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British travellers, the Kurds, and Kurdistan: A brief literary history, c. 1520-1680

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Abstract

This essay investigates accounts of the Kurds and Kurdistan by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century British travellers to the Ottoman and Safavid empires by placing them alongside contemporary Kurdish and Iranian chronicles by Sharaf al-Din Khan Bedlisi (1597) and Eskandar Beg Monshi (1616-29). Although considerable attention has been paid in recent scholarship to early-modern British travellers' accounts of the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities of the Levant, Middle East, and Persia, the Kurds have been entirely ignored. Early British travellers most often encountered Kurds in and around Aleppo, where the Levant Company established its headquarters during the 1580s. Remarkably few, however, commented on the Kurdish presence. Further east, Anthony Shirley and his companions on their mission to visit Shah Abbas in 1598 recognised Kurdistan to be a province between Baghdad and Qazvin, and regarded the Kurds as uncivilised and rootless vagabonds; for Shirley himself they provided a means to magnify his own importance. While earlier Venetian merchants "described Kurdistan and Kurds with perspicacity and in detail" (Galletti, 1995: 99), the accounts by the first British travellers alternated between description and fabrication.

Keywords: Kurdistan; Kurds; Ottoman Empire; Safavid Empire; historiography; British travellers; early modern travel writing.

ABSTRACT IN KURMANJI

Gerokên Brîtanî, kurd û Kurdistan: dîrokeke nivîskî ya kurt, c. 1520-1680

Ev gotar li ser wan neql û berhemên derbarê kurdan û Kurdistanê de ye ku ji teref gerokên brîtanî (îngilîz) yên sedsalên 16 û 17an ên li nav împeratoriyên Osmanî û Safewî hatine nivîsandin; gotar, wan dide ber berhemên dîrokî yên kurd û îranî yên hevdemên wan, wek Şerefxanê Bidlîsî (1597/8) û Îskender Beh Monşî (1616-29). Digel ku di xebatên nûjen de baleke girîng hatiye dayîn bo zanyariyên gerokên Brîtanî yên serdema berî-modern li ser civakên Xirîstiyan, Yahûdî û Misilman ên Levant, Rojhilata Navîn û Îranê de, kurd bi temamî hatine piştguhkirin. Gerokên brîtanî yên ewil bi piranî li Heleb û derdora wê rastî kurdan hatine ji ber ku Şîrketa Levantê di salên 1580an de baregeha xwe li wir ava kiribû. Lê belê, gelek kêm ji wan behsa hebûna kurdan kiriye. Bêtir li aliyê rojhilat, Anthony Shirley û hevrêyên wî di serdana Şah Ebbas ya 1580an de, Kurdistan wek parêzgeheke di navbera Bexda û Qezwînê de destnîşan kiriye û kurd wek tolazên hov û bêesl dîtine, û ji bo Shirley bi xwe ew amrazek bûn ku girîngiya xwe qat-qat zêdetir bike. Tucarên Venedîkî yên ewil "Kurdistan û kurdan bi hişmendî û hûrbînî terîf kirine" (Galleti, 1995:99), lê belê, neql û terîfên gerokên brîtanî di navbera terîf û derewan de diguherin.

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ABSTRACT IN SORANI

Gerîde Berîtanîyekan, Kurd û Kurdistan; puxteyek le mêjû 1520-1680

Em nusîne kêwmallî mijarekanî Kurd û Kurdistan le sedekanî şazdehem û Ḧevdehem dekat, le jêr roşnayî nêrrînî gerrîde Berîtanyayiyekan le herdû împiratorî 'Usmanî û Sefewîda be leberçawgirtinî herdû şakarî Şerefedîn Xanî Bedlîsî (1597/8) û Eskender Begî Munşî (1616-29) herçende zorbey kare zanistîyekan tîşkyan xistûwete ser karekanî gerrîdeBberîtanîyekan le berebeyanîy modêrneda; bellam ziyatir leser Cûwekan, Krîstiyanekan, Musellmanekan le Şam, Rojhellatî Nawerast û willatî Fars rawestawn û betewawî Kurdyan piştgwê xistûwe. Gerrîde berîtanîye berayiyekan zorcar çawyan be kurd le naw yan ledewrî Ḧeleb kewtuwe; katê ke mekoy serekîy Kompanyay Şam damezra le sallî 1580kanda. Bellam zor be kemî leser bûnî kurd lewnaweda dwawin. Ziyatir bewer rojhellat, Anthony Shirley û hawrêkanî le rêgey seferyanda bo çawpêkewtin be Şa 'Ebas le sallî 1598, Kurdistanyan be wîlayetêk nasanduwe lenêwan Beẍdad û Qezwînda û Kurdanyan wek xellkêkî namedenî û koçer nasanduwe. Mebestî Shirley le derxistinî basî Kurdan ziyatir bo nîşandanî giringîy xoy buwe. Bellam bazirgane Vînîsyayiyekan wesfî Kurd û Kurdistanyan be deqîqtir û dûrudrêjtir kirduwe. (Galletti 1995: 99), baskirdinî Kurdan lelayen gerrîde berîtanyayiyekanewe ziyatir wesfkarîy wirûkeşane buwe.

ABSTRACT IN ZAZAKI

Raywanê brîtanyayijî, kurdî û Kurdîstan: tarîxo edebîyo kilm, dorê 1520-1680î

Na meqale raporê ke Împeratorîyanê Osmanî û Sefewîyan de hetê raywananê brîtanyayijan yê seserranê şîyês û hewtêsinan ra derheqê kurd û Kurdîstanî de virazîyayî, înan ser o cigêrayîş kena û ê raporî kronîkanê hemdeman yê kurdan û îranijan yê Şerefxanê Bedlisî (1597/8) û Îskender Beg Munşî (1616-29) de nana pêver o. Herçiqas ke cigêrayîşanê peyênan de xeylê eleqe musnîyaye raporanê raywananê modernanê verênan yê Brîtanya ke derheqê komelanê xirîstîyan, yahudî û muslumanan yê Levant, Rojhelatê Mîyanênî û Îranî de virazîyayî, kurdî pêro pîya ameyî peygoş kerdene. Raywananê brîtanyayijan ê verênan kurdî zafane Haleb û derûdorê ci de dîyî, cayo ke Şîrketê Levantî serranê 1580an de merkezê xo nabî ro. Çi esto ke înan ra zaf tay kesan estbîyayîşê kurdan ser o şîrove kerd. Hîna zaf hetê rojhelatî de, Anthony Shirley û hevalê ey serra 1598î de kewtbî mîsyon ke Şah Abbasî zîyaret bikerê. Înan Kurdîstan sey wîlayetê mabênê Bexdad û Qazvînî de nas kerd û çimê înan de kurdî gewendeyê bê ristim û bê medenîyet bîyî. Seba Shirleyî kurdî tena wasitayêk bîyê ke pê înan muhîmîya xo berz bikero. Herçiqas ke bazirgananê venedîkijan “Kurdîstan û kurdî bi aqilo tuj û teferuat tarîf kerd” (Galletti, 1995: 99), raporanê raywananê brîtanyayijanê verênan mabênê terîf û pêardişî de ca girewt.

