the dragon slayer mentioned in the

Avesta.¹²¹

- **Identity:** Specific patterns or color palettes can serve as signatures for particular tribes (e.g., Shavak, Jalali) or regions.¹²¹ Some named weavings reflect cultural narratives, like 'wedding shoes' or 'divorce your wife'.¹²¹

Through these intricate designs, weavers embed narratives about their lives, beliefs, environment, and history, passing down this symbolic language and cultural knowledge to subsequent generations.²² The weaving process itself often fosters community bonds among women.¹²²

However, this rich tradition faces significant threats. Decades of conflict, forced displacement (especially the sedentarization of nomads), and state suppression have disrupted traditional lifestyles and severed connections to pasturelands and resources needed for weaving.²² Economic crises, the availability of cheaper industrial products, and assimilation policies further undermine the craft.²² There is a tangible risk of losing not only the weaving skills but also the knowledge of the meanings embedded in the traditional motifs.²² During periods of hardship, such as the sanctions era in Iraqi Kurdistan, many valuable heritage rugs were sold off out of desperation, leading to a depletion of cultural assets.²³ Despite this decline, the influence of Kurdish textile motifs persists in other art forms, like painting²³, and efforts continue, albeit on a smaller scale, to preserve this woven heritage.

D. Landmarks and Memory: The Significance of Place in Kurdish History

Specific geographical locations, archaeological sites, historical buildings, and natural landmarks within the Kurdish homeland serve as crucial anchors for collective memory, embodying tangible connections to a deep and often contested past.⁹ These places are not merely points on a map but repositories of historical narratives, cultural identity, and communal experience.

Examples of such significant sites are numerous and diverse, spanning millennia and reflecting the complex history of the region:

- **Ancient Citadels and Fortresses:** The **Erbil Citadel (Qelay Hewlêr)**, a UNESCO World Heritage site, boasts millennia of continuous human habitation, dating back to possibly 6000 BC, witnessing Sumerian, Assyrian, Gutian, Sassanian, Islamic, and Ottoman periods.¹²⁹ The imposing **Walls of Diyarbakir (Amed)** are another iconic landmark.¹²⁹ Other significant castles include **Dimdim Castle**, site of the 17th-century Kurdish resistance against the Safavids⁵⁶; **Hoşap Castle** near Van¹³⁰; **Sherwana Castle** in Kalar, formerly home to the influential Jaff tribe¹⁰⁰; **Khanzad Castle** near Erbil¹³⁰; and the Ayyubid-era **Sukkara Castle** in the Kizwan Mountains (Rojava).¹³⁵ The **Citadel of Aleppo** and **Citadel of Damascus** were significantly modified and fortified during the Kurdish Ayyubid dynasty.¹³⁰ **Hisn al-Akrad** (Krak des Chevaliers) originated as a Kurdish military settlement.¹³⁰
- **Prehistoric and Archaeological Sites:** **Shanidar Cave** in Iraqi Kurdistan yielded crucial Neanderthal remains, attesting to the deep antiquity of human presence in the

region.¹⁰⁰ **Xarab-I Kilashin** is a rediscovered ancient city¹³⁰, and **Orkesh (Tell Mozan)** in Rojava was a major Hurrian center dating back to the 4th millennium BC.¹³⁵ **Yassin Tepe** represents the ruins of the capital of ancient Sharazor.¹³⁰

