

The Kurd Anachronism: What Assyrian (Syriac) Church Documents Really Say

Fred Aprim

October 18, 2026

Some historians claim that the Kurds, as distinct people, are mentioned in Assyrian (Syriac) documents written in the early centuries of Christianity.¹ These claims refer to a few accounts, most notably connected to:

- a) Fifth-century Mar Sawa being sent to the kartwaye and,
- b) Fourth-century reference to Qardu/Kardu.

A) Fifth Century Mar Sawa and Kartwaye

Before we examine the topic in question, let's touch on a few background points first:

1. Paul Bedjan's "Acts of Martyrs and Saints" (Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum) is one of the most important primary source for studying early Christianity and the historical development of the Assyrian (Syriac) speaking churches. While the authors of some lives that appear in the Acts are known and their names are recorded; however, many lives were anonymous. Most of those lives are attributed to Mar Maruta of Maiperkat (a fourth- to fifth-century bishop), who travelled a few times around AD 400 and 410 into the Sassanid Empire shortly after the heavy persecutions under Shapur II. He personally searched out, collected and recorded the official acts, including eyewitness testimonies and the execution details of the Christians who died during those persecutions. This means that the accounts were written during the zenith of the Sassanid Empire (AD 227–651). This period is particularly significant because the Sassanids utilized the Middle Persian (Pahlavi) term Kwrt (later Kurd) as a social designation for nomadic tent-dwellers across the Zagros Mountains—the pre-Islamic homeland of the modern Kurds.

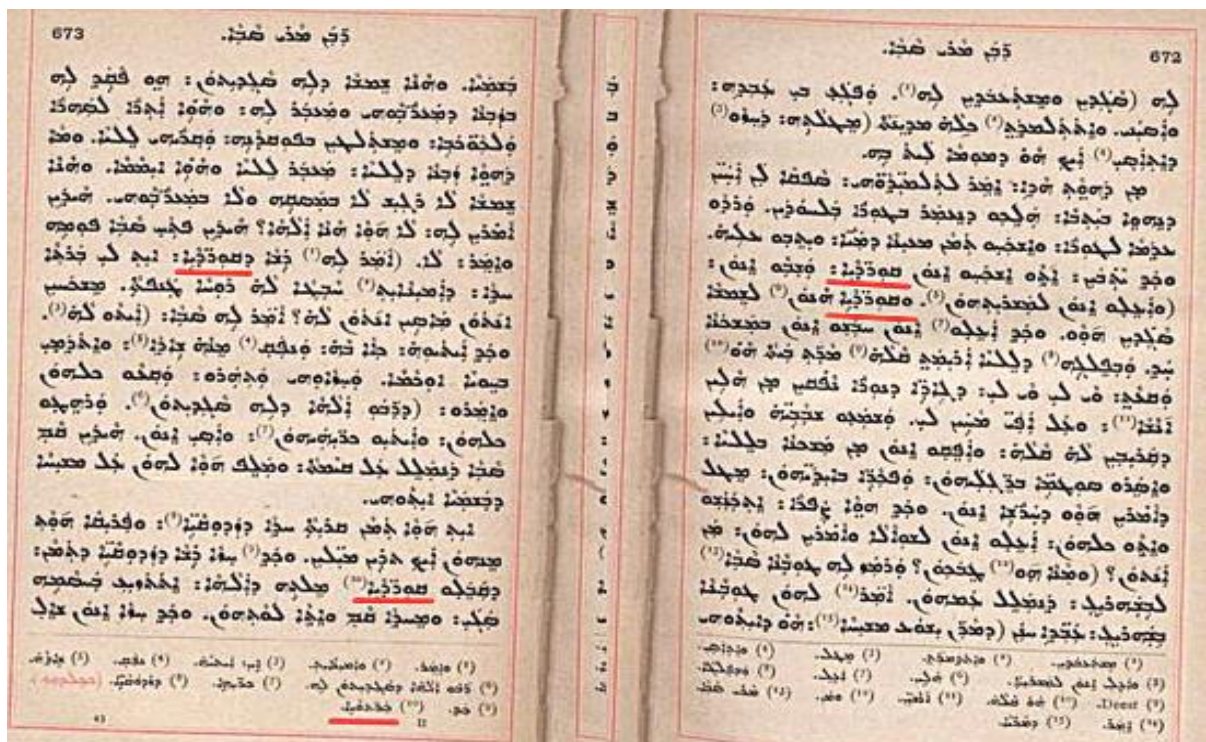
These Acts first appeared in Ms. Vat. Syr. 160 (Vaticanus Syriacus 160), housed in the Vatican Library. It was originally written/published in AD 747, three centuries after the actual events of the particular Mar Sawa (died AD 485 or 488) who is mentioned in the Acts. Why do I ask? Because Mar Maruta's original handwritten copy did not survive. Did any changes to those texts take place during that time? Chances are that the answer is yes. We know that transliteration and translation errors, and intentional manipulation of texts have caused many historical problems throughout the centuries. We also know that some versions of the Acts undermine earlier works. For example, in the 2008 Gorgias Press version of the Acts, we read that the foreword section is translated by

