



# The tribal territory of the Kurds through Arabic medieval historiography

Boris James

► **To cite this version:**

Boris James. The tribal territory of the Kurds through Arabic medieval historiography: Spatial Dynamics, Territorial Categories, and Khaldunian Paradigm. Middle East Studies Association (North America) Gathering Panel : “ Before Nationalism : Land and Loyalty in the Middle East ”, Nov 2007, Montreal, Canada.

**HAL Id: halshs-00350118**

**<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00350118>**

Submitted on 5 Jan 2009

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## MESA 2007

Panel :Before Nationalism: Land and Loyalty in the Middle East

### The tribal territory of the Kurds through Arabic medieval historiography: spatial dynamics, territorial categories, and Khaldunian paradigm

Boris James (IFPO/ University of Paris 10)

In the 14th century an egyptian author, al-Maqrîzî writes : « You should know that nobody agrees on the definition of the Kurds. The 'Ajam for instance indicate that the Kurds were the favourite food of the king Bayûrasf. He was ordering everyday that two human beings be sacrificed for him so he could consume their flesh. His Vizir Arma'il was sacrificing one and sparing the other who was sent to the mountains of Fârs. [The Kurds] perpetuated themselves in the mountain and multiplied. » Another legend cited by the same author assumes that the Kurds are the children of Salomon's wives pregnant by the work of the devil Jasad who have been expelled towards the mountains (Al-Maqrîzî, *Khîtat*: III/751). Pastoralism, attachment to the mountains, nomadism, violence and strangeness dominate the image of this warlike population.

This paper will mainly address the problems posed by territorial and ethnic categories.

My interest for the specific question of territory is born of the dayly research I'm undertaking on the Kurds within the syro-egyptian space and the tribal territory during the Bahrid mamluk period. This work deals with two aspects : the first is the question of the category « Kurd » that is to say the kurdish « ethnicity » during the Middle Ages (what is a Kurd ? ) the second concerns the insertion of the Kurds into the social and political configuration of that period in mamluk Egypt as well as the specific context of the tribal territory undergoing the long lasting war between Mamluks and Mongols.

Specific scientific works reinforced my interest for the question of territory. I think of Hakan Özoglu and Baki Tezcan's works which are dedicated to the Ottoman period. These are very stimulating readings as they underline the relevance of

describing large scale transhistorical processes. Hakan Özoglu's book, entitled *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State, evolving identities, competing loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries*, deals with the "development of the Kurdish identity and its culmination to Kurdish Nationalism". The title of Baki Tezcan's article is "The developpement of the use of Kurdistan as a geographical description and the incorporation of the region into the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century".

These two authors whose work mark the emergence of a new historical school in Turkey develop several key-ideas related to our topic. They both very interestingly show the political and administrative process that led to the attribution of the name Kurdistan to a region of eastern Anatolia under relative ottoman domination. For instance Tezcan argues "that the geographical name Kurdistan, or the land of the Kurds (literally the place abounding in Kurds), arose mainly from administrative practices and originally referred to Kurdistan in Iran only". Then he writes "the application of the word to the southeastern regions of modern Turkey had more to do with local political structures than the ethno-demographic makeup of the region". I won't question here the ottoman period since I am far from being skilled to undertake such a task. Although I will draw attention to the fact that to consider the process of categorisation that resulted into the designation of Kurdistan it is absolutely crucial to take into account previous periods and medieval geographical appellations attached to the term « Kurd » such as Bilâd al-Akrâd even if they don't totally match with the category « Kurdistan ».

An other interesting point of these works is the question of the imputation of the category « Kurd » according to the relationship of certain groups to a specific territory. Hakan Ozoglu states "the word "Kurd" was a name given to the nomadic tribes living in and around a specific territory. It was mostly the work of outsiders to imagine and label a very heterogenous group as Kurds". I'll come back to the question of the monological process which is the imputation of a category or identity by outsiders to certain groups and I'll come back to the question of categorisation according to the belonging or the relationship to a specific territory. I will try to show one among many other ways to consider the category Kurd I mean the Khaldunian prism.