- **Religious Sanctuaries:** **Lalish Temple** in Nineveh province is the holiest site for Yezidis, believed to be thousands of years old.¹³⁰ Numerous ancient Christian monasteries dot the landscape, such as **Rabban Hormizd Monastery** near Alqosh¹⁰⁰, the **Monastery of Saint Matthew (Mar Mattai)** overlooking the Nineveh plains¹³⁴, **Dair Mar Elia** near Mosul¹⁰⁰, and various churches in Rojava like the **Church of Our Lady of the Syriacs** near Derik and **St. Febronia Church** near Qamishli.¹³⁵ Jewish heritage is marked by sites like the **Tomb of the Prophet Nahum** in Alqosh (historically a major pilgrimage site)¹³⁴ and the **Tomb of the Prophet Hazkiel** in Amadiya (sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims)¹³⁰, the **Shrine of Daniel** in Kirkuk Citadel (venerated by multiple faiths)¹³⁴, and the ancient **Dome of the Jews (Yehuda ben Bathyra tomb)** near Qamishli.¹³⁵ Islamic sites include the **Mosque of Manuchihr** in Ani (built by the Kurdish Shaddadids)¹³⁰, the **Abu'l-Fida Mosque** in Hama (built by the Ayyubid prince Abulfeda)¹³⁰, the **Al-Adiliyah Madrasa** in Damascus (built by Ayyubid Sultan Al-Adil I)¹³⁰, the **Rashad Mufti Mosque** and **Kurdsat Mosque** in the Kurdistan Region¹⁰⁰, and Sufi shrines like those in **Hiran**.¹³⁴
- **Iconic Bridges:** The picturesque **Pira Delal** bridge in Zakho¹³⁰, the historic **Pira Dehderî** bridge in Diyarbakir (built during the Kurdish Marwanid dynasty)¹³⁰, and the Roman-era **Ain Diwar Bridge** on the Tigris in Rojava.¹³⁵
- **Sites of Modern Memory:** Monuments commemorating recent tragedies, such as the **Anfal Monument** in Chamchamal or Erbil¹⁰⁰, and the memorial park for the victims of the **Amûdê Cinema Fire** in 1960.¹³⁵ Cities like **Mahabad** (site of the short-lived 1946 Republic of Kurdistan)¹¹¹ and **Halabja** (site of the 1988 chemical attack)⁷ carry immense historical weight.
- **Cultural Institutions:** Museums like the **Kurd's Heritage Museum** in Sulaymaniyah¹⁰⁰, the **Textile Museum** in Erbil²³, and institutes like the **Kurdish Heritage Institute**⁹⁹ serve as repositories and interpreters of history. The ambitious **Kurdistan Museum** planned for Erbil aims to be a major landmark conveying the Kurdish story.²¹

These landmarks are not static relics; they are active sites of memory-making and identity assertion. However, their physical nature makes them acutely vulnerable to the political instability and violence that have plagued the region. Numerous sites have suffered damage or complete destruction due to state military operations (e.g., Saddam Hussein's campaigns, Turkish state actions in Sur), conflict (Iran-Iraq War, Syrian Civil War), and deliberate iconoclasm by groups like ISIS.²⁵ Furthermore, heritage sites can become battlegrounds for competing narratives, with state-sponsored restoration or development projects sometimes aiming to erase or overwrite inconvenient histories, as seen in post-conflict reconstruction in Diyarbakir's Sur district.²⁸ The preservation of these physical anchors of memory is thus an ongoing struggle, intrinsically linked to the broader political context.

The persistence of cultural practices like Newroz celebrations despite state bans³¹, the continued use of traditional clothing as an identity statement against assimilation³³, and the encoding of history and mythology in weaving²² demonstrate that these are not merely passive customs. They function as active, embodied forms of resistance and historical affirmation. Their significance is often amplified precisely because they are contested by states seeking to impose homogeneity.

Conversely, the tangible nature of landmarks, artifacts, traditional clothing, and carpets makes them exceptionally vulnerable to the consequences of statelessness and conflict. Destruction through warfare or deliberate state action²⁵, loss due to forced displacement²², neglect stemming from lack of resources or state protection²³, looting facilitated by instability¹³⁶, and state-led efforts to erase or re-appropriate historical sites²⁸ all represent direct assaults on the physical anchors of Kurdish collective memory and identity.

V. History Across Borders: The Kurdish Diaspora's Role in Preservation and Reconstruction

The Kurdish diaspora, encompassing millions scattered across the globe, plays an increasingly vital role in the preservation, transmission, and active reconstruction of Kurdish history and cultural memory. Forced displacement, both historical and contemporary, has paradoxically created new centers for Kurdish cultural life and political advocacy outside the traditional homeland.

A. Formation and Scope of the Diaspora

While Kurdish communities have existed outside the mountainous core of Kurdistan for centuries due to historical deportations—such as the large Kurmanji-speaking community in Khorasan, eastern Iran, deported by Shah Abbas in the 17th century¹³⁷, or communities in central Anatolia displaced by the Ottomans¹³⁷—the modern Kurdish diaspora in Europe and the West is a more recent phenomenon. It began largely in the 1960s with labor migration, primarily from Turkey to Germany and other Western European countries.⁸⁴ This was followed by successive waves of political refugees fleeing persecution and conflict: from Iran after the 1979 Islamic Revolution¹³⁷; from Turkey following the 1980 military coup and the intense conflict and village destruction campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s⁸⁴; from Iraq due to the Ba'athist regime's repression, the Anfal genocide, and subsequent instability²⁴; and more recently from Syria due to the civil war and state policies.⁸⁴