¹ Acts of Martyrs and Saints (Vol 2).

<https://archive.org/details/Bedjan1892ActaMartyrumEtSanctorumVol.2/page/n19/mode/2up>

Claude Detienne. Then we read, “We are happy today to be able to give to our brothers and friends the second volume of Lives of Saints; it is entirely devoted to our glorious forefathers, the martyrs of Persia. This collection is the most important and voluminous that was ever published. The one published in 1748 by the learned S. E. Assemani in his collection “Acta SS. Martyrum Orientalium,” represents only a third of the publication we have published today. We do not want to compare ourselves to the illustrious Maronite, but we allow ourselves to warn the reader that his Syriac text contains many mistakes and that his Latin translation is not quite up to the mark. A serious author who has just published a very important work has unfortunately been misled by following such an incorrect edition.”

The 2008 Gorgias Press version also presented certain martyrs as Persian Chaldeans, when we know that there was no such people known as Chaldeans in early Christianity, since the term Chaldean reflects in reality a Catholic Assyrian.²



2. The works of Joseph Simon Assemani (whose Bibliotheca Orientalis laid foundational groundwork in the eighteenth century) and Paul Bedjan (who compiled the monumental seven-volume Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum in late nineteenth century) are monumental on the early Syriac and Eastern Churches. The two are different in scope, purpose, time period and nature.

² Bedjan, Paul, Ed. “Acts of martyrs and Saints” (Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum). Volume 2. Introductory Material Translated by Claude Detienne. Gorgias Press. 2008. Accessed 10-12/2026 <https://ebin.pub/acts-of-martyrs-and-saints-vol-2-of-7-acta-martyrum-et-sanctorum-9781463213183-t-7746674.html>

We read about the texts of Assemani and Bedjan the following: “The two texts, when they report the same incident, use practically the same words. The variations in language are, however, too numerous to mention. One text may employ a synonym for the term used in the other, or a whole sentence may occur in one which is not in the other, or a scripture quotation may be peculiar to one text. But in spite of these differences, the wording is substantially the same in the two texts. The differences, however, are sufficiently numerous and striking to show that neither text was copied from the other. Furthermore, the differences between Bedjan's and Assemani's texts exclude the possibility that both could have been derived from one common MS.”³

3. Mar Sawa lived during the Sassanid Dynasty rule who have applied the Middle Persian (Pahlavi) term “Kwrt” (plural Kurtan) to all the nomads of Iran, as I mentioned briefly earlier. However, the term Kwrt functioned strictly as a socioeconomic designation. With time, Kwrt evolved to Kurd. Yet it was not until the tenth to twelfth centuries when the Arab historians and geographers began treating the term Kurd as a distinct group different from other people around them. This eventually gave rise to geographic concepts such as Kurdistan (first formally utilized as an administrative province under the Seljuks in the twelfth century).⁴ The Arab Muslims created the plural term “Akrad” after the Kurds converted to Islam in the seventh century.
4. Now turning to the textual evidence in the hagiographical accounts of Mar Sawa in which the singular term ‘Kartwaya’ appears. In Classical Syriac, the suffix -waya functions as a signifying geographic origin, tribal affiliation, or provenance. This morphological pattern is common in Syriac nomenclature, comparable to other ethnonyms and/or demonyms such as Misraya (Egyptian), Farsaya (Persian), Arabaya (Arab) and Younaya (Greek). Kartwaye in the plural form (translated to Qordaye in later translations, such as Bedjan’s version)⁵ is also a compound word, consisting of “Kart” and “waye”. The term “waye” basically means “people of”. So, when we say, for example: “Ma’er-waye”, we mean the people of the west (westerners). “Jil-waye”, we mean the people of the tribe of Jilu. “Hind-waye”, we mean the people of India (Indians). “Nir-waye”, we mean the people of Nirwa (Assyrian village/tribe)