During this round trip into the construction of the categories Kurdistan and Kurd I will mainly argue that the process of categorisation is a multiform one getting its origin from several sources and resulting in a polysemic category. Secondly I will argue that the term Kurdistan is not only an administrative abstraction in the Ottoman period and that it can also be traced back to earlier representations or literary practices. Third I will contradict the idea of an exclusive relationship between a specific territory and the category Kurd and rather link it to what we call the khaldunian historical paradigm.

## **The tribal territory of the Kurds during the Middle ages**

I must warn you here that my attempt is not to describe a historical continuum to justify a contemporary state of facts, but to invite to take into account all the elements that permit to understand a process of categorisation that goes on and drift through the years.

I prefer the expression « tribal territory of the Kurds » to those of Kurdistan or land of the Kurds (*bilâd al-akrâd*) despite the use that some medieval authors made of it . Firstly because these categories never covered the space where there were to found Kurds during the Middle Ages. And secondly, either the tribal territory largely overcame the boundaries of the regions called Bilâd al-Akrâd or within these boundaries large areas were not populated with Kurds. Thus I don't aim at drawing the precise limits of a region that, as we will see, wasn't neither ethnically homogenous nor politically unified.

I will avoid the expression « primitive territory of the Kurds ». On the one hand, the hypothesis according to which this territory constitutes the “cradle of the Kurdish people” is unverifiable and rather ideological. On the other hand this questioning doesn't seem scientifically relevant. The presence of non-sedentary kurdish tribes makes difficult and unpredictable their locating despite the fact that authors seem to ascribe specific territories to some of the tribes and that there was sometimes a confusion between names of tribes and names of territories. Several non-kurdish

populations lived in that area. It is impossible to determine their exact proportion within the whole population of that territory as late as the end of the ottoman period.

For all these reasons, the expression « tribal territory » is the most relevant because it describes a field of action crossed by the Kurdish tribes, an always shifting ideal, tribal and political space, not an area over which military domination or political sovereignty is necessarily applied.

Beyond this warning, one can state that during the Middle Ages the authors were aware of the presence of a relatively continuous space where there were to be found populations categorised as “Kurds”.

In the study of the Kurdish groups in Arabic medieval sources one can easily guess that they were essentially to be found in mountainous areas. Besides other characteristics, we can notice in the tribal territory according to the texts, a clear separation which goes growing through the years, between a Zagrosian area and a cizzagrosian area which prolongs the latter westward to the Taurus. Thus, as V. Minorsky and I. C. Vanly noticed, the Kurds in the region between Hamadân and Hulwân (Zagros) are different from the one in the area of the lake of Van and the north of Mosul (Cizzagros). Moreover the role played by the western Kurds (Hadhbâniyya, Zarzâriyya, Humaydiyya...) under the reign of the Zankid amirs and the Ayyubid sultans, makes it easier for us to know them.

### **Tribes and kurdish dynasties in the tribal territory between the 10th and the 12th century**

In the big picture, the tribal territory of the Kurds in the Middle Ages and especially during the five first centuries of Islam, extended from Dvîn (south of the lake Sevan) to Mosul, and from Hamadân to the Djezireh. The presence of powerful kurdish dynasties in the zagrosian (Hasanwayhides in Bahâr) and cizzagrosian (Rawâdis in Tabriz and Marwânids in Khilât) areas is due to the existence of king-making tribes. Conversely, these dynasties certainly weighted on the population make-up and the social organisation of these regions.

