

The Religious Landscape of Kurdistan Before Islam: A Historical Analysis

1. Introduction: The Diverse Religious Tapestry of Pre-Islamic Kurdistan

1.1. Setting the Stage: A Land of Ancient Civilizations and Religious Exchange

The historical region known as Kurdistan occupies a mountainous territory often described as part of the 'cradle of human civilisation'.¹ Situated within the Fertile Crescent, an area recognized for the genesis of the major Abrahamic faiths², this geography inherently positioned the region as a crossroads for cultural and religious interaction for millennia.¹ Mythological traditions, such as the designation of Mount Judi (Cudi) in Kurdistan as the resting place of Noah's Ark in Jewish and Islamic lore, underscore the region's deep historical resonance.¹ Archaeological and historical records attest to the presence of numerous advanced civilizations in and around Kurdistan, including those of Mesopotamia, the Hittites, and others.¹ This long history of settlement and its strategic location between major empires and cultural zones fostered a complex and diverse religious environment long before the arrival of Islam.

1.2. Overview of Complexity: A Mosaic of Faiths

Contrary to any notion of a single, monolithic pre-Islamic "Kurdish" religion, the populations inhabiting the Zagros Mountains and surrounding areas adhered to a wide array of beliefs.¹ This religious mosaic included ancient Iranian traditions (such as Zoroastrianism and Mithraism), indigenous faiths that developed unique characteristics (like Yazidism and Yarsanism), influences from regional polytheisms, and the presence of Abrahamic religions like Christianity and Judaism.¹ The term "Kurd" itself presents complexities when discussing the pre-Islamic era. While ancient Mesopotamian records mention mountain tribes like the Guti, and the Greek historian Xenophon described the Kardouchoi who troubled his army near modern Zakho in 401 BCE⁷, direct lineage to modern Kurds is debated by scholars.⁷ Some early Greek sources, like Herodotus, mention 'Kardakes' in the Achaemenid army, though whether this refers specifically to the ancestors of the Kurds is uncertain.¹⁰ The ethnonym "Kurd" appears to gain definitive historical traction around the time of the region's conversion to Islam in the 7th century CE.⁷ Some linguistic analyses suggest the term might derive from a Middle Persian common noun, *kwrt-*, referring to 'nomads' or 'tent-dwellers', which gradually became associated with the tribal groups of the region following the Islamic conquests.¹¹ This historical context suggests that the pre-Islamic religious landscape belonged to the

diverse *ancestors* of those who would later be identified more cohesively as Kurds. The very process of Islamization, interaction with conquering Arab armies, and the subsequent positioning within a new Islamic socio-political order likely played a significant role in consolidating a broader Kurdish identity, defined partly in relation to the new dominant religion and surrounding non-Kurdish populations.¹ Therefore, examining the pre-Islamic religious environment is essential not only for understanding the distant past but also for appreciating the foundational layers upon which Kurdish identity itself was constructed over centuries.

1.3. The Challenge of Sources and Syncretism

Reconstructing the pre-Islamic religious beliefs of Kurdistan's inhabitants presents significant challenges. Historical documentation is often fragmented, originating from external observers (like Greek historians or later Muslim chroniclers) or relating to imperial state religions rather than localized practices.⁷ Furthermore, many significant religious traditions, particularly indigenous faiths like Yazidism and Yarsanism, relied heavily on oral transmission for centuries.⁴ While the earliest written scripts for these faiths may date to the 11th or 12th centuries, their oral traditions point to much deeper histories.⁴ This reliance on oral lore complicates precise historical reconstruction.

A key characteristic of the region's religious history is syncretism – the blending of elements from different religious traditions. Faiths such as Yazidism, Yarsanism (also known as Ahl-e Haqq or Kakayi), and Kurdish Alevism are widely recognized as preserving elements from ancient Iranian religions (pre-Zoroastrian or Zoroastrian), Mithraism, Manichaeism, Judaism, Christianity (particularly Nestorianism), and Islamic Sufism.³ Understanding the pre-Islamic layers requires carefully analyzing these later faiths to discern the older strata they incorporated.³ The available source materials reflect this complexity, ranging from academic studies and encyclopedia entries⁷ to community perspectives², journalistic accounts⁶, online discussions⁵, and sources in languages other than English, including Arabic and Kurdish.¹⁰ Each source type offers different perspectives and requires critical evaluation to build a comprehensive picture.

2. Ancient Iranian Religions: Zoroastrianism and Related Beliefs

The geographical position of Kurdistan within the greater Iranian cultural sphere meant that ancient Iranian religions played a profound role in shaping the pre-Islamic spiritual landscape.

2.1. Zoroastrianism (Mazdayasna)

Zoroastrianism, the religion founded by the prophet Zoroaster (Zarathustra), is widely considered to have been a major, and possibly the dominant, faith among Kurdish populations before the advent of Islam.¹ Its historical significance stems from its status as the official religion of successive Iranian empires that held sway over Kurdish territories, including the