Today, the Kurdish diaspora in Western Europe alone is estimated at over 2 million people, with the largest populations in Germany, France, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands.⁸⁵ Significant communities also exist in North America, Australia, and the countries of the former Soviet Union (Armenia, Georgia, etc.).⁸⁴ Kurds from Turkey constitute the majority (around 80–85%) of the European diaspora.⁸⁴ This diaspora is often characterized as a "stateless diaspora"⁸⁴, and its identity and activities are heavily shaped by the ongoing political struggles and oppression faced by Kurds in their countries of origin, making it a highly

politicized transnational community.¹³⁸

B. Building Bridges: Cultural Centers, Education, and Community Publications

In their host countries, Kurds have established a wide array of institutions to maintain cultural continuity, foster community cohesion, address integration challenges, and advocate for Kurdish rights.⁸⁴ **Cultural Centers and Associations** are numerous, ranging from internationally renowned bodies like the Kurdish Institute of Paris (founded 1983)⁸⁴ to newer initiatives like the Kurdish Diaspora Center in Berlin (inaugurated 2024)¹⁴⁷ and local community centers (e.g., KDC Norwich, centers linked to MKM).⁴⁸ These centers often organize cultural events, provide social support, and serve as hubs for political mobilization.⁸⁴ **Educational Programs** are a key focus, aimed at combating language loss among younger generations born or raised in the diaspora and strengthening their connection to Kurdish history and culture.² Initiatives include community-run language courses⁸⁴, summer institutes offering intensive language and culture study (like the one at Northeastern Illinois University in partnership with the Zahra Institute)⁷², formal collaborations between diaspora organizations and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Ministry of Education to support Kurdish schools abroad with teachers and materials¹⁵², and student exchange programs.¹⁵¹ Academic institutions in the diaspora also play a role through dedicated Kurdish Studies programs.² **Community Publications**—journals, magazines, newspapers, and books—have flourished in the diaspora, often providing the only outlet for Kurdish-language publishing when it was severely restricted or banned in the homelands.⁶⁸ Sweden, with its supportive policies, became a major center for Kurdish publishing, attracting intellectuals and writers.⁶⁸ Journals like *Nûdem* (Stockholm, 1992-2001) explicitly carried forward the literary and linguistic mission of the earlier *Hawar* school.⁷⁶ These publications are vital for language development, literary expression, and the dissemination of historical and cultural knowledge within the diaspora and back to the homeland.⁸⁴

C. The Digital Hearth: Online Forums, Archives, and Virtual Communities

The advent of the internet and digital communication technologies has profoundly impacted the Kurdish diaspora, enabling new forms of connection, memory-making, and activism that transcend geographical boundaries.⁸⁵

Online Forums and Social Media platforms have become crucial spaces for dispersed Kurds to connect, discuss cultural and political issues, share information and personal memories, ask questions about their history, and build a sense of virtual community.¹⁰² Subreddits like *r/kurdistan*, Facebook groups, and other social media channels facilitate transnational conversations and mobilization.²

Digital Archiving has emerged as a particularly vital strategy for preserving Kurdish history, given the vulnerability of physical materials and the lack of a central state archive.¹⁰ Numerous

online initiatives serve as crucial repositories:

- The **Kurdistan Memory Programme (KMP)** focuses on creating a comprehensive multimedia archive of modern Kurdish history, emphasizing oral testimonies of conflict and survival.²¹
- **Kurdipedia** aims to be a large multilingual online encyclopedia and archive for Kurdish information.⁸¹
- University-led projects like the **Kurdish Digital Archive** at the University of Exeter (part of DAME) collaborate with institutions in Kurdistan to digitize and provide open access to historical materials.⁹⁸
- Other platforms like **Partipedia** focus on specific areas like political organizations.¹⁰³
- The website associated with Susan Meiselas's book *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History* acted as an early virtual archive, collecting photographs and stories, though it faced hacking and censorship.¹⁰ These digital archives offer resilience against physical destruction and state censorship, making historical resources globally accessible.¹⁰

These online activities contribute to the formation of **Virtual Memory Sites** and a transnational Kurdish consciousness.¹⁵⁴ Digital spaces allow for the circulation and co-creation of collective memories, the negotiation of identity, and the maintenance of cultural connections across vast distances, fostering an "imagined community" in the digital realm.¹⁵⁴