It would be too long to return to the complicated history of what Minorsky calls the « iranian intermezzo », the rise of daylami and kurdish principalities during the 10th and 11th century. Let's just cite the Shaddâdis of the Rawâdiyya tribe from the Hadhbâniyya confederacy (from the 10th to the end of the 12th century) in Azerbaydjan and Armenia ; the Rawâdis who are related as well to the Hadhbâniyya (from the 9th to 11th century), in Azerbaydjan ; the Marwânids from humaydî origin (from the 10th to the 11th century) in the Diyâr Bakr and around the lake of Van ; the Hasanwayhids from the Barzîkânî tribe (10th and 11th centuries) ruling over Hulwân, Dînawar, Nihâwand and the region of Hamadân and the Shahrazûr.

## **The Tribal and political reshuffling between the 12th and the 14th century**

### The tribal space

Between the 12th and the 14th centuries the field of action the Kurdish tribes seems to reduce according to the arabic sources. Let me briefly cite some cities or regions still considered by geographers as Yâqût al-Hamawî (d.1229) or al-'Umarî (d.1349), as being highly populated with Kurds at that period: Irbil, Tell Haftûn, 'Aqr, the Shahrazûr, the region of al-Dasht, Qaymur, a forteress in between Mosul and Khilât from which came the famous qaymariyya Amirs of Aleppo and Damascus, Fink, ruled by bashnawiya Kurds since the 10th century, Nusaybin, in the north of the Djezireh, Sinjâr, Hisn Tâlib, ruled by the Jûbiyya Kurds close to Hisn Kayfâ which is said to be part of the Bilâd al-Akrâd during the 13th century. Mosul is still a place of settlement and recruitment of the Kurds. But Suhraward which constituted the northern boundaries of al-'Irâq with the Shahrazûr, was no longer considered to be populated with Kurds during the 13th century. At that time nothing is said about the Kurds in upper Azerbaydjan or Armenia. Tabrîz for example stopped to be a region populated with Kurds. And meanwhile, in 1152, the saldjuqid sultan Sandjar was creating an administrative region called Kordestan on the zagrosian area formerly ruled by the Hasanwayhids, the zankid and ayyubid historians mainly described the cizzagrosian part of the tribal territory as being populated with Kurds.

## Political reshuffling

The reasons for such a reshuffling of the tribal space are widely described in the sources and can be seen as follows: the struggle for power against the Armenian and Georgian principalities, the Turkish infiltrations from the east and consequently the new military enlistment strategies. Thus while the Kurdish principalities and tribes managed to set a relatively secure political space in southern Azerbaijan and Armenia, these regions underwent massive Turkish invasions which resulted in the undermining of the former principalities and the settlement of Turkish powers following the example of the whole Middle East.

The last manifestation of the Turkish take over Azerbaijan and Armenia takes place during Saladin's reign in 581/1186. Ibn al-Athîr writes that a conflict breaks out in the *Zûzân al-akrâd* between Turkmen and Kurds because of a banal wedding quarrel and spreads out in Djezireh (Nusaybîn, Sinjâr...), the Diyâr Bakr (Mayyâfâriqîn), Khilât, Bilâd al-Shâm, the Shahrâzûr and Azerbaijan (Ibn al-Athîr : vol 10/136 ; Ibn Shaddâd, *Nawâdir*: 63 ; Michel le Syrien : vol.3 /400-3 ; Lyons & Jackson : 234).

Despite this last manifestation, the harshest attempt to take over and control the tribal territory of the Kurds was led by the Zankids. During the years 525/1130 in order to secure the hinterland of their capital, Mosul, the Zankids carried out an offensive on the Kurdish principalities of that region: the Humaydiyya, the Mihrâniyya (Hadhbâniyya) and the Hakkâriyya citadels were taken. The Zankids started also to massively recruit Kurds in their army. This resulted in unleashing an important flow of Kurdish population in Syria and Palestine and particularly those who participated to the Counter-Crusade.

The Ayyubid period is the climax of the Kurdish integration within the main cities of Syria and Egypt to the extent that the highest religious, administrative or judicial authorities in Egypt could be Kurdish even very late during the Mameluk period. Many big cities of the Near East at the end of the Ayyubid period had a Kurdish quarter (Eddé, James).