Introduction

> Some adde unto Armenia in their modern Mappes and Discoveries, besides the Turcomani a people that came thither out of Tartaria, the Curdi, both still retaining the Tartarian and Arabian manner of life in tentes, without Cities, Townes, or houses.
>
> Samuel Purchas, *Purchas his Pilgrimage* (1613: 239).

British understanding of the Kurds and Kurdistan has long been intermittent and, until the late twentieth century, often unreliable. Writing in 1921, Rupert Hay (1921), the British officer charged with taking control of the newly-defined district of Erbil from the Ottomans – which includes all the territories of today’s autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan region – reckoned that, until the First World War, “most people” had never heard of the Kurds, “or heard of [them] only as the

wildest of brigands" (2). Viewing the Kurds as lawless brigands has a very long pedigree (James, 2016), and Hay was doubtless correct in his assessment of how little the general British public knew about them. Yet since the late eighteenth century, as Saad Eskander (2010) observes, "a number of British explorers and officials of the East India Company began to make journeys to various parts of Ottoman and Qajar Kurdistan" (2), generated by motives both commercial and strategic.

After all, Kurdistan lay directly across the fastest over-land routes from Europe into northern India, and fears that France, and later Russia, had designs on British possessions in India made Kurdistan a place of considerable interest and importance. By the early nineteenth century, a concerted effort to compile as much information as possible about the Kurdish people and the lands they inhabited was underway: the result, in part, can be found in the nine thousand pages of documents from the National Archives recently published in facsimile form as *Records of the Kurds: Territory, Revolt and Nationalism, 1831-1979* (Burdett, 2016). While the political classes in Whitehall, Basra, and Calcutta for whom these reports were produced and among whom they circulated were relatively well informed about the Kurds and Kurdistan, ordinary readers had to rely on published accounts by travellers, mostly ambitious young men keen to boast about their adventurous journeys between Britain and India.[1]

The purpose of the current essay is to offer a critical survey of accounts of the Kurds and Kurdistan by the British travellers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who preceded these formal and informal agents of empire. How and in what ways did these writers account for the existence of the Kurds? What features of Kurdish life drew their attention? In an age when Britain was a relatively insignificant island nation attempting to compete with the might of France and imperial Spain through its commercial and diplomatic alliances with the Ottomans, how did writing about the Kurds contribute to emerging narratives of British nationalist fantasies and ambitions? For Edward Said, "modern Orientalism" was born in the age of Napoleon. Before this, Said (1995) admits, France and Britain in particular were engaged in a process of discovery, of knowledge gathering, one that gradually came to entail a sense of European "*positional superiority*" (7) that would eventually justify imperial domination. "The Orient," he reminds us, "was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be 'Oriental' in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it *could be ... made* Oriental" (5-6). In what ways did these early travellers represent their

[1] Hay himself seems to have been put in command of Erbil province with no better information than he could gather from two travelogues: Rich's *Narrative of a Residence in Koordistan* (1836), and Soane's *To Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in Disguise* (1912) (Hay, 1921: vii). Rich and Soane were unusual; both spoke numerous oriental languages and both were keenly sympathetic to the Kurdish people.

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"discovery" of the Kurds? Did their writings purport to offer new empirical knowledge of a people, fit the Kurds into previously known categories, or fabricate and fantasise their encounters with the inhabitants of what was to them new, and undoubtedly "Eastern," terrain?

Kurds and Kurdistan: who and where?

In 1613, writing in the idiom of his era, the great compiler of travel writing Samuel Purchas (1613) declared Kurds to be among the "Discoveries" made by "modern" travellers (239). The first British traveller to report encountering Kurds was the merchant Ralph Fitch (in Hakluyt, 1910) who casually describes visiting "Merdin" in 1591, reporting that this city "is in the countrey of the Armenians; but now, there dwell in that place a people which they call *Cordies*, or *Curdi*" (vol. 3: 315). To the early-modern British, the Kurds were an obscure novelty. Before Fitch first encountered them, however, glimpses of Kurds had occasionally appeared in English translations of Continental European texts under a bewildering variety of names – Cordyns, Cordos, Cordies, Coords, Curdi, Curdes, Corbi, Curdians, Courdines, Gurdians, Carduchi, Gordieini.[2] Such an assortment is perhaps hardly surprising. While Purchas voiced a popular early-modern conception of the Kurds as Tatar Turkmen (Alsancakli, 2016), others assimilated them to the world of classical learning by associating the Kurds with the Carduchoi encountered by Xenophon in what would become the Roman province of Corduene (Nöldeke, 1898).

Uncertainty appears in the Venetian Marco Polo's (in Purchas, 1613) observation that the Kurds are "Mungrels in Religion" (66). But a degree of specificity does emerge in the earliest printed reference to Kurds to appear in English. Published between 1518 and 1520, Richard Pynson's (c. 1518/20) translation of a history of the Mongols composed around 1307 by the Armenian nobleman, monk, and traveller Het'um of Korikos (Hayton of Corycus),[3] informed early British readers that:

> In this realm of Mesopotamy inhabet christen men, some be Siryens, some Armyns and the other sarasyns. The syriens and the sarasyns of the sayd countrey medyll with no dede of armes, but they be shepardes and labourers of the grounde for the most part, except some that

[2] Kurds appear in English language translations of histories by Minadoi (1595); Soranzo (1603); Botero (1608); and D'Avity (1615); all published before *Purchas His Pilgrimes*. The unusual "Corbi" appears in the translation of Barbaro's "Travels to Tana and Persia," by William Thomas, Clerk of the Council to Edward VI, at British Library Royal MS 17C X (c. 1551-1552), f. 62v, f. 63r and f. 63v.