Median, Achaemenid, Parthian, and particularly the Sasanian empires.⁵ Some historical accounts suggest that the majority of Kurds living under Sasanian rule (224–651 CE) adhered to Zoroastrianism.⁵ The Medes, an ancient Iranian people often identified as ancestors of the Kurds², are known to have adopted Zoroastrianism, further strengthening this connection.⁹ The core tenets of Zoroastrianism center on the monotheistic worship of Ahura Mazda, the wise lord and creator.¹¹ The religion emphasizes a cosmic dualism between good (represented by Spenta Mainyu, the Holy Spirit) and evil (represented by Angra Mainyu or Ahriman), human free will in choosing between them, and eventual messianic redemption.¹¹ Concepts such as heaven, hell, and a final judgment are central¹¹, influencing later Abrahamic faiths.¹¹ Fire is considered a sacred element, representing purity and Ahura Mazda's light, leading to its central role in worship rituals.³ The primary ethical injunction is summarized as "Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds" (Humata, Hukhta, Huvarshta).²⁵ The Avesta constitutes the religion's sacred scriptures¹, originally composed in an ancient Iranian language. Evidence for the local adoption of Zoroastrianism includes the discovery of a 2000-year-old miniature Avesta written in the Hawrami (Ahurami) dialect, found in Kurdistan.²³ The influence of Zoroastrianism extended beyond formal religious adherence. Elements are visible in later Kurdish culture, most notably the celebration of Newroz (the Persian New Year), a spring festival symbolizing renewal and the victory of light over darkness, often linked to the myth of the blacksmith Kawa defeating the tyrant Zahhak (Azhdahak) – a story deeply embedded in Kurdish identity and themes of resistance.¹ Furthermore, Zoroastrian concepts and practices may have contributed to the syncretic mix found in later indigenous faiths like Yazidism and Yarsanism⁵ and potentially influenced regional Sufi mystical orders, such as the Naqshbandi and Qadiri.⁵ Some interpretations posit that Zoroastrianism, or more broadly Mazdayasna ('Worship of Wisdom'), represents the oldest religious stratum for all Iranian peoples, potentially predating Zarathustra himself, with the prophet seen as completing or reforming an existing tradition.⁵ This deep historical layering is reflected in the modern revival of Zoroastrianism among some Kurds, who explicitly connect it to their ancient identity and national aspirations.¹¹

The decline of Zoroastrianism as the dominant religion began decisively with the Arab-Muslim conquests of the 7th century, which led to the fall of the Sasanian Empire.¹² The conversion of the population to Islam was a gradual process occurring over centuries.¹² While some conversions may have been voluntary, historical accounts also mention periods of pressure, persecution, and violence against Zoroastrians, leading many to convert to survive or emigrate (like the Parsis who fled to India).⁵ Consequently, Zoroastrianism transitioned from a state-sponsored, majority religion to a minority faith within Kurdistan and the broader region.

2.2. Mithraism

Alongside Zoroastrianism, Mithraism is frequently cited as another significant ancient Iranian religion practiced among pre-Islamic Kurds.¹ Some sources suggest it was heavily practiced, particularly among specific Kurdish groups like the Guran and Hewrami⁵, and consider it one of the oldest religions in the Kurdish historical context.⁶ Often described as a "Cult of the Sun"

¹, Mithraism involved the veneration of Mithra, an ancient Indo-Iranian deity associated with contracts, light, and cosmic order.

While distinct from Zoroastrianism, Mithraism shared its Iranian origins and likely interacted with it. Its presence is noted in lists of major religions that found a place in Kurdistan, alongside Mazdaism (Zoroastrianism) and mystery religions.¹ Potential echoes of Mithraic beliefs or practices are suggested to have survived in later Kurdish traditions, including elements within Sufi orders like the Naqshbandi and Qadiri, and among Dervishes.⁵ It is also considered a contributing source to the syncretic faiths of Yazidism, Yarsanism, and Alevism.⁵ Some proposed timelines of Kurdish religious history place Mithraism, characterized as fire/sun worship, chronologically before the widespread dominance of Zoroastrianism.⁵ The deep-rooted significance of the snake (mar) in Kurdish mythology and symbolism, evident even at the Yazidi holy site of Lalish²⁷, might also connect to ancient strata of belief potentially encompassing Mithraic or other pre-Zoroastrian traditions.

The relationship between Zoroastrianism and Mithraism in pre-Islamic Kurdistan appears complex. Both faiths stemmed from a common Iranian religious background, sharing reverence for concepts like light and potentially fire.¹ Mithraism gained prominence across the Roman Empire, which bordered western Kurdish regions⁶, while Zoroastrianism was the state religion of the Persian empires dominating the east.⁵ This suggests the religious landscape was not uniform. It is plausible that adherence varied geographically and socially.

Zoroastrianism, particularly during the Sasanian period, might have been more dominant in urban centers and among the elite due to state patronage.⁵ Concurrently, Mithraic traditions or related folk beliefs, perhaps part of a broader "Yazdanism" complex⁵, could have persisted more strongly in rural or mountainous areas, or among specific tribal groups.⁵ This dynamic interplay, involving coexistence, potential competition, and syncretism between these related but distinct Iranian religious streams, helps account for the diverse influences observed in subsequent Kurdish religious developments.

2.3. Pre-Zoroastrian Iranian Faiths and Yazdanism

Several sources point towards the existence of an underlying stratum of belief that predates or exists alongside formalized Zoroastrianism. References are made to a "western Iranian pre-Zoroastrian faith" derived directly from Indo-Iranian tradition.¹¹ This suggests that Zoroastrianism itself may have emerged from, or represented a reformation of, older existing beliefs. The term Mazdayasna is sometimes used to encompass this broader pre-Zarathustra belief system of the Iranian peoples.⁵ Yazidism, in particular, is frequently linked to these ancient, pre-Zoroastrian roots.¹¹ The concept of "Yazdanism," though a modern scholarly term introduced by Mehrdad Izady¹⁶, attempts to capture this shared ancient heritage. It is proposed as an umbrella term for a group of indigenous, monotheistic faiths originating in the Zagros Mountains, primarily among Kurds, which includes Yazidism, Yarsanism, and sometimes Alevism.⁵ These faiths share characteristics like a belief in reincarnation and cyclical worldviews, potentially drawing from the same ancient wellspring that also influenced Mithraism and Zoroastrianism.⁵ This framework helps conceptualize the shared origins and

overlapping features of these distinct Kurdish faiths, suggesting a common foundation in the pre-Islamic religious milieu.