D. Negotiating Identity: Memory and Belonging in Exile

Life in the diaspora involves a continuous process of negotiating identity, shaped by the dual context of the homeland's history and the realities of the host society.¹³⁹ Collective memory, often centered on experiences of oppression, displacement, and resistance, plays a crucial role in affirming Kurdishness and challenging the dominant historical narratives of the states Kurds fled.¹⁴³

However, diaspora identity is not static. Conceptions of self, homeland, and belonging evolve, particularly across generations.¹³⁹ While the first generation often carries direct memories of trauma and political struggle, second and third generations inherit this legacy but reinterpret it through their own experiences in the diaspora, navigating hybrid identities and sometimes facing challenges like language loss or assimilation pressures.⁹⁵

Cultural production—art, literature, music, film, curation of (real or imagined) museum exhibits—becomes a key strategy for diaspora Kurds to engage with these complexities.⁹ It serves multiple functions: restoring and preserving cultural heritage, reconstructing and negotiating identities, achieving visibility for the Kurdish cause in host societies, fostering solidarity, and challenging the oppressive policies of homeland states.¹⁴⁶ Asking diaspora members to imagine curating a Kurdish museum, for instance, reveals personal constructions of Kurdishness and highlights what aspects of heritage and memory they deem most significant.⁹

The Kurdish diaspora, particularly in Europe, has transformed from primarily a refuge for persecuted individuals into a major engine for the production, preservation, and

institutionalization of contemporary Kurdish culture. Due to severe restrictions on language, publishing, and cultural expression in Turkey, Iran, and Syria for extended periods, key developments in modern written Kurdish (like the Latin alphabet via *Hawar*), the flourishing of modern literature, the establishment of formal cultural institutes, and the growth of academic Kurdish Studies largely occurred in diaspora settings.⁶ This demonstrates a shift where the diaspora became not just a preserver of tradition but the primary generator and incubator for significant aspects of modern Kurdish cultural and intellectual life.

Furthermore, modern communication and digital technologies have fundamentally reshaped the landscape of Kurdish historical memory. The internet, social media, and digital archiving initiatives have enabled the creation of a resilient, transnational "imagined community" and virtual repositories of knowledge that transcend the limitations imposed by state borders, political censorship, and the physical destruction of heritage.¹⁰ These technologies provide indispensable tools for connecting dispersed populations, circulating memories, preserving endangered materials, and sustaining Kurdish identity in a globalized, yet still politically fragmented, world.

VI. Documenting the Past: Academic and Institutional Initiatives

Alongside community-based efforts, formal academic and institutional initiatives play an increasingly important role in the systematic study, documentation, and preservation of Kurdish history and heritage. These efforts, often situated in universities, research centers, museums, and archives both within Kurdish regions and internationally, contribute to a more structured and critically examined understanding of the Kurdish past.

A. The Rise of Kurdish Studies: University Programs and Research Institutes

The academic field of Kurdish Studies has experienced significant growth in recent decades, particularly in European and North American universities.⁶ This development is often linked to the increased visibility and activism of the Kurdish diaspora, as well as a growing recognition of the historical neglect of Kurdish topics within traditional Middle Eastern Studies programs.⁶ Kurdish Studies provides crucial platforms for rigorous, interdisciplinary research into all aspects of Kurdish society, including history, politics, language, literature, culture, gender, and diaspora experiences.²

Several universities now host dedicated centers or programs:

- The **Centre for Kurdish Studies (CKS)** at the University of Exeter (UK) is a prominent example, housing significant library and archival collections.⁹⁸
- The **Zahra Institute** in the US, affiliated with Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU), offers MA and certificate programs specifically in Kurdish Studies, along with summer institutes.⁷¹
- The **Global Kurdish Initiative for Peace** at American University's School of International Service focuses on research, dialogue, and policy analysis related to

Kurdish issues.²

- Other universities with significant research activity or course offerings include Uppsala University (Sweden)⁷⁵, the University of Central Florida⁹³, University of Rouen-Normandie (France)⁸⁵, University of Fribourg (Germany)⁸⁵, Middlesex University (UK)⁸⁵, University of Vienna (Austria)⁸⁵, and Carleton University (Canada), which has collaborated on programs with the University of Rojava.⁶
- Within Turkey, the establishment of the first Department of Kurdish Language and Literature at **Mardin Artuklu University** in 2010 marked a significant, albeit politically sensitive, development.¹