[3] The British Library Catalogue dates the ms 1518-20. Since both the title and final paragraph of Pynson's work name Edward, Duke of Buckingham as the inspiration for the project, *Here begynneth* must have been printed before 1520, in which year the Duke fell from favour only to be executed for treason the next year. In addition to Pynson's translation, a separate English translation is included as the fifth work in a manuscript collection, "History of the Crusades," in the British Library, MS Royal 18.B.XXVI.

> dwelled in a country that is called Meredyn [Mardin] the which be good archers And they ben called Cordyns. (folio IVv).

Although his description of this mixture of peoples is far from clear, Het'um seems to be distinguishing the agricultural communities of Christian Assyrians and Armenians who lived among "sarasyns," presumably Turkmen and Arab Muslims, from the militarised tribal Kurds living in the mountain areas around Mardin.[4] Later generations of travellers from Britain will likewise continue to associate Kurds with the Parthians,[5] the highly skilled equestrian archers who famously repulsed the imperial Roman army as recounted in Plutarch's life of Crassus, though any such relation between Kurds and Parthians remains entirely speculative (Minorsky, 1913-36: 1133-34).

Most early-modern British travellers often failed to notice Kurds even when they met them. Similarly, uncertainty over geographical terms at the time meant that British writers remained rather vague about where Kurdistan was located. They knew that Marco Polo (in Frampton, 1579) included "*Curdistan*" among the "eyght Kingdomes" of Persia, locating it "towards the South" (15), but would not have recognised that Polo was describing the Shabankara Kurds of Fars, who were later moved to Khorasan by Shah Abbas.[6] In 1598 William Parry (1601), the first English traveller to write about actually being in Kurdistan, also listed Kurdistan among the kingdoms that were "part of Persia," but without specifying where it began and ended (26). By 1673, the Scottish cartographer John Ogilby (1673) could attempt a geographical account of Kurdistan by combining classical geography with recent European travel writing. He omits the Kurdish-inhabited enclave of northern Syria; for him, the "*Curdes* are a people who have their Residence in the Mountains" that divide "*Turky* from *Persia*," stretching from "*Aderbeitzan*" to "the Country of *Babylon*" or Baghdad. "Nature," Ogilby continues, "seems to have delighted her self in making this Country as a Bulwark between these two great Realms of *Persia* and *Turky*, as it was anciently a Boundary between that of the *Romans* and *Parthians*" (102). Most of the early British travellers who ventured through Kurdistan, so defined, while en route to Persia or India and wrote about their travels, such as John Eldred, John Mildenhall, George Strachan, and the intrepid Thomas Coryate, never mention Kurds or describe themselves as being in Kurdistan.

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[4] "Armyns" may of course refer to the Arameans, though unlikely since we find "Armins" in Heytoun's discussion of Syria clearly referring to Armenians; however, see Lipinski (2009).

[5] Cartwright (1611: 20-21) already questioned the Parthian identification, as does Minadoi. In his much reprinted *Cosmographie*, Peter Heylyn (1652) continues confidently to report how, in Asia, "pagans" are to be found "onely in the mountainous Counteys bordering on *Armenia*; inhabited by a people whom they call *Curdi*, or the *Corduenes*, supposed to be descended from the antient *Parthians*," (3: 49). See also Ogilby (1673: 102-3).

[6] See Buchner and Bosworth (2012), "Shabankara," and see Le Strange (1915: 137-8).

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Ralph Fitch proves exceptional here since he had at least observed and recorded the "Curdi" of Mardin.

Biddulph and Lithgow: the fabrication concerning the Kurds of Aleppo

Of the greater number of sixteenth and seventeenth century merchants, consuls, chaplains and others associated with the Levant Company, who resided in Aleppo, and who would have had direct dealings with local Kurds, very few of them seem to have noticed them. A possible exception was Robert Huntington, Company chaplain in Aleppo between 1670 and 1682. An energetic collector of manuscripts, Huntington's donations to the Bodleian Library in Oxford of 1680 included an autograph copy of Sharaf al-Din Khan's *Sharafnama*.[7] However, most of those early merchants and travellers who wrote accounts of spending time in Aleppo were silent on the topic of the Kurds, and that silence is curious since the Kurdish community centred in Killis, about forty-five miles north of Aleppo, was highly conspicuous at the turn of the seventeenth century when the Levant Company was establishing itself.

Substantial Kurdish communities had settled in Syria since the crusades. Of Kurdish ancestry himself, Salah al-Din in 1187 had brought Kurdish tribal regiments to the siege of Jerusalem and they subsequently flourished in and around Damascus and Aleppo throughout the Ayyubid dynasty (c. 1171-1260) and beyond (Tejel, 2009). In 1516 the Ottoman Sultan Selim I (r. 1512-20) conquered Syria and Jerusalem with the assistance of Kurdish forces from Killis led by one Qasim Beg. When Sultan Süleyman came to power in 1520, Qasim Beg's son, Janbulad Beg, successfully commanded Ottoman armies to victories in Belgrade, Rhodes, and Moldavia and in return was named hereditary governor of Killis on condition of keeping the region's Kurds obedient to the Porte: thus began the dynasty of the Janbuladzada or Canbuladogullari (meaning Janbulad's sons) ([Bedlisi], 1868-1875: 2.1.69-77). Among his many sons, Janbulad Beg favoured Husayn Khan, his fifth, who in 1604 was appointed Ottoman governor of Aleppo.[8] While Masters (1999: 31) reports that the clan later split, one branch continuing to influence regional politics into the eighteenth century while the other spread into Lebanon to form the Druze clan of Jumblatt, Abu-Husayn (1999) disputes the latter claim.