3. Indigenous Faiths: Yazidism and Yarsanism

Emerging from the ancient religious landscape of the Zagros Mountains, Yazidism and Yarsanism represent distinct indigenous faiths with deep roots in the region, preserving unique traditions and worldviews.

3.1. Yazidism (Êzîdîti / Sharfadin)

Yazidism stands out as one of the most distinctive religious traditions associated with the Kurdish people. Its origins and historical development are subjects of considerable discussion and varying interpretations.

Origins and Development: The history of Yazidism involves a complex interplay between ancient roots and medieval formation. Many accounts, including those from within the community, trace Yazidi beliefs back to ancient Iranian or Indo-Iranian traditions that predate Zoroastrianism.¹¹ Some adherents consider it the oldest monotheistic religion in the world.¹⁹ Its mythology and cosmogony exhibit parallels with ancient Iranian concepts¹⁷, and it is often linked to the broader "Yazdanism" complex or Mithraic influences.⁵

However, historical scholarship strongly emphasizes the pivotal role of Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir (d. 1162 CE) in shaping the faith as it is known today.⁸ Sheikh Adi, described as a Sufi mystic possibly of Umayyad descent, settled in the valley of Lalish (north of Mosul) in the early 12th century.⁸ There, he founded the Adawiyya Sufi order among the local Kurdish population.⁸ It is believed that Sheikh Adi encountered existing local beliefs – potentially a mix of Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, ancient Iranian elements, and perhaps veneration of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid I – and synthesized them with his own mystical Islamic teachings.¹⁹ His ascetic life and reported miracles attracted a strong following, and his tomb in Lalish became the religion's central shrine.³

This dual narrative – ancient origins versus 12th-century formation – is not necessarily contradictory. Sheikh Adi likely reorganized, reformed, and gave structure to pre-existing local beliefs, integrating them with Sufi concepts and terminology.¹⁷ The emphasis on ancient roots serves to assert the faith's indigenous character and continuity, particularly vital for a community facing historical persecution based on accusations of heresy.¹⁹ The scholarly focus on Sheikh Adi highlights the documented historical process of the religion's consolidation and the origins of its Sufi-influenced vocabulary.¹⁷ The primarily oral nature of the early tradition further contributes to the ambiguity surrounding its precise origins.⁴

The etymology of the name "Yazidi" is also debated. While some Western scholars linked it to the Umayyad Caliph Yazid ibn Muawiyah (Yazid I, r. 680–683 CE), possibly due to Sheikh Adi's lineage and the group's reverence for him⁸, this connection is vehemently rejected by Yazidis themselves.¹⁸ Alternative derivations point to the Old Iranian word *yazata* (divine being, angel)⁸ or the Kurdish phrase *Êz dâ* ('God created me'), leading to self-designations like *Em miletê ezdaîn* ('We are the Ezdayi nation').¹⁸ The faith is also known as Sharfadin.¹⁷

Core Beliefs and Deities: Yazidism is fundamentally monotheistic, centered on belief in one supreme God, referred to as Xwedê, Xwedawend, Êzdan, or Pedsha ('King').¹⁷ According to Yazidi hymns (Qewls), God possesses numerous names (1,001 or 3,003).¹⁷ God created the world but entrusted its care and administration to seven Holy Beings or Angels (often called the Heptad).³ The preeminent figure among these angels is Tawûsî Melek, the Peacock Angel, who acts as the ruler and active caretaker of the world.³ Yazidis often refer to themselves as *Miletê Tawûsî Melek* ("the nation of Tawûsî Melek").¹⁷ Some interpretations describe a divine Triad, comprising the transcendent God, Tawûsî Melek, and Sheikh Adi (or sometimes Sultan Ezid, potentially a deified Yazid I).¹⁷

A key theological distinction is the Yazidi understanding of evil. Unlike the Abrahamic concept of Satan as an independent force opposing God, Yazidism posits that Tawûsî Melek initially fell from grace for refusing God's command to bow to Adam (interpreted as an act of ultimate loyalty to God alone), but subsequently repented and was reconciled with God.¹⁵ Yazidi belief generally holds that God is purely good, and evil arises from human actions.²⁰ This complex narrative surrounding Tawûsî Melek has historically led to misinterpretations by outsiders, who erroneously labelled Yazidis as "devil worshippers".¹⁴ Yazidism also incorporates a belief in the transmigration of souls, or reincarnation.¹⁶ The natural elements – fire, water, air, and earth – are considered sacred and must not be polluted.¹⁷

Rituals and Practices: Yazidi religious life involves distinct rituals and social structures. The holiest site is the temple complex at Lalish, where Sheikh Adi is buried; a pilgrimage to Lalish at least once in a lifetime is a religious duty for adherents.³ Sacred hymns, known as Qewls, encode religious history, mythology, laws, and genealogies, preserving the faith's oral traditions.³ Yazidi society is characterized by a caste system, including hereditary priestly lineages (Sheikhs and Pirs) and laypeople (Murids).³ A strict rule of endogamy forbids marriage outside the Yazidi community; violation leads to expulsion.³ Prayers are traditionally performed facing the sun, leading to the inaccurate description of "sun worshippers".¹⁵ Ritual practices include periodic fasting³, baptism¹⁹, and the ceremonial circulation of bronze or iron peacock effigies called *sanjaqs* among Yazidi communities.⁸ Numerous taboos govern daily life, relating to food, clothing (e.g., avoidance of the color blue), and the prohibition of uttering the word "Shaytan" (Satan) or similar-sounding words.⁸ The primary language for religious traditions and oral literature is the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish.¹⁷