Research within Kurdish Studies employs diverse methodologies, including traditional historical analysis, archival research, oral history collection, ethnography, literary criticism, and linguistic analysis.⁷¹ This scholarship is disseminated through dedicated peer-reviewed journals like *Kurdish Studies*⁹³, academic monographs, edited volumes (such as the comprehensive *The Cambridge History of the Kurds*⁶), and doctoral dissertations.⁸⁵

B. Guardians of Heritage: Museums and Archives

The institutional landscape for preserving tangible Kurdish heritage—artifacts, manuscripts, documents, photographs—is fragmented due to the lack of a Kurdish nation-state.⁸

Preservation relies heavily on initiatives undertaken by regional governments (like the KRG in Iraq), non-governmental organizations, universities, private collectors, and diaspora communities.⁸ These efforts often struggle with inadequate funding, lack of trained personnel, security concerns, and the overarching political instability of the region.²³ Furthermore, major international museums have historically marginalized or omitted Kurdish heritage from their narratives of Middle Eastern civilizations.⁹

Despite these hurdles, important institutional initiatives exist:

- **Museums in Kurdistan:** Existing museums include the Kurd's Heritage Museum in Sulaymaniyah¹⁰⁰ and the Textile Museum in Erbil.²³ A significant future project is the planned **Kurdistan Museum** in Erbil, designed by renowned architect Daniel Libeskind. This landmark institution aims to provide a national and international focus for Kurdish history and identity, housing permanent and temporary exhibitions, educational resources, and the extensive digital archive compiled by the Kurdistan Memory Programme (KMP).²¹
- **Archives and Institutes in Kurdistan:** Key centers for documentation and research include the **Kurdish Heritage Institute (KHI)** and the **Zheen Centre for Documentation and Research**, both based in Sulaymaniyah and involved in international collaborations, including digitization projects with the University of Exeter.⁹⁹ The **Kurdistan Center for Arts and Culture (KCAC)**, supported by the KRG presidency, is actively digitizing rare books and manuscripts across Iraqi Kurdistan.⁹⁶ The **Kurdish Music and Heritage Establishment (KMHE)** focuses on archiving musical traditions.³⁷
- **University Archives (International):** Academic institutions in the diaspora play a

crucial role in housing unique collections. The **Omar Sheikhmous Archive** at the University of Exeter is a major resource for the study of modern Kurdish political history.⁸ Exeter also holds an extensive collection of Kurdish materials from the former Soviet Union.⁹⁸

- **Digital Archives:** As previously noted, digital platforms like the **Kurdish Digital Archive (Exeter/DAME)**⁹⁸, the **Kurdistan Memory Programme (KMP)**²¹, and **Kurdipedia**⁸¹ function as vital institutional efforts to preserve and disseminate historical information globally.
- **Community Archives (Diaspora):** While perhaps less formalized than state or university archives, diaspora community centers and past initiatives like the Kurdish Museum and Library in Brooklyn (founded by Vera Saeedpour) represent important efforts to preserve heritage outside the homeland.⁹

C. Media's Role: Broadcasting and Publishing Kurdish Heritage

Media organizations, both traditional and digital, also contribute to the documentation and dissemination of Kurdish history and culture.

- **Broadcasting:** In regions where permitted, television channels feature cultural programming, including performances by Dengbêj.⁵³ Kurdsat Broadcasting Corporation, based in Sulaymaniyah, is a significant Kurdish media entity.¹⁰⁰ The launch of TRT Kurdî (formerly TRT6) by the Turkish state represented a shift towards allowing Kurdish-language broadcasting, although its content is state-controlled.¹ Diaspora-based media outlets also play a role in reaching global audiences.¹⁴⁵
- **Publishing:** Kurdish publishing houses, whether operating within Kurdistan (where politically feasible) or established by the diaspora (e.g., in Sweden, Germany), are essential for producing and distributing books on Kurdish literature, history, folklore, and language.⁶⁸ Historically, journals and magazines like *Hawar* were instrumental in developing the written language and fostering intellectual discourse.⁵⁵
- **Online News and Platforms:** Contemporary online news outlets focusing on Kurdish affairs (e.g., Medya News, ANF English, Rudaw, Kurdistan24, Kurdistan Chronicle) frequently report on cultural preservation activities, historical commemorations, and research related to Kurdish history, making this information accessible to a wider audience.¹⁵

The increasing formalization and institutionalization of Kurdish history through academic programs, archives, and museums represent a crucial step towards ensuring its preservation, legitimization, and accessibility. However, this process is not without complexities. Decisions regarding standardization (of language or historical narratives), canonization (which texts or traditions are prioritized), funding sources (including state actors, as seen in the Dengbêj project in Turkey¹⁴ or KRG support for KCAC⁹⁶), and curatorial choices inevitably involve power dynamics and the potential politics of representation.⁹ Whose history gets told, in which dialect, and from which perspective become pertinent questions, potentially marginalizing non-elite or dissenting voices within the broader Kurdish community.