British merchants and travellers living in or passing through Aleppo could not avoid meeting Kurds. Those landing at the port of Iskenderun would be accompanied by Kurdish guides over the Belen pass, and would travel through Kurdish villages on the way to Aleppo. Fynes Moryson, who buried his brother

[7] Currently catalogued as MS. Hunt. Donat. 13; see Sachau and Ethe (1889: 164), Madan, et al. (eds.) (1980: 2: 743), and Alsancakli (2015: 142) for the fullest and most detailed account of this autograph copy.
[8] On Husayn and his appointment as *beylerbey* of Aleppo, see Griswold (1983: 86-99).

in Belen, never once noticed that there were Kurds in the area. Yet in 1599, the Levant Company chaplain William Biddulph (1609) records:

> In the Mountaines betwixt *Scanderone* and *Aleppo*, there are dwelling a certaine kind of people called at this day *Coords*, comming of the race of the ancient *Parthians*, who worship the Devill, and allege for their reason in so doing, that God is a good man, and will doe no man harme, but that the Devill is bad, and must be pleased lest he hurt them. (41)

Biddulph's journey took him south of the nearby Afrin valley where there was a substantial community of Yazidi Kurds (Lescot, 1938: 199-217; Guest, 1987: 53-4; Rycaut, 1680: 93). Although Biddulph never again mentions Kurds, his account reveals typical confusions about the local Kurdish community: imagining that all Kurds were Yazidis, and that Yazidis worship the devil. These misunderstandings would continue among subsequent generations of British and other European travellers. However, even in so brief an account, Biddulph manages to generate further confusion. He continues:

> There is also, although not in the direct way, (yet for safety and pleasantnesse of the way, it is sometimes taken in the way to *Aleppo*) an ancient City called *Achilles* [Killis], where one *Asan Bashaw* ruleth like a king (paying duties to the *Turkes*) successively from his predecessors, continuing of the house of *Sanballat*, who hindred the building of the Temple of *Jerusalem*, who is called to this day, *Eben Sumbolac*, that is, the sonne of *Sanballat*: and all his kinred call one another, *Ammiogli* ["paternal cousin" in Turkish], that is, *Brother Ammonite*; for they account themselves of the race of the Ammonites. This *Asan Bashaw* is now old, and (for the most part) referreth all matters of government to his kinsman *Useph Bege*, that is, *Lord Joseph*. (41)

Biddulph regularly preferred the Bible to explain facts on the ground rather than what he himself witnessed or could learn from local informants. His notion that the Kurdish emirs of Killis claimed ancestry from the Ammonites shows considerable ingenuity in this regard. He has evidently confused the Kurdish emir Janbulad Beg, the father of Husayn Khan who had assisted the Ottoman Sultan Selim I in capturing Jerusalem in 1516, with the biblical Sanballat, who allied with Tobiah the Ammonite to oppose the construction of the second Temple in 445 BCE (*Nehemiah* 4-6).[9] Thanks to his inventiveness, Biddulph fails to recognise that the Janbuladzada were Kurdish. When Husayn Khan was appointed governor of Aleppo in 1604, the English chaplain cannot have failed to notice how months of civil disorder followed because the previous governor, Nasuh Pasha, had refused to hand over the citadel to

[9] In addition to *Nehemiah*, "Sanballat is mentioned in the Elephantine Aramic papyri as Governor of Samaria," How (1928: 295).

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Husayn. Such was the scale of the violence and months of unrest that in October, the Portuguese traveller Pedro Teixeira (1710) reported from as far away as Baghdad that "no Body durst travel till there was News from Aleppo, which had been 3 Months besieg'd, because the *Bassa* that was in it, would not deliver it up to the Besieger, tho' he brought positive Orders from the *Grand Signior*, there being some private Quarrel between them. During the Siege the Inhabitants endur'd much Famine and other Hardships, as I was afterwards told there" (43). Teixeira made no further comment on the nature of the "private quarrel," but Biddulph makes no mention even of the disturbances and famine, nor that a Kurdish chief had controversially been appointed governor.

Perhaps even more extraordinary is the garbled version of how Husayn Khan came to be executed that the Scottish travel writer William Lithgow added, in 1632, when revising his previously published account of visiting Aleppo in 1611. While governor, Husayn was ordered by Cigalazade Yusuf Sinan Pasha to summon his Kurdish troops and join an army that was defending Ottoman lands against efforts by Shah Abbas I (r. 1588-1629) to retake parts of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan ceded by the Peace of Constantinople (1590). Husayn arrived too late to prevent the Ottoman defeat at a battle near Urmia in western Azerbaijan in November 1605. In a rage, Sinan Pasha accused Husayn of treason and had him summarily executed (Griswold, 1983: 108). In 1632, Lithgow (1906), when revising his account previously published in 1614, claimed to have been in Aleppo and "an eye witnesse to that funeral feast" (108)[10] held for the decapitated Kurdish emir even though the battlefield execution took place nearly a thousand kilometres away and fully six years before his visit to Aleppo.

The Shirley Expedition: encounters with thievish and migratory cave and tent dwelling troublemakers

If "discovering" the Kurds allowed and perhaps even encouraged fabrication, imaginative speculation, and self-serving reportage, in the case of Anthony Shirley similar tendencies served programmatic personal ambitions. Published in 1613, fourteen years after he left Persia, Shirley's *Relation of his Travels into Persia* is remarkable for a number of reasons. Alongside accounts by his travelling companions William Parry, George Manwaring, and the Frenchman Abel Pinçon, it provides one of the earliest British reports of encountering Kurds beyond northern Syria in territories recognised to be Kurdistan.

All three Englishmen disapproved of the place and the people, while Pinçon often remarks on the beauty of the countryside. Parry (1601) considered Kurdistan "theevs country," and portrayed the Kurds as "addicted to thieving,

[10] Lithgow's earlier brief report of visiting Aleppo appears in *Discourse of a Peregrination* (1614: sigs. L4v-M).

not much unlike the wilde Irish" (18, 17). Manwaring (1933) agreed and considered "Curdia" "a very thievish and brutish country," inhabited by uncivilised people (196). While offering an eye-witness portrait of the Kurds and their nomadic ways, Manwaring must have relied on local informants to explain how they enjoyed two harvests a year:

> They have no houses, but live in tents and caves; they till their corn twice a year, and remove from place to place with their tents; they ride commonly upon cows and bulls, and keep their abiding, for the most part, by a little river called Hadno; their apparel is very coarse, for they wear only a shirt, and over that a rough felt coat, and on their heads a clout tied: they would come into our company sometimes forty, sometimes more or less; and, except we did look well unto them, they would filch and steal anything they could lay their hands upon. (196)

Accusations of theft were already a well-established perception of the Kurds, whether the Shirley party were aware of it or not. As Boris James (2014) has shown, although Kurdish tribes engaged in various activities including pastoralism, agriculture, and trade, "the image the Arabic and Persian sources transmit of them is essentially of bandits and raiders" (281), while the representation of Kurds as highwaymen continued from the late thirteenht century well beyond the medieval period.