The obvious political humiliation that represents the Zankid take over the Kurdish principalities, paradoxically resulted into a new emergence of the Kurds not

as a homogenous and politically unified people but as a people violently entering the «Civitas». Here we see appearing the khaldunian paradigm.

This cycle finishes with the end of the Ayyubid Dynasty, when the Mamluks cease the power in Egypt and Syria. With the Mamluks we can notice two phenomena. The disappearance of the Kurds as a major military force in the State and especially within the group of high ranking amirs and the reappearance of the Kurds in the tribal territory thanks to the fall of the Turkmen auxiliary dynasties and thanks to global politics. The tribal territory becomes a stamp space because of the warm and cold war between Mamluks and Mongols (Amitai-Preiss). The mamluk direct rule never reached further east than al-Rahba and the Mongol influence, even if it manifested in very violent reminders in the tribal territory, has always been a punctual or say a seasonal one as John Meloy describe the same phenomenon in mamluk Hedjâz. The return of the Kurds to the edges (to bedouinity ?) closes the cycle. I'll come back later to that idea borrowed from Gabriel Martinez-Gros the french specialist of Ibn Khaldûn.

To draw a link with the next two parts of my paper I incist on the cruciality of these spatial dynamics and the khaldunian historical paradigm which I just described here, to understand the construction of both the categories of Kurdistan and Kurd. To say it bluntly on the one hand the Kurds are the Kurds (or are a people) also because they enter the historical Khaldunian paradigm as a historical driving force and on the other hand the word Kurdistan or Bilâd al-Akrâd has been used during the Middle Ages and during the ottoman period also because a specific territory rather difficult to identify has been shaped by these spatial dynamics.

## **From Bilâd al-Akrâd to Kurdistan : the territorial categories**

Some scholars asserted that the origin of the word "Kurdistan" can be only retraced in the attribution of this designation to an administrative unit either in seldjukid Iran or in Ottoman Anatolia.

I will argue that the word Kurdistan can be traced back far before the ottoman period in diverse other territorial categories and in the representation of a place highly inhabited by Kurds.

I already mentioned the province Kordestan created by Sandjar in 1152 in the region formerly ruled by the kurdish Hasanwayhids. Even if the source is controversial and the operation a very administrative one it is quite easy to consider that this word was used to designate a region where there were to be found many Kurds if not a majority and especially during the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> century where categories like “velayat-i ekrâd” were used by iranian authors to indicate the same area (Tezcan).

At the same period and even before, arab speaking authors used several categories to designate the place where the Kurds lived : Zûzân al-Akrâd, Djibâl al-Akrâd, al-Akrâd, Bilâd al-Akrâd etc. These categories as we will see, mainly applied to the region of the Dyâr Bakr, the lake of Van and the hinterland of Mosul.

This is the first answer to why the word Kurdistan was not used until the Ottoman period to designate cizzagrosian regions (that is to say eastern Anatolia) ? Arabic authors would rather use its exact translation : Bilâd al-Akrâd.

Let's start with the term *Zûzân*. The word *zozan* means today in kurdish the summer pastures. The word is also known in eastern armenian dialects (Bayazit, Mûsh, Van, Maratchkert, Tchatak) and means as well, a pasture in the mountain. For the medieval arab authors it is a specific geographical complex inhabited by Armenians and Kurds. According to Ibn Hawqal (10th century), the master (*Sâhib*) of *Zûzân* was al-Dayrânî, probably Deranik, the armenian king of Vaspurakan between the lake of Van and Mount Ararat (Ibn Hawqal, vol. 2/348). The author doesn't mention any trace of kurdish presence in that region where christians make up a great part of the local population. Three hundred years later Yâqût in the *Mu'jam al-Buldân* writes about *Zûzân* : « This is a region located in the center of the armenian mountains between Akhlât, Azerbaydjan, Diyâr Bakr and Mosul. Its inhabitants are Armenians (*ahluhâ arman*) ; there are also some groups of Kurds (*wa fihâ tawâ'if min al-akrâd*). Ibn al-Athîr (d. 1233) (Yâqût al-Hamawî, « *zûzân* ») at the same period writes : *Zûzân* is a vast region located on the eastern border of the Tigris river in the region of Jazîrat Ibn 'Umar. It starts at a distance covered in two