Furthermore, the success of many recent institutional initiatives underscores the critical importance of transnational collaboration. Projects like the University of Exeter's digital archiving partnership with the KHI and Zheen Centre in Sulaymaniyah⁹⁹, the KRG's engagement with diaspora organizations to support Kurdish education abroad¹⁵², and the international scope of academic conferences and Kurdish Studies programs⁶ highlight how bridging geographical divides and pooling resources between Kurdistan and the diaspora are essential for overcoming the limitations imposed by statelessness and political fragmentation.

VII. Obstacles to Memory: Erasure, Suppression, and Destruction

The Kurdish struggle to remember and retain history unfolds against a backdrop of profound and interconnected challenges. These obstacles, rooted primarily in the condition of statelessness and the policies of the states governing Kurdish territories, actively impede the preservation and transmission of cultural memory.

A. The Weight of Statelessness: Fragmentation and Lack of Institutional Support

The fundamental reality of being the world's largest ethnic group without a recognized independent state profoundly shapes the Kurdish experience of historical preservation.¹ Statelessness translates directly into the absence of unifying national institutions—a central government, a national archive, state-funded museums, a standardized education system promoting Kurdish history and language—that typically play a primary role in safeguarding and disseminating a nation's heritage.³

This lack of a sovereign state structure is compounded by political and geographical fragmentation. The division of the Kurdish homeland among Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria following World War I created artificial borders that dissect communities, reinforce dialectal differences, and hinder coordinated cultural and historical initiatives.³ Each part of Kurdistan faces distinct political realities and levels of repression, further complicating efforts towards unified preservation.

Moreover, statelessness can manifest as a literal lack of citizenship within host countries. The case of Syrian Kurds, hundreds of thousands of whom were stripped of their citizenship in 1962 and rendered *ajanib* (foreigners) or *maktumin* (unregistered), exemplifies this extreme vulnerability.⁴ Lacking basic civil rights, documentation, and legal standing, these individuals and their descendants face immense barriers to education, employment, travel, and the ability to protect their cultural identity and heritage.⁴ Even for Kurds who hold citizenship in diaspora countries, feelings of precariousness, non-belonging, and being perceived as perpetual outsiders can persist, reinforcing a sense of social or political statelessness.¹⁶⁸

B. Politics of Erasure: State Suppression, Assimilation, and Linguicide

The states governing Kurdish populations have frequently pursued policies aimed at

suppressing or erasing Kurdish identity, history, and culture, viewing Kurdish aspirations for autonomy or even cultural recognition as a threat to national unity and territorial integrity.¹ Kurds have often been framed through state discourse as "separatists," "terrorists," or even non-existent as a distinct group (e.g., the "Mountain Turk" theory in Turkey¹³), justifying repressive measures.¹⁶

Forced Assimilation policies have been a key tool in this process, aiming to absorb Kurds into the dominant Turkish, Arab, or Persian national identities.⁵ Methods included changing Kurdish place names to Turkish, Arabic, or Persian ones⁵; prohibiting or discouraging the use of Kurdish personal names³; implementing resettlement policies to disperse Kurdish populations¹⁶; and promoting dominant national narratives while denying or distorting Kurdish history.⁵

Linguicide, the deliberate suppression of a language, has been a central element of these policies.¹ For decades, particularly in Turkey, speaking or writing Kurdish in public (and sometimes even in private) was banned and punishable.¹⁴ Kurdish education was prohibited, Kurdish publications were censored or destroyed, and Kurdish cultural institutions were closed down.¹ This direct assault on the Kurdish language aimed to sever a core component of identity and interrupt the primary medium for transmitting history and culture.

Cultural Suppression extended to other domains. Traditional Kurdish clothing has been discouraged or banned in certain contexts.³¹ Kurdish music and folklore were suppressed, with musicians and Dengbêj facing persecution.¹⁴ Newroz celebrations were frequently prohibited or violently dispersed.³¹ Cultural materials, including books and archives, have been confiscated.⁹² These measures collectively aimed to render Kurdish culture invisible and illegitimate within the public sphere.