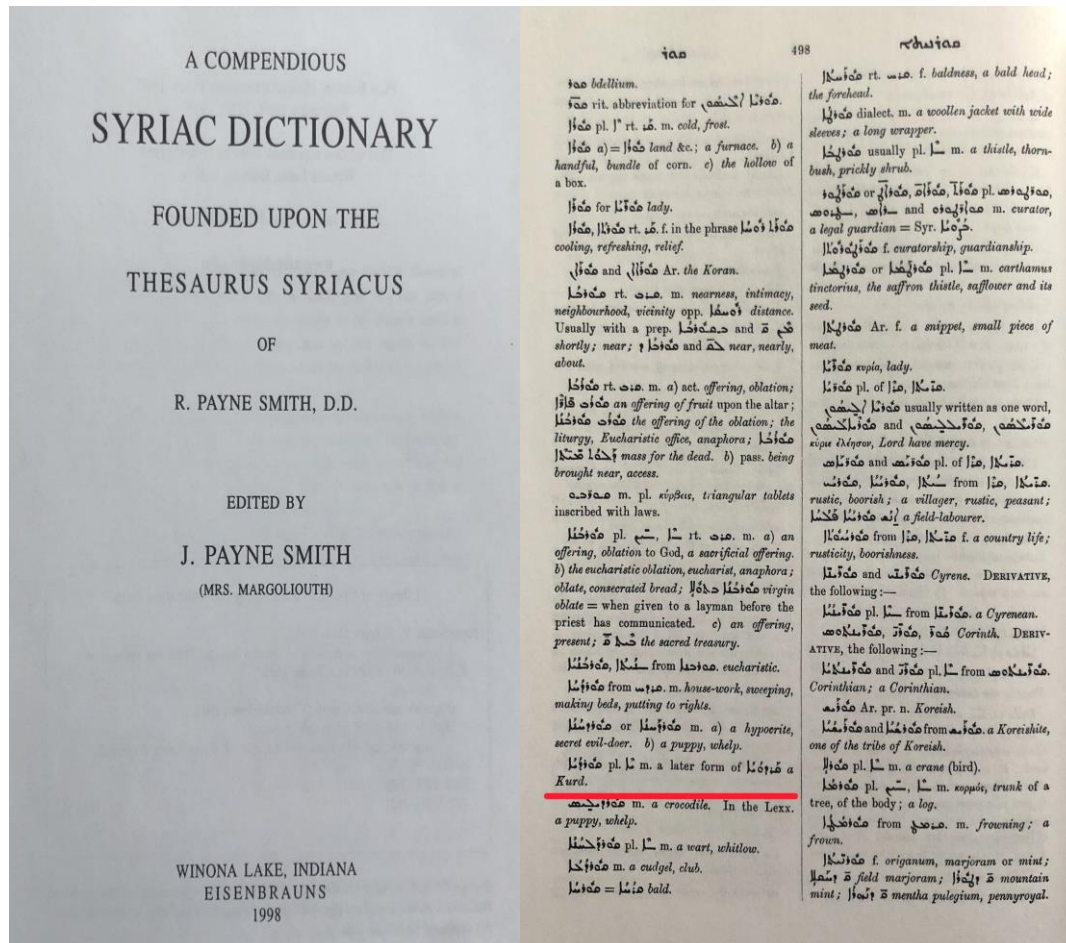
³ Lent, Frederick. “The Life of St. Simeon Stylites: A Translation of the Syriac Text in Bedjan's *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*”. Vol. IV. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. Vol. 35 (1915), pp. 103-198. Accessed 10/13/2026 <https://doi.org/10.2307/592644>

⁴ As Muslim historians, such as Al-Tabari, Al-Masudi, and later chroniclers, cataloged the populations of the Zagros and Jazira regions, the terminology shifted from a class/lifestyle descriptor (*nomads*) to an ethno-linguistic group, *the Kurds as distinct from Persians and Turks*.

⁵ Bedjan, Paulus. “*Acta Martyrum Et Sanctorum Syriace*” (Acts of Martyrs and Saints). Tomus II. Otto Harrassowitz, Leipzig, 1891. Page 673.