Historical Presence and Syncretism: Yazidism emerged as a recognizable religious community by the 12th century¹⁹ and was historically adhered to by several Kurdish tribes and principalities, such as Bohtan and Mahmudi.¹⁸ The faith is highly syncretic, reflecting Kurdistan's history as a religious crossroads. It seamlessly blends elements from ancient Iranian religions (pre-Zoroastrian roots, reverence for elements) with Islamic Sufism (terminology, veneration of Sheikh Adi), Nestorian Christianity (baptism, perhaps reverence for Jesus), Judaism (mythological elements), and possibly Manichaeism and Gnosticism.³ This blending occurred over centuries, particularly between the 12th and 15th centuries.¹⁹ Despite incorporating diverse influences, particularly Sufi vocabulary in its esoteric literature, much of

Yazidi mythology, cosmology, rituals, and festivals remain distinctly non-Islamic, preserving a unique identity.¹⁷ This syncretism can be understood not merely as passive borrowing but as an active process of adaptation and identity formation. By incorporating elements from dominant surrounding cultures while preserving core indigenous beliefs, Yazidism navigated complex historical pressures and maintained continuity with its ancient past, demonstrating resilience and a dynamic engagement with its environment.

3.2. Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq / Kakayi)

Yarsanism, whose followers are also known as Ahl-e Haqq ('People of Truth') or Kakayi, is another indigenous faith found primarily among Kurds in western Iran (Iranian Kurdistan) and parts of Iraqi Kurdistan.¹ Like Yazidism, it is considered a branch of the ancient Yazdani faiths.¹⁶

Core Tenets: Yarsanism incorporates esoteric teachings and focuses on the inner, mystical journey of the soul.³ A central belief is the concept of theophany, or the manifestation of the Divine Essence in successive historical periods through various avatars or figures.³

Truthfulness, purity, selflessness, and spiritual perfection are key virtues.³ Like Yazidism, Yarsanism includes a belief in the transmigration of souls through numerous reincarnations.¹⁶ Religious knowledge, texts, and rituals are often guarded and accessible primarily to initiates.³ Music (especially playing the *tanbur*, a sacred lute) and mystical poetry play a vital role in religious ceremonies (*jam*).³

Historical Presence and Origins: Yarsanism shares common features with Yazidism and Alevism, suggesting they may all stem from a shared ancient western Iranian religious tradition, distinct from mainstream Zoroastrianism but derived from older Indo-Iranian roots.¹² Some historians propose that Yarsanism dates back to the pre-Islamic era, even though its earliest known scriptures were written later, possibly around the 11th or 12th centuries.⁴ Its rich oral traditions are believed to preserve a much deeper history.⁴ Yarsanism is listed among the Kurdo-syncretic religious communities that attest to the rich cultural heritage of the Kurds.¹ Historically, the Gorani language (or Hawrami), linguistically distinct from the main Kurdish dialects (Kurmanji and Sorani), was closely associated with the Yarsani community and remains the sacred language in which most of their religious texts are written.¹⁴

3.3. The Concept of Yazdanism

As mentioned earlier, "Yazdanism" is a term introduced into modern scholarship, notably by Mehrdad Izady, to categorize a group of ancient, indigenous, monotheistic religions originating primarily among the Kurds in the Zagros Mountains.¹⁶ This grouping typically includes Yazidism, Yarsanism, and sometimes Kurdish Alevism.⁵ These faiths share core features such as a belief in reincarnation or the transmigration of souls, a cyclical view of the world, and roots that appear to predate Islam and possibly diverge from orthodox Zoroastrianism, connecting instead to older Indo-Iranian or western Iranian traditions.¹²

Yazdanism provides a conceptual framework for understanding the common heritage and theological similarities (like the concept of divine emanations or avatars) underlying these

distinct religious expressions, suggesting they evolved from a shared pre-Islamic religious substratum in the region.¹⁶

4. Abrahamic Faiths and Other Belief Systems

Beyond the prominent Iranian and indigenous faiths, the pre-Islamic religious landscape of Kurdistan also included established Abrahamic communities and potentially other belief systems, contributing to the region's overall diversity.

4.1. Christianity

Christianity had a significant presence in and around the Kurdish regions well before the arrival of Islam.¹ Some sources even claim that *most* Kurds were Christians prior to their conversion to Islam, particularly those living within the sphere of influence of the Byzantine Empire.² Historical accounts mention Christian communities in northern and western parts of Kurdistan under Byzantine rule, where the religion was sometimes enforced by the government.⁵ Christianization efforts were not always peaceful, with reports of forced conversions, killings, and the destruction of non-Christian worship places.⁵

However, the precise nature and extent of Christian identity *among ethnic Kurds* is complex and debated.² While some individuals or groups identified as Kurdish may have converted to Christianity, much of the Christian presence consisted of distinct ethno-religious groups like Armenians and Assyrians (often adherents of the Church of the East, sometimes referred to as Nestorians) who lived alongside or among Kurdish populations.¹³ Over time, processes of cultural interaction, language shift, and assimilation occurred, with some members of these Christian groups potentially becoming Kurdified.¹³ Today, most Christian communities in the region maintain distinct ethnic identities separate from Kurds.¹⁴

Despite the complexities of ethnic identification, Christianity undoubtedly formed part of the religious milieu encountered by Islam. Furthermore, Christian traditions, particularly those of the Church of the East (Nestorianism), left discernible marks on other regional faiths. Yazidism, for instance, incorporates elements believed to derive from Christian influence, such as a rite of baptism and the sacramental use of wine (though alcohol consumption is more broadly accepted in Yazidi culture compared to Islam).⁸