C. Scars on the Land: Displacement and the Destruction of Cultural Heritage

Physical destruction and forced displacement have inflicted deep wounds on Kurdish society and its cultural landscape, severing connections to ancestral lands and erasing tangible markers of history.

Forced Displacement has been a recurring trauma. Mass deportations occurred under the Ottomans and Safavids.¹³⁸ Turkey enacted laws in 1927 and 1934 permitting forced relocation of Kurds.¹⁶ Iraq's Ba'athist regime implemented large-scale "Arabization" campaigns, forcibly evicting hundreds of thousands of Kurds from oil-rich regions like Kirkuk and settling Arabs in their place.¹¹ The Anfal campaign involved mass deportations to camps in the southern desert.²⁵ Hundreds of thousands of Faily Kurds were stripped of citizenship and deported from Iraq to Iran.²⁶ The conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK in the 1980s and 1990s led to the internal displacement of an estimated 3 million Kurds.²⁹ More recently, conflicts involving ISIS and the Syrian civil war have generated massive new waves of Kurdish refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).²⁴ This constant uprooting disrupts social structures, breaks chains of oral transmission, and alienates people from the landscapes imbued with their history.³

Destruction of Villages and Homes has often accompanied displacement. During the Anfal genocide, the Iraqi regime systematically destroyed an estimated 90% of Kurdish villages (around 2,000-4,000, depending on estimates).¹¹ Similarly, thousands of Kurdish villages were forcibly evacuated and destroyed by Turkish security forces during the 1990s conflict.¹⁶ This razing of settlements aimed to eliminate support bases for insurgents but also erased centuries of habitation and cultural presence on the land.

Destruction of Cultural Heritage Sites is another devastating consequence. Historical landmarks, archaeological sites, religious sanctuaries (mosques, churches, Yezidi temples, monasteries), libraries, and archives have been damaged or destroyed either as collateral damage during conflicts or through deliberate acts of iconoclasm or state policy.⁸ Examples include damage during the Anfal campaign²⁵, the Iran-Iraq War⁹⁷, destruction by ISIS in Iraq and Syria³⁰, Turkish military operations in Syrian Kurdistan (Rojava)¹³⁵ and urban warfare in Diyarbakir's Sur district.²⁷

The instability created by conflict also fuels the **Looting and Illicit Trade** of antiquities and cultural artifacts, further dispersing and losing irreplaceable historical evidence.¹³⁶ Finally, **Environmental Destruction (Ecocide)**, through deforestation, dam construction, burning of agricultural lands, and restriction of access to pastures linked to military strategies or development projects, also impacts cultural heritage, particularly for communities whose traditions (like weaving or pastoralism) are tied to the land.²²

These challenges—statelessness, suppression, displacement, and destruction—are not discrete phenomena but operate in a devastating synergy. The lack of state protection inherent in statelessness makes Kurdish communities vulnerable to state policies of suppression and assimilation.³ These repressive policies often provoke resistance, leading to conflict.¹¹ Conflict, in turn, along with direct state actions like the Anfal or village evacuations, results in mass displacement and the physical destruction of homes, cultural sites, and archives.¹¹ Displacement disrupts the social fabric necessary for oral transmission and access to cultural resources, while destruction removes the tangible anchors of memory.³ This weakened state can leave communities more susceptible to further suppression, perpetuating a cycle of vulnerability and loss.

Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the erasure of Kurdish culture and history is often not merely a byproduct of conflict but a deliberate strategy employed by states. The targeting of language, cultural practices, historical sites, and collective memory serves to undermine Kurdish identity, weaken resistance, delegitimize historical claims to territory, and enforce the dominant national narrative.³ In this context, cultural destruction becomes a tool of political control and ethnic cleansing.

VIII. Conclusion: Weaving Past, Present, and Future

The Kurdish experience of remembering and retaining history is a testament to profound resilience in the face of extraordinary adversity. Lacking the institutional scaffolding of a nation-state and confronting decades of systematic suppression, fragmentation, displacement, and violence across multiple countries, Kurds have nonetheless sustained and

