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The Cultural Impact of the Persian Language in and around Bidlis

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Abstract

It may seem perplexing, in the beginning, to see Iranian poet Khayyām's *rubāies* and other Persian poems on the gravestones of Bidlis from the late nineteenth century. However, when scrutinizing Bidlis's political and cultural history, it is clear that Persian language and culture has deep, longstanding roots in this city and been integrated into high Iranian-Islamic culture in both respects. Based mainly on primary archival sources and inscriptions, I touch on the adventures and preponderance of Persian—the *lingua franca* of the rulers of Bidlis, a Kurdish principality located on the Ottoman-Iranian frontier—and its intellectuals after the city was integrated into the Ottoman world, and thus the decaying ascendancy of Persian.

Mohammad Amin Riyāhī's book, *Nofūz-e zabān o adabīyāt-e Fārsī dar qalamrov-e Osmānī*, is a well-known study in this respect, but mostly focuses on the adventures of Persian in and around court circles. Another comprehensive book on the subject, *The Persianate World: The Frontiers of a Eurasian Lingua Franca*, illustrates the frontiers of Persian's usage in the vast geography stretching from China, Central Asia, and India to the Ottoman world. By focusing on a limited area like Bidlis, the region's most prestigious principality, this article attempts to elucidate the impact of Persian in the Ottoman-Iranian frontiers, unearthing its influence as a language of both diplomacy and literature as well as a *lingua franca* of Bidlis intellectuals in the lands ruled by Kurdish rulers.

Keywords: Persianate world; Persian; Bidlis; Emirate of Bidlis; Iranian-Islamic high culture

Introduction

The influence of the Persian language went far beyond the areas in which it was natively spoken.¹ From the eleventh century onwards, Persian became the *lingua franca* of various ethnic communities in Central Asia as well as the language of court, administration, diplomacy, and literature in the vast area from the Indian subcontinent to Transoxiana and, in subsequent centuries, the Western Caspian to Baghdad and Istanbul.²

Persian became the language of court in Central Asia, Western Asia, and Anatolia owing to the rulers of these lands, who had Turco-Mongol origins. The Turco-Mongol dynasties that successively dominated Iran after the tenth century took their state government practices from the Sassanids, on whom they based their legitimacy, and made Persian the language

¹ For more information, see Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*; Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature*; Bartold, *Cultural History of the Muslims*.

² Khanbagi, "Champions of the Persian Language: The Mongols or the Turks?," 195–196; Green, "The Frontiers of the Persianate World," 1–2.

of court. While Persian was significantly influenced by the language and even the culture of these Turco-Mongol dynasties, it was not completely disarmed by them.³ It is true that these dynasties had the infrastructure and experience necessary to governing a new country with a new people, but their skill was likely not as good as the Iranians, whose bureaucratic background was infamous.⁴ Thus, the influence of the Persian language increased in parallel with the vast geography over which these dynasties ruled. Persian became the court and diplomatic language of these conquerors during the time of the Ghaznavids, who continued the Persian renaissance started by the Samanids in eastern Iran, during the time of the Seljuks, and then of the Mongol conquerors. Historians studying this period agree that these empires' expansionist policies paved the way for the expansion of both the Persian language and Iranian-Islamic high culture.⁵

Persian's adventure in Anatolia can be said to have started in earnest with the Battle of Manzikert. The Iranianization of Anatolia in terms of state governance practices, bureaucracy, language, and literature became more systematic after the second half of the thirteenth century. In this period, as a result of the personal efforts of a few Ilkhanid viziers, governance elites from Iranian cities including Urmia, Khurasan, Hamadan, Isfahan, Arran, Shiraz, Marand, Tabriz, Qazvin, and Khoy started coming to Anatolia under Ilkhanid rule. Among these powerful viziers, Shams al-Dīn Muhammad Juvaynī, a favored vizier with a systematic agenda on Anatolia, filled the bureaucracy with people from Iran.⁶ Newly arrived Iranian elites also played a crucial role in carrying Iranian-Islamic high culture to Anatolia. The story of Muhammad b. Alī Rāvandī (d. after 1207), the author of *Rāhat al-sudūr* and historian of the Seljuk dynasty, is a notable illustration of how Iranian court traditions and culture were transmitted to Anatolia by such elites.⁷ Persian continued to be the language of literature, bureaucracy, and diplomacy of the ruling and elite classes in Anatolia in the fourteenth century and several centuries later.⁸ In the fifteenth century, all Anatolian principalities preferred Persian in their correspondence with each other, let alone with the Iranian world. From the reign of Orhan Gazi (1324–1362) to the reign of Bayezid II (1481–1512), the Ottomans corresponded with the rulers of the Germiyanids, Karamanids, Kastamonu, Dulkadir, Canik, Hamidili, and Erzincan and Mardin in Persian. Even some of Mehmed the Conqueror's correspondence with Crimean khans and Bayezid II's correspondence with his brother Cem Sultan are known to have been in Persian.⁹