4.2. Judaism

Jewish communities also have an ancient history in Kurdistan, predating Islam.¹ Historically, Kurdish Jews formed a distinct part of the region's diverse population.² The kingdom of Adiabene, located in the heartland of ancient Assyria (corresponding to parts of modern Iraqi Kurdistan), famously had rulers who converted to Judaism in the 1st century CE, indicating a notable Jewish presence and influence even at elite levels during the Roman era. While specific details of Jewish life among the broader pre-Islamic Kurdish population are sparse in the provided materials, their long-standing existence contributed to the region's religious plurality. Similar to Christianity, Judaism is also considered one of the sources contributing elements to the syncretic faith of Yazidism.⁸ Additionally, certain Kurdish legends, like the

story of salvation from the tyrant Zohak, may echo narrative structures found in Jewish traditions.¹

4.3. Manichaeism

Manichaeism, the dualistic religion founded by the prophet Mani in the 3rd century CE in the Sasanian Empire, is also mentioned as one of the major world religions that found a place in Kurdistan.¹ Historical sources suggest that some pre-Islamic groups in northern Iraq, known as the Shamsani, practiced Manichaeism.¹⁹ It is listed as one of the potential influences on the local beliefs encountered by Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir when he arrived in Lalish¹⁹ and may have contributed to the broader syncretic mix of Yazidism.¹⁹ With its origins within the Iranian cultural sphere and its emphasis on a cosmic struggle between light and darkness, Manichaean ideas might have resonated with existing dualistic concepts prevalent in Zoroastrianism and other regional beliefs.

4.4. Local Pagan/Polytheistic Traditions

Beneath the layers of organized world religions, evidence suggests the persistence of more ancient, localized pagan or polytheistic traditions. References to "regional polytheisms"³ and speculative connections to very ancient sites like Göbekli Tepe or the beliefs of Sumerian, Hurrian, and Hittite civilizations⁵ point to deep historical strata of belief. The Hurrians, who inhabited parts of Kurdistan in the Bronze Age, are considered among the groups contributing to Kurdish ethnogenesis.⁹ Practices such as reverence for natural forces (sun, fire, water, earth)³ and the sanctity of specific natural sites like springs and mountains³ likely stem from these older traditions and continued within later faiths like Yazidism. The Yazidi belief in *Xudans*, described as divine powers or spirits inhabiting and controlling natural elements and phenomena¹⁷, may also reflect these ancient animistic or polytheistic roots. The enduring significance of snake (mar) symbolism in Kurdish mythology, folklore, and iconography, notably the black snake relief at the entrance of the Lalish temple²⁷, likely taps into very old, pre-Abrahamic and possibly pre-Zoroastrian, layers of meaning associated with creation, protection, and chthonic forces.

The coexistence of these diverse systems – major Iranian religions, indigenous developments, Abrahamic faiths, Manichaeism, and local traditions – created a dynamic religious environment. The evidence points less towards rigidly separated communities and more towards permeable boundaries where interaction, borrowing, and syncretism were common.³ Political affiliations (Byzantine vs. Sasanian) influenced the prominence of certain faiths⁵, while instances of forced conversion⁵ and assimilation or language shift¹³ demonstrate that religious and ethnic identities could be fluid and subject to external pressures. This complex interplay suggests that defining "Kurdish religion" in the pre-Islamic era requires acknowledging a spectrum of beliefs and identities, likely more fluid and overlapping than modern categories often imply.

5. The Advent of Islam and the Process of Islamization

The arrival of Arab Muslim armies in the 7th century CE marked a pivotal turning point in the religious history of Kurdistan, initiating a gradual but ultimately transformative process of Islamization.

5.1. Initial Contact and Conquest (7th Century)

The spread of Islam among Kurdish populations began during the early Muslim conquests.¹² The first significant contact between Kurds and Arab armies occurred during the conquest of Mesopotamia around 637 CE.¹² At this time, most Kurdish tribes were subjects or allies of the Sasanian Persian Empire and initially offered strong resistance alongside the Sasanians against the invading forces.¹² Key engagements, such as the Battle of Jalawla in 637 CE, resulted in Sasanian defeats and opened the way for the conquest of Persia and the Kurdish territories.²³

5.2. Timeline and Nature of Conversion

Mass conversion to Islam among the Kurds is generally dated to the reign of the second Rashidun Caliph, Umar ibn Al-Khattab (634-644 CE).¹² As the Sasanian Empire crumbled between 639 and 644 CE, it became clear that resistance was ultimately futile. Consequently, Kurdish tribal leaders began to submit, one by one, to Muslim authority and adopt Islam, with their tribespeople typically following suit.¹²

However, accounts regarding the nature and pace of this conversion process vary significantly. Some sources emphasize a relatively early and voluntary acceptance of Islam. Figures like Jaban al-Kurdi and his son Meymun al-Kurdi are cited as among the very first Kurdish converts to Islam, later recognized as Companions of the Prophet Muhammad.¹² Khalil al-Kurdi as-Semmani is noted as an early Kurdish Tabi'un (a follower of the Companions).¹² From this perspective, Kurds played a role in Islamic civilization relatively early on¹, and some argue that most Kurds accepted Islam by choice, integrating it into their identity.⁵ Another viewpoint suggests that for many Kurds, particularly those in Byzantine-influenced areas, conversion might have represented a shift from Christianity to Islam, both Abrahamic faiths.² Conversely, other perspectives, particularly those found in less official histories or reflecting minority experiences, depict the Islamization process as far more violent and protracted.⁵ These accounts speak of decades of conflict, numerous local uprisings by Kurdish populations against the invaders, and brutal suppression involving wholesale massacres and genocide.⁵ The example of Khwarazm, while not exclusively Kurdish but illustrative of the era's violence, being conquered and its population massacred three times after rebellions, is cited in this context.⁵ This narrative stresses resistance and coercion rather than voluntary acceptance.