For his part, Anthony Shirley (1613) summarily dismissed the "*Courdines*" as the "scum of Nations" (51), yet as we will see, his account also attributed them with considerable political influence. His retrospective observations about Kurds and Kurdistan were heavily shaped both by the reasons that had brought him there and his sense of his own importance. Late in 1598, together with his younger brother Robert, Anthony had set out for Persia in search of military employment, later claiming that he had hopes of persuading Shah Abbas to form alliances with Christian princes to oust the Ottomans from Europe in exchange for direct trade with England. Less flattering accounts suggest that the Shirley brothers were hoping to improve their family fortunes following several failed attempts at doing so through piracy. Whatever their initial motives might have been, within a few months of their arrival in Qazvin, Shah Abbas sent Anthony off with sumptuous gifts to woo the support of European powers while Robert stayed on in Persia; he was not exactly a hostage (Raiswell, 2004).

Although Anthony's efforts failed to gather European support, in 1603 Shah Abbas did go to war against the Ottomans at which the London press elevated the Shirley brothers into celebrities. Their adventures were broadcast in several popular pamphlets and even reached the public theatre in a play performed throughout the season of 1607 (Parr, 1995). Years later in his *Relation,* the manuscript of which he passed to his brother Robert in 1611 (Ross, 1933: xix), Anthony relates an anecdote about a tribe of Kurds in order to explain how,

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back in 1599, it was his personal influence over Shah Abbas that made him decide to declare war against the Ottomans.

Shirley (1613) first mentions Kurds when recounting his journey from Baghdad to Qazvin. He describes Kurdistan as a mountainous wasteland "governed by a Prince of the *Courdines*, called *Cobatbeague*" (25). "The fruitfuller parts," he conceded

> were used by certain people, called *Courdines*, living in Tents, knowing no other fruit of the earth, but what belonged to the sustenance of their cattell, upon the milke, butter, and flesh, of which they live, ruled by certain particular Princes of their owne, which give partly an obedience to the *Turke*, and part to the *Persian*, as they are nearest the Confines of the one or the other. Yet in that simplicitie of living (not being without the contagion of all Mankind, of all Provinces, and of all States, ambition of getting, superiority, and larger Dominion) some Warres daily grow in amongst them, even to the extirpation of a whole Nation: As wee found freshly, when we passed by one of those Princes, called *Hiderbeague*, all whose people were devoured by the sword, or carried away captive by *Cobatbeague*; and himselfe remained, onely with some twenty soules, in certain poore Holdes in a Rocke. (27-28)

Writing some months before Shirley and his companions arrived, Sharaf al-Din Khan Bedlisi offers a rather fulsome account of Qobad Beg, an emir of the powerful Kalhor Kurds. Bedlisi (1868-1875) describes him as "the spokesman of his century and the unique pearl of the world for his courage, his elegance, and his beauty," continuing:

> Today he possesses his hereditary domains and his acquisitions with their entailments from the confines of Deinewer, of Bilour and Bag'irlou right up to the limits of Baghdad (the city of salvation). He has no second in the number of cattle and extensive pastures, of rich treasures and great wealth that he has progressively amassed, nor in respect of his numerous followers and supporters. (2.1.181)

Like his father Umar Beg, Qobad Beg was staunchly loyal to the Ottomans, so Shirley had every reason to fear and despise him. Parry (1601) explains how, while still in Baghdad, the English party received warning that Sultan Mehmed III (r. 1595-1603) had learned of their intentions and issued orders for them to be seized and sent to Constantinople. To avoid arrest by the Ottoman governor of Baghdad, he writes, "we stole slily away" (16) and joined a caravan of Persian pilgrims who were heading due north up the Tigris valley to visit the holy shrines of Samarra. This was not the obvious route to Qazvin by which the Shirley party were expected to be travelling, so the troops sent from Baghdad

to find and seize them failed in their mission.[11] But the danger was far from over as they turned to head eastward. Parry (1601) explains how, on enquiring from the Persians "whether we had any more of the Turkish Governors to passe," they learned that there is "one (and that very mighty) called *Cobat-bag*, by whome we must of necessity passe" (16).

> Yet, as God and good fortune would, sum of them (better bethinking themselves) remembred another way, through one *Heyder-bags* country; who was neighbor to the other, howbeit at continual wars with him, in regard wherof we had good hope he would ayde us. (17)

Adjusting their route, good fortune continued to favour them as they journeyed onward. Spotting a "troupe of horses coming towardes us, which wee verily imagined to be the enemy," Parry (1601) is relieved to report that the horsemen prove to be followers of Haydar Beg "who came to our succours, and safely to convoy us through the same, having hadde some intelligence before of our progresse that way." (17)

Of Haydar Beg and his mountain fortress, Manwaring (1933) offers a far more enthusiastic account than Shirley's dismissive remarks:

> we came to a place worth the noting called Hitherbagg, where there did inhabit a king called by the name of the King of Hitherbagg. There is but only one town, and it is walled round very strongly with a rock of stone, so that it is invincible: there this king doeth live very gallantly, being a man of so goodly personage as we saw in all our travels: he holdeth always a league with the King of Persia, and setteth the Great Turk at defiance, for the Turks would fain conquer that place, but cannot. There we pitched our tents two days, in a pleasant valley under the town, accompanied with the king and his followers, who did sport with us, and used us very kindly. (198)

Unlike Shirley's characterisation of a beleaguered warrior hiding out with a few followers among some "poore Holdes in a Rocke," Manwaring praises this "gallant" and independent leader in command of "a very strong castle, planted with ordinance" that "doth command all around about it." He relates how, when "the Turk did send a great army against it," after only "one day and a night service they were fain to fly away," with the loss of "the better half" of the men. (198)

While varying in detail, these differing accounts of the journey from Baghdad indicate that Haydar Beg's impenetrable fortress was situated somewhere between Qasr-e Shirin and Bisotun in today's Kermanshah province.[12] What

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[11] See Manwaring (1933: 195) and Shirley (1613: 25) for slightly differing accounts.
[12] See Pinçon (1933: 148-150); Manwaring (1933: 197-99); Parry (1601: 16-17); Shirley (1613: 25-28).