The Assyrians and the Church of the East were part of the Sassanid Empire during its existence from AD 227 to AD 645. This means that this fourth century term “Kartwaye” simply meant “people of tents” or “nomads” just as the Sassanids used the term Kwrt, meaning tent-dweller nomad and just as the Arabs used the term Kurd from the seventh century until approximately the tenth to the twelfth centuries to mean nomad.

The Assyrian term Qurdaya (Kurd) evolved from this original Kartwaya.⁶ As the dictionary of R. Payne Smith indicates. It seems that the shift followed in the Assyrian (Syriac) language was similar to that of the Persian and Arab counterparts.



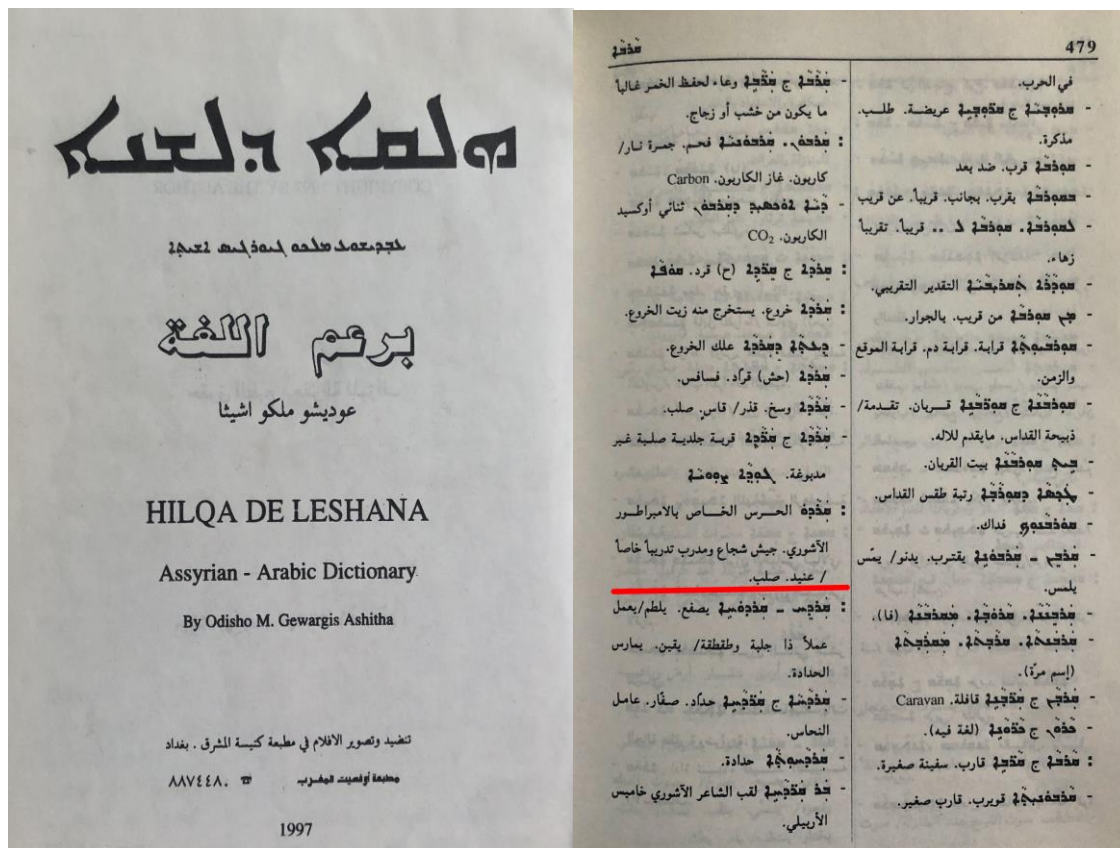
The question here is, why would the Assyrian Christians treat the term Kurd any differently from the Persians and the Arabs considering that both Persians and Arabs are the Assyrians' immediate neighbors? The term Kwrt, Kurd, Kartwaya strictly meant nomad until around the tenth to the twelfth centuries.

⁶ Smith, J. Payne. Ed. "A Compendious Syriac Dictionary Founded Upon the Thesaurus Syriacus of R. Payne Smith." Winona Lake, Indiana. Eisenbrauns. 1998.