It is highly probable that the reality of Islamization was complex and varied across different regions and tribes within Kurdistan. Conversion might have occurred more readily or peacefully in accessible plains or among tribes seeking political advantage within the new Islamic order.¹² In contrast, remote mountainous regions likely saw prolonged resistance, allowing older faiths to persist for longer periods.⁵ The conflicting narratives reflect not only

the multifaceted nature of historical conquests but also how this history has been remembered and interpreted through different lenses over time. Narratives emphasizing willing conversion align with integrating Kurdish history into a broader Islamic framework¹², while those emphasizing violence resonate with modern Kurdish nationalist sentiments or the historical experiences of non-Muslim minorities who faced persecution.⁵

5.3. Interaction with Pre-existing Faiths

The Islamization of Kurdistan was not an overnight event but a gradual process involving complex interactions with the diverse religious landscape that preceded it.¹² While Islam eventually became the majority religion, pre-Islamic beliefs and practices did not simply vanish. Elements of older Iranian faiths, such as Zoroastrianism or Mithraism, appear to have survived and influenced the development of local Islamic traditions, particularly within Sufi mysticism.⁵ Syncretic faiths like Yazidism and Yarsanism explicitly preserved significant pre-Islamic components while incorporating some Islamic (especially Sufi) elements, allowing them to endure as distinct religious communities.³ Over centuries, however, the dominance of Islam led to the steady decline of Zoroastrianism²¹ and likely diminished the public practice of other non-Islamic faiths.

5.4. Establishment of Islamic Institutions

The consolidation of Islam in Kurdistan brought about significant changes in the region's cultural and intellectual life, establishing a new style of civilization.¹² Madrasas (Islamic schools) became crucial centers for religious learning and scholarship. The first Kurdish madrasa is reported to have been established around the 950s in Hamadan, in what is now Iranian Kurdistan.¹² These institutions offered curricula that included Tafsir (Quranic exegesis), Hadith (Prophetic traditions), Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), logic, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and philosophy.¹² While Arabic was the primary language of scholarship initially, educationalists translated important texts into Kurdish for use in these madrasas.¹² Mosques were constructed, with the Menüçehr Mosque in Ani (built in 1072 by the Kurdish Shaddadid dynasty) being cited as the first mosque within the current borders of Turkey.¹² A distinct Kurdish Islamic intellectual tradition began to emerge, with figures like Bassami Kurdi (9th century), Evdilsemedê Babek (972-1019), and Ali Hariri (1009-1079) recognized as early Kurdish Islamic poets and authors.¹² Later centuries saw prominent Kurdish scholars like the historian and geographer Abulfeda (1273-1331), after whom a lunar crater is named¹², and the polymath Al-Dinawari (Dînewerî, d. 895), known in Europe as the "Kurdish Genius" for his contributions to various sciences.³² These developments indicate the integration of Kurdish society into the broader Islamic world and the emergence of a distinct Kurdish contribution within it.

6. Synthesis: Characterizing the Pre-Islamic Kurdish Religious Environment

The evidence drawn from historical accounts, religious studies, and cultural analysis reveals that the pre-Islamic religious environment of Kurdistan was exceptionally diverse and dynamic.

6.1. A Mosaic, Not a Monolith: The most salient feature was the coexistence of multiple distinct belief systems.¹ Rather than a single unified religion, the ancestors of the Kurds adhered to a spectrum of faiths. Dominant among these were ancient Iranian religions, primarily Zoroastrianism (Mazdayasna) and Mithraism, reflecting the region's deep ties to Iranian civilization.¹ Alongside these were indigenous faiths like Yazidism and Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq/Kakayi), which developed unique characteristics while preserving ancient roots.⁵ Abrahamic religions, namely Christianity (especially the Church of the East/Nestorianism) and Judaism, had established communities within Kurdistan.² Other belief systems like Manichaeism also found adherents¹, and underlying all these were likely older layers of local folk traditions and polytheistic or animistic beliefs.³

6.2. Regional Variation and Political Influence: The religious composition was likely not uniform across the vast and mountainous terrain of Kurdistan. Political boundaries played a role; areas under the influence of the Byzantine Empire probably had a higher concentration of Christians⁵, whereas regions controlled by the Sasanian Empire emphasized Zoroastrianism as the state religion.⁵ The rugged geography, particularly the mountain ranges, often served as refuges for heterodox groups or those seeking to preserve older traditions away from the control of centralized states.¹ Different tribes or communities may have favored specific beliefs, contributing to local variations.

6.3. Syncretism and Interaction: The close proximity of diverse religious groups fostered constant interaction, leading to significant borrowing and blending of beliefs and practices. This syncretism is particularly evident in the formation and doctrines of Yazidism and Yarsanism, which integrated elements from Iranian, Mesopotamian, Abrahamic, and Islamic mystical traditions.³ This suggests a degree of fluidity and mutual influence, although certain social boundaries, like the strict endogamy practiced by Yazidis, were maintained to preserve group identity.³

6.4. Shared Cultural Substratum: Despite the theological diversity, many of these faiths shared common threads, particularly those stemming from the broader Iranian cultural and religious milieu. Concepts such as reverence for natural elements (fire, sun, water), cyclical views of time, dualistic notions of cosmic struggle, and certain mythological motifs appear across different traditions.³ This shared substratum likely facilitated the processes of syncretism and contributed to the development of a distinct regional religious culture, even amidst doctrinal differences.