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remains uncertain is who Haydar Beg might have been. Bedlisi offers an account that is remarkably similar to Manwaring's of how in 1595, just four years before the Shirley party arrived, the recently appointed Ottoman governor of Tabriz, Khizir Pasha, "marched against the fortified castle of Sheykh Haydar," emir of the Mokri tribe, "with the intention of taking revenge and destroying his castle." According to Bedlisi's (1868-1875) account, when confronted by the "valiant Kurdish warriors" under Haydar's command and obliged to witness the slaughter of his own officers and troops, Khizir Pasha, "preferring exercise to rest, retreated the very same day" (2.1.152-3). Although nominally subject to the Ottomans and with tribal lands further north around Maraga in eastern Azerbaijan, Sheykh Haydar of the turbulent Mokri tribe, according to Eskandar Beg Monshi's *History of Shah 'Abbas* (*Tarikh-e alamara-ye Abbasi*, wr. 1616-29), had rebelled against the Ottomans and "on several occasions sent envoys to the Safavid court to declare his loyalty to the Shah" (1978: 2: 1016). Such declarations of loyalty, often disingenuous, were common amongst Kurdish princes of the border. So whether it was Sheykh Haydar of the Mokri they encountered or a different Kurdish leader named Haydar, for the beleaguered English travellers on the run from Qobad Beg, here indeed was an ally.

Nevertheless, for Anthony Shirley, the Kurds primarily served as an opportunity for fulsomely praising Shah Abbas for his personal nobility. Shirley (1613) observes how the rebellious "Prince of *Hamadan*" not long ago "called in a strength of the *Courdines*, to his assistance," but at the mere approach of Abbas and his army, the Kurdish rebels "presently vanished, every man retyring to his best knowne safe-gard" (38, 43). Such is the charisma of a divinely sanctioned leader, according to Shirley, that his enemies flee at the very sight of him. There is no record of a "Prince of *Hamadan*" rebelling against Abbas and enlisting Kurdish support. However, when compiling his *Relation* years after he had left Persia, Anthony may well have been recycling and elaborating analogous tales of rebellious Kurdish tribes reported to him by Robert.

Writing after the fact, Anthony Shirley's interest in the Kurds is directly related to his admiration for the Safavids and his desire to celebrate their victories reclaiming territory from the Ottomans during the 1603-1618 wars. Convinced that the Shi'a rulers of Persia were providential agents destined to overthrow the Sunni Ottomans for the benefit of Christian Europe, he recounts how during his brief stay at the Safavid court, the arrival of ten thousand migratory Kurds precipitated the war. According to Shirley (1613), Shah Abbas had risen to power because "God his great providence" had "mightily preserved" him from Ottoman treachery, "but the best was, the more the [Ottoman] Prince hated him, the more his subjects loved him, having received newes at *Cassan* [Kashan], of ten thousand soules of *Courdins* which had abandoned their possessions under the *Turke*, and required some waste land of him to inhabit

in; which he had given them" (75-76). According to Shirley, the arrival of Mehmed Agha, the Ottoman General of the Janissaries in Baghdad, demanding the return of the Kurds so infuriated Shah Abbas that he followed Shirley's advice, summarily dismissed Mehmed Agha and declared war against the Ottomans. This episode involving a tribe of Kurdish migrants is not recorded by Eskandar Beg Monshi or any other contemporary chronicler, though Kurdish tribes regularly switched sides between the Ottomans and Safavids.[13]

For Shirley, telling the story of ten thousand disaffected Kurds serves to emphasise his own importance, illustrates how the rising star of Shah Abbas drew supporters, while inadvertently indicating how important the Kurdish tribes of the border were. Although claiming personal responsibility for advising the Shah to go to war, he portrays the Kurds precipitating a fifteen-year war between the two empires of the region. In this account, the Kurds appear both generalised and abstract; at once an obscure and beleaguered tribal leader hiding among the rocks, a group of indigent migrants whose lives are in the hands of greater powers, yet who provide cause for a war that was progressing in the Safavids' favour when Shirley's *Relation* appeared in 1613.

Cartwright: the preacher's travels

The most detailed visual description of encountering Kurds by an early-modern British traveller appeared in the account by John Cartwright whose reasons for travelling remain obscure. He met the Shirleys in 1599 and capitalised on the popularity of their celebrity in his 1611 travelogue, *The Preacher's Travels*, claiming the English brothers were "the onely meanes that stirred up the Persian king to take up armes against the great Turke" (78). This is just what Anthony Shirley wanted people to believe. Otherwise, Cartwright was confused about where he was when he first encountered Kurds, but his observations nevertheless influenced British and French cartographers.[14] This meeting took place, Cartwright (1611) records, after three days travelling from Diyarbekir to Bedlis while crossing the Batman River, a tributary of the Tigris which he mistakenly calls the Euphrates.

> We were no sooner over, but forthwith wee were incountred with a certaine troupe of people called the *Curdies*, which some thinke to be a

[13] Compare Eskandar Beg's (1978) account from early 1603: "A further incident which occurred this year was the arrival at the royal camp of Soleyman Beg Mahmudi, the governor of Khoshab and Qara Hesar, a provincial governor subject to the Ottoman *beglerbeg* of Van. He now transferred his allegiance to the Shah, in the customary manner of Kurdish emirs, who always give their allegiance to whichever party is in the ascendant. But the expressions of fealty he uttered did not derive from any loyalty of heart. The Shah, although he had no illusions as to the worth of professions of loyalty by Kurds, accepted Soleyman Beg's protestations at their face value (it is usually advisable for rulers to do this), loaded him with robes of honor, and raised him to the rank of khan before giving him permission to return to his own territory." (2: 856)
[14] As late as 1816, the eminent cartographer James Rennell consulted Cartwright's account for his *Illustrations* (196).