Persian in and around Bidlis

This introduction was intended to portray the environment in which we trace the influence of the Persian language and Iranian-Islamic high culture in and around Bidlis, the capital of most prestigious Kurdish principality of sixteenth century. In fact, Bidlis was part of the vast "Persianate world" or, as Green reconceptualizes, "Persographia,"¹⁰ which stretched from the Balkans to Central Asia and from the Indian subcontinent to the Caucasus, the area

³ See for instance, Doerfer, *Türkische und Mongolische Elemente im Neupersischen*, which gives a huge number of Turkish lexical elements in the Persian language.

⁴ Compare, for instance, Çağrı Bey's noteworthy desperation about the inexperience in state administration after the Battle of Dandanakan. See Peacock, *The Great Seljuk Empire*, 3, 9, 39.

⁵ For the Persian language influence in the Islamic World, see Green, *The Persianate World: The Frontiers of a Eurasian Lingua Franca*.

⁶ Kerimüddin Mahmud Aksarayi, *Müsameretü'l-Ahbar: Moğollar Zamanında Türkiye Selçukları Tarihi*, 64, 79, 81, 148–149; Darling, "Persianate Sources on Anatolia and the Early History of Ottomans," 131, 141–142. For Shams al-Dīn Muhammad Juvaynī's career, see Lane, *Early Mongol Rule in Thirteenth-Century Iran: A Persian Renaissance*, 177–213.

⁷ Hillenbrand, "Ravandi, the Seljuk court at Konya and the Persianisation of Anatolian cities," 202–214.

⁸ For detailed information, see Riyahi, *Nufūz-e Zabān wa Adabiyāt-e Fārsī dar Qalamrov-e Osmānī*.

⁹ For these letters, see Feridun Ahmed Bey, *Münşeātü's-Selātīn*; for the Persian language's influence in the Ottoman Empire, see İnan, "Imperial Ambitions, Mystical Aspirations: Persian Learning in the Ottoman World," 75–92.

¹⁰ For discussion of the concept of "Persianate" and alternative conceptualization like "Persographia," see Green, "The Frontiers of the Persianate World," 3–9.

where Persian language, culture, literature, art, and identity dominated strongly. In this, Persian cultural zones would, of course, have been prevalent for several centuries.

From the thirteenth century onwards, Bidlis became one of the provincial centers where Persian was strongly represented in culture, architecture, literature, and administration. Persian's influence in and around Bidlis can be explained by factors such as loyalty to empires centered in Iran and the resulting integration and geographical and cultural proximity. In terms of the former, this influence was, in fact, not that different from other parts of Anatolia, as both these geographical regions had been ruled by great empires centered in Iran—such as the Seljuks, Ilkhanids, and Timurids—since the eleventh century, when Persian was the language of state governance, bureaucracy, and literature.¹¹ While Anatolia's direct connection with the center in Iran was interrupted by the collapse of the Ilkhanids, the situation in and around Bidlis continued as before. The Timurids' successors—the Qaraqoyunlus, Aqqoyunlus, and Safavids—were centered around Tabriz and continued to dominate Bidlis and its surroundings for at least another century. Thus, Bidlis and its vicinity remained in Persian and Iranian-Islamic culture's zone of influence for at least four more centuries. Persian not only was the language of chancery in Bidlis, but also that of its Sufis, poets, merchants, and scholars. By adopting Persian, Bidlis's ruling classes and elites endeavored to “describe their own social worlds and to paint themselves as same rather than others.”¹²

Bidlis's Mythological Origin: Sassanid Roots?