To illustrate this complex landscape, the following table provides a comparative overview of the major religious systems discussed:

Table 1: Comparative Overview of Major Pre-Islamic Religions/Belief Systems among Kurds

Religion/System	Putative	Core	Notable	Primary	Key
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m	Origins/Key Figures	Beliefs/Deities	Practices/Rituals	Regions/Periods of Influence (Pre-Islam)	Document Refs
Zoroastrianism (Mazdayasna)	Prophet Zoroaster (Zarathustra); Ancient Iranian roots	Monotheism (Ahura Mazda), Dualism (Good vs. Evil), Free Will, Heaven/Hell	Fire veneration, Purity rituals, Newroz festival, Avesta scripture, Good Thoughts/Words/Deeds	Widespread in Iranian empires (Median, Achaemenid, Sasanian); Dominant in many areas	1
Mithraism	Ancient Indo-Iranian deity Mithra; Mystery cult	Veneration of Mithra (light, contract), Sun worship, Cosmic order	Initiation rites, Communal meals (speculative), Possible bull sacrifice (in Roman form)	Practiced alongside/before Zoroastrianism, esp. Guran/Hewrami Kurds; Roman borderlands	1
Yazidism (Êzidîti)	Pre-Zoroastrian Iranian roots debated; Sheikh Adi (12th C) pivotal	Monotheism (Xwedê), Heptad of Angels, Tawûsî Melek (Peacock Angel), Reincarnation	Lalish pilgrimage, Qewls (hymns), Endogamy, Sun-facing prayer, Taboos, Sanjaqs (effigies)	Kurdish mountains (Lalish/Sinjar); Formalized 12th C onwards, roots much older	3
Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq)	Ancient W. Iranian roots (Yazdanism); Figures like Sultan Sahak	Divine Manifestations (Avatars), Truth/Purity, Inner Journey, Reincarnation	Esoteric teachings, Jam ceremonies, Music (Tanbur), Poetry, Gorani sacred language	W. Iran/Iraqi Kurdistan; Pre-Islamic roots, formalized later	3
Christianity	Jesus Christ; Apostles	Monotheism (God), Jesus as Son of God/Savior, Trinity (most forms)	Baptism, Eucharist, Prayer, Bible scripture	Byzantine-influenced areas (N/W Kurdistan); Armenian/Assyrian	2

				communities	
Judaism	Abraham, Moses	Monotheism (YHWH), Covenant, Torah Law	Circumcision, Sabbath, Dietary laws (Kashrut), Prayer, Synagogue worship	Ancient presence, Adiabene conversion (1st C CE); Kurdish Jewish communities	¹
Manichaeism	Prophet Mani (3rd C CE)	Radical Dualism (Light vs. Darkness), Gnostic elements, Syncretic (Zoroastrian, Christian)	Asceticism, Elect/Hearers distinction, Sacred writings	Present in Sasanian era; Shamsani group mentioned	¹
Local Traditions	Ancient indigenous roots	Polytheism/Animism, Nature spirits (Xudans), Reverence for specific sites/elements	Local rituals, Folk practices, Mythologies (e.g., snake symbolism)	Underlying layer across Kurdistan, potentially very ancient	³

7. Legacy and Continuity in Kurdish Culture and Identity

The diverse religious landscape of pre-Islamic Kurdistan did not simply disappear with the advent of Islam. Instead, elements of these ancient beliefs and practices have persisted, shaping Kurdish culture, contributing to the survival of distinct religious minorities, and influencing contemporary identity narratives.

7.1. Enduring Traditions in Culture and Folklore

Numerous aspects of contemporary Kurdish culture bear the imprint of pre-Islamic traditions. The most prominent example is the celebration of Newroz on the vernal equinox.³ While celebrated across the Iranian world, Newroz holds particular significance for Kurds, strongly associated with the myth of Kawa the Blacksmith overthrowing the tyrannical Zohak.¹ This narrative, symbolizing liberation, renewal, and resistance against oppression, connects directly to themes often linked with ancient Iranian cosmology (light vs. darkness) and resonates deeply with Kurdish historical experiences and national identity.³

Beyond Newroz, elements of older faiths likely survive in Kurdish folklore, social customs, music, and dance.³ Reverence for natural elements and specific geographical sites, such as

mountains and springs, which was characteristic of ancient Iranian and indigenous faiths, continues to hold importance in some Kurdish communities, particularly among Yazidis and Yarsanis.³ The potent symbolism of the snake (mar), deeply embedded in Kurdish mythology and visible in Yazidi iconography²⁷, likely connects to very ancient, pre-Islamic layers of belief concerning creation, protection, and life forces. Furthermore, some scholars suggest that elements of Mithraism or Zoroastrianism may have subtly influenced the practices and ethos of certain Sufi orders prevalent among Kurds, like the Naqshbandi and Qadiri, representing a subterranean continuity of older spiritual sensibilities within an Islamic framework.⁵

7.2. Survival and Revival of Non-Islamic Faiths

Crucially, some pre-Islamic religions have survived not just as cultural influences but as living faiths among Kurdish populations. Yazidism and Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq/Kakayi) have persisted for centuries as distinct ethno-religious communities, preserving their unique cosmologies, rituals, social structures, and sacred texts (oral and written) that directly link them to the pre-Islamic past.³ Despite facing historical persecution and pressure to convert⁵, these groups have maintained their identities, often in relative isolation within mountainous regions. In recent decades, there has also been a remarkable and widely reported revival of interest in Zoroastrianism among Kurds, particularly in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).¹¹ This resurgence is often framed by adherents as a return to the authentic, ancestral religion of the Kurds, predating Islam.²³ It appears fueled by several factors, including disillusionment with political Islam and sectarian violence, particularly following the rise of extremist groups like ISIS²¹, a desire to assert a distinct Kurdish identity separate from Arab, Turkish, and Persian neighbors²¹, and the relative religious tolerance promoted by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).⁶ New Zoroastrian organizations have formed (like Zend and Yasna in the KRI)²³, official recognition has been sought and sometimes granted²³, and the first official modern Zoroastrian fire temple in Iraqi Kurdistan was opened in Sulaymaniyah in 2016.¹¹ This revival, while numerically small, highlights the enduring symbolic power of the pre-Islamic past in contemporary Kurdish society. Kurdish philosophy websites also engage with figures like Zoroaster.³³