adapted a rich array of strategies to keep their historical narratives and cultural memory alive. This investigation reveals a multifaceted approach that dynamically integrates diverse methods. The **oral traditions**, embodied by the Dengbêj, epic poetry, and folk music, have served as foundational "living archives," preserving language, transmitting historical accounts, and fostering collective identity even when written expression was impossible or forbidden.¹³ The development of **written literature and archives**, though hampered by censorship and destruction, represents a crucial effort to codify history and language, particularly through the classical poetic traditions, the emergence of modern prose and historical novels, the pivotal work of journals like *Hawar*, and painstaking recent efforts in archiving and digitization.¹ **Cultural practices and symbols**—the annual defiance and renewal of Newroz, the expressive power of traditional clothing, the intricate narratives woven into carpets, and the deep meaning vested in historical landmarks—provide embodied anchors for memory and identity, often taking on heightened significance as acts of resistance against cultural erasure.⁵ The **global diaspora** has emerged as a vital force, establishing cultural centers, educational programs, and community publications, while leveraging digital technologies to create transnational networks, online forums, and virtual archives that preserve heritage and connect Kurds across borders.⁷⁶ Finally, **academic and institutional initiatives**, including the growth of Kurdish Studies programs, specialized archives, museums (both existing and planned), and media organizations, contribute to the formal documentation, critical analysis, and wider dissemination of Kurdish history and culture.⁷¹

The interplay between these strategies is notable. Oral traditions inform written literature; cultural practices are documented and analyzed academically; diaspora initiatives support preservation efforts both abroad and in the homeland; digital tools make diverse forms of heritage globally accessible. This dynamic network of memory practices demonstrates remarkable adaptability, finding new avenues for expression and preservation even as old ones are threatened.

The table below offers a synthesized overview of these diverse methods:

Table 1: Overview of Kurdish Historical Memory Preservation Methods

Method Category	Key Vehicles/Examples	Primary Mode of Transmission	Key Challenges	Resilience Factors/Adaptations
Oral Traditions	Dengbêj (Bards), Epic Poems (<i>Memû Zîn, Dimdim</i>), Storytelling, Folk Music (<i>Stran, Lawik, Klam</i>)	Oral Recitation/Performance, Musical Expression	Suppression, Stigmatization, Language Loss, Modernization Pressure, Loss of Masters	Master-Apprentice System, Affective Power, Intangibility (Hard to Erase), Institutionalization (Dengbêj Houses), Modern Adaptation
Written Records & Literature	Classical Poetry (Xanî, Cizîrî, Nalî),	Written Text/Publication,	Censorship, Destruction, Lack	Exile Publishing, Language

	Modern Novels & Short Stories, <i>Hawar</i> Journal, Chronicles (<i>Sharafnāma</i>), Archives	Archival Preservation	of State Archive, Access Restrictions, Fragmentation, Linguicide	Standardization Efforts, Diaspora Presses, Digitization, Private/Community Archiving
Cultural Practices & Symbols	Newroz Festival, Traditional Clothing (<i>Cil û bergên kurdî</i>), Carpet/Kilim Weaving, Significant Landmarks & Sites	Embodied Practice/Ritual, Material Culture	Politicization/Bans, Assimilation Pressure, Economic Decline, Displacement, Physical Destruction, State Re-appropriation	Politicization as Resistance, Deep Cultural Roots, Diaspora Celebration, Artistic Revival, Community Preservation Efforts
Diaspora Initiatives	Cultural Centers, Diaspora Education Programs, Community Publications, Online Forums, Digital Archiving Projects	Community Organization/Digital Networks	Assimilation Pressures, Funding Issues, Generational Gaps, Political Divisions, Host Country Policies	Transnational Networks, Global Reach, Safe Haven for Expression, Political Advocacy, Technological Adoption
Academic & Institutional Efforts	Kurdish Studies Programs, University Archives, Museums (e.g., KHI, Zheen, planned Kurdistan Museum), Research Institutes, Media	Formal Research/Curation, Academic Publishing	Resource Scarcity, Political Interference, Access Restrictions, Politics of Representation, Lack of State Support	International Collaboration, Scholarly Rigor, Digital Preservation, Open Access Initiatives, Growing Recognition

The tenacity of Kurdish historical consciousness, woven through these diverse threads, stands as a powerful counter-narrative to the forces of erasure. Despite centuries of statelessness and the immense suffering caused by conflict and oppression, the Kurdish people continue to assert their history and identity. The act of remembering—whether through the mournful song of a Dengbêj, the defiant lighting of a Newroz fire, the meticulous digitization of a fragile manuscript, or the scholarly analysis of a historical event—remains central to Kurdish self-understanding and the ongoing pursuit of cultural vitality, political rights, and a

recognized place in the world's narrative. The preservation and transmission of this history are not merely about the past; they are fundamental to shaping the present and future of the Kurdish people.

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