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> remnant of the ancient *Parthians*, who so much annoied the *Romans* with their bowes and arrows, as before is declared. This rude people are of a goodly stature, and well proportioned, and doe never go abroad without their armes, as bowes and arrowes, Scimitarre and buckler, yea and at such time, when a man for age is ready to goe down to his grave. (20-21)

Immediately the travellers reach the riverbank, they are confronted by figures rising up before them on the approaching shore like a theatrical tableau. Cartwright's shift into that curious passive voice, "wee were incountred," signals the force of coming face to face with this spectacular model of martial pride and manliness that had survived for centuries and, individually, could still be seen enduring hardily into old age. Not simply distant figures adding human scale to a landscape, these "theevish" Kurds are visualised and rendered physically present. This "rude people" bespeak their ancient pedigree in their confident martial bearing and attire, a "troupe" so strong that they once defeated invading Roman armies and continue to command the eastern shores of the Tigris, still armed with their ancient weapons even when old men. This sounds like genuine, personal observation enriched and authenticated by evoking Roman imperial history, not simple orientalising backwardness, but rather a recognition of historical continuity that brings the past into the present, inviting us to visualise those men bearing the very same "bowes and arrowes, Scimitarre and buckler" that once turned back the Roman armies.[15]

Yet Cartwright (1611) reiterates a persistent generalisation:

> They doe adore and worship the Divell, to the end he may not hurt them or their cattell, and very cruell are they to all sorts of Christians; in which regard, the Country which they inhabite is, at this day termed *Terra Diaboli*, the land of the Divell. They live under the commandement of the great Turke, but with much freedome and liberty; For *Solymus* the second having a great multitude of them in his army against the Persians, they did him little service, performing no more than what well pleased themselves. (21)

Cartwright's caravan route had taken him among the Khalidi, "a robber tribe" of Yazidi Kurds "living along the Batman river near Bitlis" who continued to grow in strength well into the eighteenth century (Guest, 1987: 18).[16] Cartwright's casual reference to Kurdish involvement in recent history,

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[15] While reminding readers that, only a few paragraphs previously, he had described Marcus Crassus' expedition against the Parthian general Surena from Plutarch's account, Cartwright (1611) remains indecisively off-hand about his authorities for linking Kurds and Parthians; "some thinke" this to be the case, but he leaves the matter open (16).

[16] Guest (1987) notes that the Khalidi first appear in the Ottoman archives in 1704 when they were condemned for being thieves (56).

however, is both misinformed and misguided. Since Sultan Selim II (r. 1566-1574) never fought the Safavids, the aside about unreliable Kurdish forces doing "little service" against the Persians represents a confusion. Cartwright was clearly mistaken, but may have heard gossip about Kurdish troops being of "little service" to the Ottomans on any number of more recent campaigns: returning to England he might even have heard about Cigalazade Yusuf Sinan Pasha's humiliating defeat in September 1605 when Husayn Khan arrived from Aleppo too late to be of any assistance.

Cartwright (1611) continues by praising a Kurdish village:

> One Village of note is there in this Country, wholly inhabited by the *Curdes*, being five days journey from *Caraemit*, and three days journey from *Bitchlish*, called by the Country people *Manuscute*. This Towne is seated in a most fertile and fruitfull valley betweene two mountains, abounding with pasture and cattell: and about a mile from it, is an Hospitall dedicated to St. John the Baptist, which is much visited as well by Turkes as Christians, who superstitiously affirme, that whosoever wil bestow either a Sheepe, Kidde, or some peece of money to releeve the poore of that place shall not only prosper in his journey, but obtaine forgivenesse of all his sinnes. (21)

Cartwright was clearly pleased to report finding a Christian institution flourishing in a Kurdish village. Of Manuscute and the hospital dedicated to John the Baptist, however, the record is otherwise entirely silent. Indeed, Cartwright is the only source to mention a village of this name and its location remains uncertain.[17] Nevertheless, in 1653, the French royal geographer Nicholas Sanson, included Manuscute in his map of "Sorie, et Diarbeck," situating it west of Bedlis.[18] Twenty years later, in 1673, John Ogilby followed suit, including "Munuscut" in his "New Map of Asia," oddly placing it on a road that by-passes Bedlis (frontispiece). Most recently, but inconclusively, Thomas Sinclair (1987-1990) reports no evidence of any former Christian hospital or monument to St John in his archaeological survey of the immediate area (1: 297-311).

After leaving the relatively hospitable Kurdish village he calls "Manuscute," Cartwright and his companions pass through several Armenian villages en route to Bedlis, encountering less friendly Kurds along the way, and finding the city itself to be oppressive and lacking in appeal.

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[17] There are no references to Manuscute in any of the travelogues catalogued by Yerasimos (1991), in [Bedlisi] (1868-75), or in Evliya Çelebi (1990).
[18] Nicholas Sanson, "Soria, et Diarbeck divisés dans leurs Parties," British Library Maps CXIV70; Manuscute also appears on Sanson's undated "Description de l'Empire des Perses," British Library Maps CXIV91.

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> Having well refreshed our selves amongst these villages, we proceeded in our ordinary travell, but ere we had passed two miles, certain troupes of *Curdies* incountred our *Caravan*, with a purpose and intent to have robbed the same, but finding themselves too weake to contend with so great company, they departed until the next day following, when againe they met with us in a very narrow passage between two mountaines, where they made a stay of our whole *Caravan*, exacting a Shaughee on every person, which to purchase our peace wee willingly paied; and so arrived that evening at *Bithlis* an ancient City, but a City of much cruelty and oppression, where little justice and right is to be found to releeve distressed passengers. (27)

After portraying them harshly, once he has left Bedlis, Cartwright no longer notices Kurds at all, as if they had become invisible. This pattern of representation is typical: Kurds are first discovered, and then quickly ignored or forgotten.

Samuel Purchas, William Finch, Thomas Roe, Paul Rycaut: some facts about Kurds and Kurdistan

Even as interest in the Shirley brothers started to wane, so too the appeal of discovering Kurds began dwindling into silent neglect. In 1625, when Samuel Purchas produced his multiple-volume set of *Purchas His Pilgrimes,* which included edited selections from numerous travel writers, he reprinted selections mentioning Kurds from Polo, Shirley, and Cartwright, but curiously omitted references to the Kurds from the extracts by Biddulph and Parry. However, he did include additional references from two other British travellers.