days from Mosul, extend to the boundaries of Khilât and ends in Azerbaydjan until the district of Salmâs. There are several fortresses hold by the Bashnawiyya and Bukhtiyya Kurds ». Ibn al-Athîr who actually is from that region, even comes to use the expression *Zûzân al-Akrâd* in *al-Kâmil*, to talk about the place where the conflict between Turkmen and Kurds started (Ibn al-Athîr : vol 10/136) .

My first remark is that it is most likely that the word *Zûzân* is a very ancient local common name. The fact that arabic sources made it a proper name is probably an extrapolation. First because it is a common name both in armenian and kurdish languages nowadays. And second because the word is mainly used in western kurdish dialects while eastern Kurds tend to use the word *Köestan* (*Kûhestân* in persian) also mentionned by the arabic sources (*Yâqût*, “*Qûhestân*”) to indicate a geographical complex inhabited by Kurds and situated further east. This might once again show the cultural separation between zagrosian and cizzagrosian Kurds at that time period.

In comparison the expression *Bilâd al-Akrâd* is a relatively late category that appears probably during the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Although there isn't any precise description of that region it seems to always designate a cizzagrosian area overlapping the *Zûzân*. 'Imâd al-dîn al-Isfahânî uses it to talk about the region of Hisn Kayfâ (Hasan Keyf). Ibn al-'Imâd ( vol. 7 p. 423) mentions the *Bilâd al-Akrâd* in the obituary of a certain al-Bashîrî who came from Qala'at Bashîr right into the region described as the *zûzân* by Ibn al-Athîr. Baybars al-Mansûrî (pp. 329, 352) also cites the *Bilâd al-Akrâd* as well as the *Djibâl al-Akrâd*. Abû Shamâh (p. 204) indicates that the Qâḍî Kamâl al-dîn 'Umar b. bandâr al-Tiflîsî has been appointed judge in the cities of Šâm, Mosul, Mârdin, Mayyâfâriqîn and al-Akrâd. We should notice how an ethnonym comes to be used here as a territorial category.

To summarize: we have here an area (*Zûzân*) which is exclusively armenian during the 10<sup>th</sup> century while the Kurds are mainly located further east and south in the *Djibâl* called the *dâr al-Akrâd* by al-Ya'qûbî (Vanly, I.C. 1976 : 355 ; al-Ya'qûbî : 232) and even in the *Fârs*. This area becomes both armenian and kurdish to exclusively kurdish during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This does confirm the idea according to which the tribal territory of the Kurds slid westward between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup>

century in such a way that it might have changed at least a little bit the demographic make-up of the region. And if the Kurds didn't become majoritarian in the Zûzân area, which is most likely, they became the main focus of their coreligionist historians, that is to say that the Kurds have been symbolically granted with the Zûzân three hundred years before the Ottomans ascribed the name of Kurdistan to that particular region. I would also suggest that these two designations (*Zûzân al-Akrâd* and *Bilâd al-Akrâd*) are truly political and contain a performative aspect. The real armenian region for the arab authors of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century (al-'Umarî, vol. 3/ p.124) is the region of Sîs (Bilâd al-Takafûr: thagavor means king in armenian), the kingdom of Levon, a place where armenian sovereignty was applied. Conversely the Bilâd al-Akrâd hadn't any definit armenian or kurdish political domination, but it is pretty easy to guess that the author who used this category wished or saw it become an exclusively kurdish political space. Although the term Bilâd al-Akrâd doesn't have neither an official nor a systematic use during the Middle Ages it had certainly a role in the categorisation of this specific region as Kurdistan in the Ottoman period or is it simply the translation or the reflect of a more local use of the word Kurdistan.