B) Fourth century Qardu/Kardu

The term Kwrt or Kurd does not originate from Assyrian (Syriac) roots. Over centuries of translation and transliteration across Middle Persian, Arabic, Assyrian (Syriac), Greek, and Latin, similar-sounding words began to blur together. Thus, it is very natural that many versions of the name appeared in the transliteration process and some of these newly transliterated terms became confused with ancient terms already in existence such as Qardu, Kardu, etc. While classical Syriac texts mention regions like Beth Qardu, these referred specifically to geographic locations (corresponding to the classical Greek Corduene/Curduine, south of Lake Van) rather than to an ethnic group known as "Kurds".

In Assyrian Akkadian, the root Qardu actually meant "valiant" or "valor" (derived from qardutu) rather than referring to a distinct ethnic community.⁷ This fact is reported in Dr. Odisho Malko's dictionary.⁸



The process continued as nationalist historiographies and some nineteenth-and twentieth-century orientalists attempted to draw a connection between ancient Bronze Age or Classical terms—such as the Sumerian Karda, the Assyrian Qardu, Xenophon's Kardouchoi, or the

⁷ Aprim, Fred. "Kurd is Not Related to Qardu, Kardu, Kardukh, Carduni, etc."

<https://www.fredaprim.com/pdfs/2024/Kurd%20and%20Ancient%20words.pdf>

⁸ Gewargis, Odisho M. "Hilqa De Leshana: Assyrian-Arabic Dictionary." Baghdad. 1997.

Babylonian Kardunish and the modern Kurds. Philologists like Theadore Nöldeke demonstrated that the phonetic shift from the Greek Karduchoi to the Middle Persian and Arabic Kurd does not follow regular Indo-European or Iranian phonological laws.

For decades, nationalists and romantic historians attempted to draw a straight line from Xenophon's mountain warriors to modern Kurds purely on the basis of the similarity of the words. Modern historical linguistics correctly reject this as a folk etymology or an overly simplistic linguistic equation.

In fact, we are told that the Babylonian term “Karduniaši/-ean” simply does not exist. Nor has there ever been sufficient proof that Karduniaš could be classified as a “nation-state.” A kingdom, chiefdom, or loosely managed empire, sure; but there was no nationalist movement that created an identity from belonging to a specific region within Karduniaš.⁹



⁹ Adrienne L. Spunaugle. “*Empire and Ethnicity: A Social History of Deportation in Assyria and Karduniaš during the First Millennium BCE.*” A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Near Eastern Studies) in the University of Michigan, 2020.

Claiming that modern Kurdish identity is linked to the ancient Karduchoi, Corduene or Qardo is viewed as obsolete and outdated. The claim is political not historically proven.¹⁰ In addition, in its entry on Gordyene, the Encyclopedia Iranica makes a striking academic distinction:

"Despite common perceptions (based on the alleged similarity of the names), the ancient root Qardū (in Cordu-eni, Cordu-ena, Gordyene, and Gordyaea) is not akin to the root Kurd-. Therefore, ancient Gordyene and its people cannot be held as ancestors of the modern Kurds."

The encyclopedia highlights that while nationalist or older nineteenth-century historiography frequently equated Xenophon's Carduchoi or the region of Corduene with "Kurdistan", which was based purely on the superficial phonetic similarity of Kard- to Kurd, modern historical linguistics views them as etymologically distinct.

Historians tell us that the Kardukhoi or Cardukhoi lived as far north as the Bohtan River. The "kh" ending of their name is apparently an Armenian plural ending of Kardū, for Xenophon writes that he learned the name of the tribe from an Armenian.¹¹

In late antiquity and through the Middle Ages, the region of Qardu was explicitly organized under the Church of the East as the diocese of Beth Qardu. The inhabitants spoke Aramaic or Sureth as called in the native language, and the region was heavily populated by indigenous Assyrian farming and monastic communities right up to the modern era, prior to the devastating demographic shifts that intensified during the nineteenth century. Furthermore, early church fathers and writers from the region, such as Ephrem the Syrian in the fourth century, placed Noah's Ark resting place on Mount Qardo. Syriac Christians historically built monasteries and shrines in the region to commemorate the event. Furthermore, Fr. Alber Abouna writes, Youkhana of Dalyatha, from Beth Nuhadra, was a contemporary of Patriarch Timothy I. He received the monastic habit at a monastery in the Qardu region around AD 700 but later left to settle on Mount Qardu—near the village of Arkul, close to Mount Judi—where he built a monastery and eventually passed away.¹²