Purchas (1905) cites the journal of the merchant William Finch, written in Lahor in late February 1610, from which we learn how a caravan arriving from Persia brought news of the Ottoman-Safavid wars and the Safavid capture of Bedlis, “the strong Castle of *Curde*s” (1: 432). This detail is particularly interesting since the absence of documentation concerning “those who ruled at Bitlis” suggests the possibility “that the hereditary amirs of Bitlis caused chaos throughout the principality” (Dehqan and Genç, 2015: 50). What we do know is that, in 1609/1610, the Ottomans appointed Diya al-Din Khan, a son of Sharaf al-Din Khan, governor of Bedlis, although he was known to have been sympathetic to the Safavids, having paid homage to Shah Abbas in 1606/1607 (Dehqan and Genç, 2015: 49, 52; Monshi, 1978: 2: 932). Did Diya al-Din Khan betray the Ottomans and invite the Safavids to occupy the castle?

In 1625, Purchas also included two brief comments about the Kurds from reports by Thomas Roe, who served as English ambassador to the Mughal court between 1615 and 1618, and later at the Ottoman Porte between 1621 and 1628. The first letter, dated October 1616 from Ajmer, conveys news of the continuing conflict between the Ottomans and Safavids:

> Concerning *Persia*, the *Turke* hath only yet made a *Bravado*, and performed little, the passages are stopt, and the King drawing his armies into his Borders to defend himselfe, and finding no great worke, tooke occasion to take in by force a revolted Nation to the east of *Babylon*. The people are called Coords. How by the Ancients or the true Geographicall situation of their Countrey, I am yet ignorant in. (in Purchas, 1905: 1: 585)

Roe's admitted "ignorance" of the Kurds and Kurdistan suggests how common such a lack of knowledge was among even the educated, including those serving as ambassadors to eastern nations. Several years later, in 1622, having spent a year in Constantinople, Roe published an anonymous report which casually notes the indirect role of Kurdish forces in events leading up to the death of Sultan Osman at the hands of the Janissary corps that year (Roe, 1622; rpt. in Purchas, 1905: 2: 1370-75). Roe reported how the Grand Vizier, Dilaver Paşa, led to the young sultan's downfall by persuading him that:

> he was no *Emperour*, nor could be safely alive, while the *Janizaries* had the power which they lately usurped: Informing him, that they were corrupted from their ancient Institution, & were lazie Cowards, given over to ease and lust, *et animo per libidines corrupto, nihil honestum inerat*. But if his Majestie would pull up his spirits, and follow his advice, hee would provide him a new Souldioury about *Damascus*, and from the *Coords*, of men ever bred in the frontier, hardnes, and warre, of great courage and experience, and that of them he should erect a new *Militia*, that should wholly depend of him. (Roe, 1622: sig C2; and in Purchas, 1905: 2: 1373)

This detail concerning the enlistment of Kurdish guards appears in none of the other contemporary reports of Osman's death that appeared at the time in English, but was picked up in 1813 by John Cam Hobhouse.[19]

British indifference to the Kurds continued throughout the seventeenth century. In 1628, Thomas Herbert (1634) visited Kurdish-inhabited regions of north western Iran, but mentions them only once in a list of those "divers Nations" inhabiting the Caspian town of Amol (106). After the publication of Herbert's *Relation* in 1634, no British traveller mentioned encountering Kurds for more than a century when they make a brief appearance in a footnote to John Green's *A Journey from Aleppo to Damascus* (1736: 9). While British travellers were taking no notice of the Kurds, John Ogilby was busy compiling a detailed account of "The Province of Curdistan" for his *Asia* of 1673 (102-103). But besides Cartwright, Ogilby had to rely on translations of works by European

[19] See [anon], *The strangling* (1622); [anon] *A true relation* (1622); and Hobhouse (1813: 1003).

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rather than British travellers: notably Ramusio's Venetian travellers, the Portuguese merchant Pedro Teixeira, the Italian Pietro della Valle, and the French travellers Pierre D'Avity and André Thevet. Even Paul Rycaut, who spent the seventeen years between 1661 and 1678 in Constantinople and Izmir, never mentions ever meeting any Kurds. Rycaut does, however, describe the organisation of the Kurdish emirates in Diyarbekir province based on Ottoman chancery documents, and later relates an anecdote concerning Kurdish involvement in the downfall in 1662 of Murtaza Pasha, the Ottoman governor of Baghdad (1670: 52; 1680: 92-97). But from George Sandys to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and well into the eighteenth century, British travellers to Ottoman lands favoured visiting western Anatolia with classical and Christian ruins on their minds and had little interest in any Kurds they might have met, or in venturing further east into Kurdistan.

By way of conclusion

British interest in Kurdistan began in earnest towards the end of the eighteenth century once the need for overland routes between London and India, that were more rapid than the slow and often hazardous journey under sail via the Cape of Good Hope, had become an imperial imperative (Hoskins, 1928). Fearing that France, and later Russia, posed a threat to British control over India, officials of the East India Company set about gathering cartographical and political data with a view to protecting routes into northern India. Before then, from the late sixteenth into the early seventeenth centuries, several British travellers wrote brief descriptions of the Kurds based on personal encounters and information gathered from local informants. Yet given the numerous travel writers of the era who journeyed through the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, and who could not have avoided meeting Kurds along the way, relatively few seem to have recognised them. Unlike the Jews, Arabs, Gypsies, Armenians, Greeks, and various communities of Eastern Christians living within the Ottoman and Safavid domains, the Kurds proved of little interest to most early-modern British travellers.

Perhaps this interest gap should not be surprising since, for travellers with limited language abilities and unreliable local informants, distinguishing Kurds from the communities of nomadic Arabs and Jews, Yörüks and other Turkmen tribes, would have required an enormous degree of curiosity and dedication. What is, perhaps, nevertheless noteworthy is how among these early travellers' accounts, some are surprisingly detailed and specific, such as those by Manwaring, Shirley, and Cartwright, while others involve elaborate and ingenious fabrications such as we find in Biddulph and Lithgow. But none of them express any hint of seeking to dominate the Kurds. Lacking the fully-formed sense of cultural superiority associated with "the idea of European

identity as a superior one" that Edward Said (1995) describes emerging "from the end of the eighteenth century" (7), these early travel writers viewed the Kurds variously as curiosities, living remnants of the past, at once pastoral nomads and brigands, "not unlike our wilde Irish," as well as warriors who once defeated the armies of Rome. They had no more interest in seeking to control the Kurds than they had in competing with their strategic allies, the Ottomans.

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