It is worth emphasising that these particular categories (*Zûzân al-Akrâd*, *Bilâd al-Akrâd*) related to a territory specifically attached to the Kurds, appeared during the kurdish epicycle, the reemergence of the Kurds as a people during the zankid and ayyubid periods according to Ibn Khaldûn's views.

## The Khaldunian paradigm

Let's come back a moment to Özoglu's sentence : "the word "Kurd" was a name given to the nomadic tribes living in and around a specific territory" (Özoglu, p. 14). Except for the nomadic nature of these groups we can all agree on this statement.

Nevertheless I would also suggest that there is a lot of other elements entering the construction of the category Kurd in the medieval literary sources. We don't have

the possibility here to expose all these elements and will content ourselves with presenting the Khaldunian paradigm mentioned before. As I already said I borrow this reflection from Gabriel Martinez-Gros.

Ibn Khaldûn's (1332-1406) conceptions have been largely debated and constitute a very subtle and original theorisation of political history in his time. However, G. Martinez-Gros is rightly assuming that the ideas exposed in the 'Ibar, his main opus, seem very likely to represent a widespread Weltanschauung during the Middle Ages. The main idea of Khaldun's work is that a dichotomy world of sedentarity/ world of the bedouins is driving the cyclic history of muslim societies. I quote Martinez-Gros (: "Ibn Khaldûn divides the human societies into two ways of life, the Sedentary and the Bedouin. The first ones, the sedentaries, live under the authority of a State, which gathers the financial and human resources of the surrounding country into the capital city under constraint and through taxation".

"As a paradox, to maintain its existence, the State has to buy violence and solidarity ['asabiya] in the regions which deny its authority. As another paradox, the State, conquered and governed by force, a force necessary for the sake of the commonwealth, generally belongs to a Bedouin aristocracy. In fact there is no State without organized violence; there is no organized violence except among the Bedouin; so there is no government except from the Bedouin". The political manifestation of the 'asabiya in the "Civitas" or sedentary world is the dynasty. Dynasties have a life, die and are replaced by other dynasties supported by another 'asabiya. As everybody understands, the term "bedouin" doesn't designate an ethnic belonging. That is why Arabs, Turks, Berbers and Kurds are Bedouins for Ibn Khaldun. They are the driving forces of that system, the power makers and thus the history makers. "For Ibn Khaldun, [but not only for him (al-Khazrajî, 193 r°.)], the ayyubid dynasty is a kurdish dynasty since the kurdish supports of Saladin give a specific complexion to the turkish basis of the dynasty. What makes the Ayyubids different, and then make them exist, within the huge turkish sphere of influence is that kurdish touch."

Thus within the cyclic history of Ibn Khaldûn there is a "kurdish epicycle" which begins with the zankid conquest of the tribal territory and ends with the rise of the Mamluk dynasty. Consequently the Kurds exist as a people for taking part in that cyclic history, for emerging in the sedentary world and then return to the edges.

What is noteworthy from G. Martinez-Gros demonstration is that political representations of a time give clues to understand the process of categorisation. Then the category kurd is also a political category. If there is a territory to be considered here, it isn't Kurdistan or the Bilâd al-Akrâd but the world of the bedouins, the edges. However the latter is not highly significant and the Kurds come to be defined by their relationship to the sedentary world, to the «Civitas», to the State.

The far most frustrating result of what we exposed previously on the category Kurdistan and Kurd is that the subjective aspects are left aside. Since people that saw themselves as Kurds (and for sure there were) didn't write anything on their own representations we are condemned to only consider what Özoglu calls the monological process. He writes: "The agency of local people in creating the term "kurd" is unknown. However it seems very likely indeed that it was an outsider's term, and that as such it emerged as a result of monological process in which those so labeled adopted the term in the following periods" (Özoglu, p. 27). The mystery of this equation is the diachrony between the imputation of a category and the self-attribution or the adhesion to it, the very moment where some individuals came to consider themselves as a group coming from a specific territory and started to act on the image they give to the world.

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