In part one of his three parts book, Abouna addresses on several occasions martyrs from the region of Qardu, or captives of King Shapur from Sinjar, Beth Arabaye, Beth Zabdai, Armenia, Qardu and other places.¹³ Abouna also mentions that a famine in the sixth century caused many monks to leave Mount Maqloob and moved to the Qardo Mountains.¹⁴

¹⁰ Roman writers of late antiquity sometimes translated these regional groups using terms like Cyrtii (or Cyrtaei), which also denoted mountain nomads or brigands in the hills of Media and Persis, rather than a cohesive "Kurdish" ethnicity. Many historians do not agree that Kurds originated from Cyrtii.

¹¹ Limbert, John. "The Origins and Appearance of the Kurds in Pre-Islamic Iran." International Society for Iranian Studies and Taylor & Francis, Ltd. are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Iranian Studies.

¹² Abouna, Alber. "History of the East Syriac Church: from the Advent of Islam to the End of the Abbasid Era." Part II. Dar al-Mashriq, Beirut. 1993. Page 111.

¹³ Ibid. Part I. Pages 13, 23, 24.

¹⁴ Ibid. Part III. Page 255.

Archbishop Mar Addai Scher talks about the Great Flood, Nimrod, Gilgamesh, and how Noah's Ark rested on Mount Qardu, which is also known as Mount Judi.¹⁵ Mount Qardo was an Assyrian Christian region. Early church fathers and writers from the region, such as Mar Aprim or "Ephrem the Syrian" of the fourth-century, placed Noah's Ark resting place on Mount Qardo. Syriac Christians historically built monasteries and shrines in the region to commemorate the event.¹⁶

There is no proof whatsoever that Xenophon intended to say Kurds by writing Carduchoi. The connection was championed by modern historians, particularly as the Kurdish nationalists and historical case gained widespread attention post-WWI. In fact, modern linguists and historians, including Theodor Nöldeke, Martin Hartmann, F. H. Weissbach¹⁷ Garnik Asatrian¹⁸, John Limbert¹⁹, and many others have pointed out that these ancient names are etymologically unrelated to the term Kurd (Middle Persian *kwrt*). The phonetic similarities (K-R-D) are coincidental, and the conflation occurred because medieval and modern writers retroactively linked ancient geographical locations and unrelated mountain tribes to the later Middle Persian social term that the Sassanids created, which evolved into the modern ethnonym by the Arab Islamic historians around the tenth – twelfth centuries. More recently, Michał Marciak, Professor of History, specializing in the historical geography of the ancient Near East, analyzes the linguistic and historical data regarding the ancient region of Gordyene, which is known as Corduene in Latin, Kordukh in Armenian, and Qardu in Semitic sources, and the ancient Karduchoi tribe. He concurred with the above mentioned scholars and linguists. He asserts that drawing a direct line from these ancient names to the modern ethnonym "Kurd" relies on a superficial phonetic similarity that falls apart under linguistic scrutiny, leading him to reject the direct ancestral connection.²⁰

From the above, we can conclude that Kardwaye and Qardu/Kardu, which appeared in the early fourth- and fifth- century Syriac documents do not refer to some ethnic people known today as Kurds. There is no reason whatsoever that the Assyrian Christians would have acted differently from their Persian and Arab neighbors regarding how they interpreted what the term Kurd and/or its original form *Kwrt* really meant.

¹⁵ Scher, Addai. *Histoire De La Chaldee Et De L'Assyrie*. Part I. Beyrouth Imprimerie Catholique. 1913. Page 20.

¹⁶ About this issue, read Al-Jeloo, Nicholas. *Qardo And The Mountain Of Kēwillā: Noah's Ark And Its Landing Place In Assyrian/Syriac Texts And Folklore*.

¹⁷ Nikitine, Basile, "Les Kurdes: Etude Sociologique Et Historique." Paris. 1956.

¹⁸ Asatrian, Garnik. "Prolegomena to the Study of the Kurds." *Iran and the Caucasus* 13. Yerevan State University. 2009.

¹⁹ Limbert, John. "The Origins and Appearance of the Kurds in Pre-Islamic Iran." *Iranian Studies*. Vol 1, Issue 2. Spring 1968.

²⁰ Marciak, Michał. "Sophene, Gordyene, and Adiabene: Three Regna Minora of Northern Mesopotamia Between East and West". Brill, 2017.