7.3. Themes of Religious Identity, Tolerance, and Conflict

Kurdistan's long history of religious diversity has created a complex legacy regarding identity, tolerance, and conflict. On the one hand, the region is often lauded for a tradition of coexistence and religious tolerance, particularly in comparison to other parts of the Middle East.² Some argue that the Kurds' own historical experiences of suffering, including persecution at the hands of fellow Muslims, have fostered a particular culture of acceptance towards religious minorities in modern times, especially within the KRI.² The KRG has passed laws protecting minority rights and actively promotes religious pluralism.⁶ On the other hand, this history is also deeply marked by religious conflict and the persecution of minorities.⁵ Yazidis, in particular, have faced numerous massacres throughout history, often justified by mischaracterizations of their faith.¹⁴ Zoroastrians endured oppression after the

Islamic conquest and during later periods like the Safavid and Qajar eras.²¹ Even among Muslims, sectarian differences (e.g., Shafi'i Kurds vs. Hanafi neighbors, Sunni vs. Alevi/Shia minorities) have sometimes played a role in identity formation and politics.¹²

The relationship between Kurdish nationalism and religion is particularly complex.¹³ Some secular Kurdish nationalists have historically downplayed the role of Islam or viewed it as less deeply rooted among Kurds compared to neighboring peoples¹³, sometimes promoting pre-Islamic faiths like Zoroastrianism as more authentically Kurdish.²¹ Conversely, Islam remains the religion of the vast majority of Kurds, and Islamic identity is deeply intertwined with Kurdish culture and history for many.⁵ Islamist movements also exist among Kurds, sometimes creating tensions with nationalist or secularist streams.³⁴

This dynamic reveals how the pre-Islamic religious heritage is not merely a matter of historical record but is actively engaged and politicized in contemporary Kurdish society. The revival of Zoroastrianism, linked explicitly to Kurdish nationalism and a rejection of perceived foreign or extremist Islamic influences²¹, exemplifies this trend. Similarly, the assertion of a distinct Yazidi identity, sometimes even emphasizing separation from a broader Kurdish identity¹⁸, is shaped by historical persecution and present-day concerns for survival and recognition. The invocation of ancient ancestors like the Medes⁹ or prophets like Zoroaster³⁰ in modern discourse serves to construct narratives of historical continuity and cultural distinctiveness that support contemporary political and identity projects. Understanding the legacy of pre-Islamic religions in Kurdistan therefore requires analyzing not only the direct continuity of beliefs and practices but also the ways in which this past is selectively remembered, interpreted, and deployed in response to modern challenges and aspirations.

8. Conclusion

8.1. Recapitulation of Findings

This analysis, based on the provided sources, confirms that the religious landscape of Kurdistan prior to the widespread adoption of Islam in the 7th century and subsequent centuries was characterized by profound diversity. It was not a monolithic entity but a complex mosaic of beliefs and practices. Key findings include:

- **Dominance of Iranian Traditions:** Ancient Iranian religions, notably Zoroastrianism (Mazdayasna) and Mithraism, held significant sway, reflecting Kurdistan's position within the greater Iranian cultural sphere and the influence of successive Persian empires.
- **Presence of Indigenous Faiths:** Unique indigenous religions, particularly Yazidism and Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq), flourished, preserving ancient beliefs often traced to pre-Zoroastrian or distinct western Iranic roots, while also demonstrating remarkable syncretism.
- **Abrahamic and Other Communities:** Established communities of Christians (primarily Church of the East/Nestorians and Armenians) and Jews existed alongside Kurdish populations, contributing to the region's pluralism. Manichaeism also had a presence.
- **Underlying Folk Traditions:** Deeper layers of local polytheistic, animistic, or pagan

beliefs, focused on nature reverence and specific sites, likely persisted alongside and influenced the major organized religions.

- **Complex Islamization:** The arrival of Islam initiated a gradual and multifaceted process of conversion, involving both voluntary acceptance and violent conquest, leading to Islam becoming the majority faith over time but not erasing pre-existing beliefs.
- **Enduring Legacy:** Pre-Islamic traditions left lasting marks on Kurdish culture (e.g., Newroz), folklore, and potentially Sufi practices. Yazidism and Yarsanism survived as distinct faiths, and Zoroastrianism is experiencing a modern revival linked to contemporary identity politics.

8.2. Final Synthesis: A Dynamic Heritage

In conclusion, the pre-Islamic religious environment of Kurdistan was a dynamic arena of coexistence, interaction, syncretism, and regional variation. Shaped by its geography as a cultural crossroads and its location within and between major empires, the region nurtured a unique blend of Iranian, indigenous, Abrahamic, and other belief systems. The Islamization process added another significant layer, interacting with and transforming, but not entirely supplanting, the older traditions. Understanding this complex religious history is fundamental not only for appreciating the deep cultural roots of the Kurdish people but also for comprehending the historical foundations of contemporary religious diversity, identity formations, and ongoing inter-communal dynamics in the region. The study of these ancient faiths reveals not merely a vanished past, but foundational elements whose echoes continue to resonate in Kurdish culture, society, and politics today.

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