Bidlis's connection with the Persian world went far beyond the influence and use of its language. Indeed, Sharaf Khan attributed his ancestors' origins to the Sassanids (*mulūk-i akāsira*), mentioning their fame as the sons of Anūshīrvān, even among the people, and noting that his ancestry dated back to Bahvāt, one of the three sons of Anūshīrvān Jāmāsb b. Fīrūz, who settled in Akhlāt. According to Khan, Bidlis's rulers were first cousins with the Meliks of Shirvan and Rustamdar, ruled by other sons of Anūshīrvān.¹³ It is noteworthy that in the sixteenth-century environment in which dynasties sought ancestral association to Islamic legitimacy, even some Kurdish rulers (Hakkari) felt the need to associate themselves via ancestry with Abbasid caliphs.¹⁴ In contrast, Sharaf Khan sought a Persian legitimacy, proving that Sassanid ancestry was still indispensable to the legitimacy of Kurdistan's most prestigious sixteenth-century rulers. The presentation of Bidlis's rulers as the most prestigious among the Kurds is explained through this ancestral superiority. This phenomenon can also be observed among Çemişgezek rulers, who gave dynasty members Sassanid/Persian names such as Suhrāb, Kaykhusraw, Kayparwīz, Rustam, and Piltan, attaching seeming importance to this Persian heritage.

The connection between Bidlis's rulers and Persian heritage was not limited to this, however. Indeed, Sharaf Khan claimed that the Rojiki tribe, to which Bidlis's rulers belonged, came from Dari Persian.¹⁵ Sharaf Khan had a good education in the court of Shah Tahmāsb, and his role in this search for origins and the connection established with Persian heritage is a question awaiting an answer.

The Geographical Factor in Bidlis's Choice of Persian

In Bidlis, the influence of the Persian language and Iranian-Islamic high culture went beyond its loyalty as a vassal to empires centered in Iran, and was directly related to Bidlis's

¹¹ Compare Peacock and Yıldız, *Islamic Literature and Intellectual Life in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century Anatolia*.

¹² See, Green, “Idiom, Genre, and the Politics of Self-Description on the Peripheries of Persian,” 203.

¹³ Sharaf Khan Bidlīsī, *Sharafnāma*, vol. 1, 362.

¹⁴ Dehqan and Geç, “A Document on the Kurdish Hakkari Claim to the Abbasid Descent,” 4–12.

¹⁵ Sharaf Khan Bidlīsī, *Sharafnāma*, vol. 1, 357–358.

geography and location. This second and most decisive factor was particular to Bidlis and its vicinity. The mountainous geography inhabited by the Kurds extended to the Iranian realm. This geography on the trade routes from Central Asia, Iran, the Persian Gulf, and the Mediterranean was part of the Persianate world in historical, linguistic, ethnic, and religious terms.¹⁶ Hence, the fourteenth-century Ilkhanid notable Hamd Allah Mustawfî Qazvîni presented the wider geography that included Bidlis as a part of *Iran-zamîn*.¹⁷

Sharaf Khan (d. 1601), Bidlis's most prestigious khan, in his *Sharafnāma*—completed in 1597—emphasized Bidlis's location on a lively route and as a geography integrated into western Iran. He described the city as a passageway between the provinces of Azerbaijan, Diyarbakr, Armenia, and Diyar Rabi'a, claiming it was the sole route for pilgrims to Turkistan and India coming from Iran, Iraq, and Khurasan, travelers from Jiddah and Zangibar, of Khitay, Khotan, Russian, Slavic, and Bulgarian traders, and Arab and Persian merchants.¹⁸ This special location naturally connected Bidlis to the Iranian realm also in commercial terms. Iranian silk traders who transported their goods from Iran to Aleppo used the Bidlis Valley as a main route through the centuries. Iranian Ismaili intellectual Nāsir Khusraw, who came to Bidlis-Erzen in the winter of 1046–47, wrote that he encountered Iranian merchants selling grapes (*raz-e armānūsh*) there.¹⁹ Between 1335 and 1343, Francesco Balducci Pegolotti (1290–1347), the representative of the Bardi banking company in Cyprus, wrote a merchant manual on his way to Tabriz that included valuable information on every place Italian commerce had reached, including the Bidlis route.²⁰

Bidlis and Tabriz: Cities in Commercial and Cultural Perspectives

As Bidlis was an important market for Iranian merchants, Tabriz was an important trade point for the merchants of Bidlis. Francesco Romano, a Venetian merchant who came to Bidlis at the beginning of the sixteenth century, wrote that traders in Bidlis often went to Tabriz for trading; even people from the towns surrounding Bidlis went to Tabriz to sell their honey, cheese, and butter.²¹ Bidlis maintained these commercial ties with Tabriz for centuries, so much so that Evliya Çelebi, who visited the Bidlis in the second half of the seventeenth century, stated that most of its people were merchants who traded with Iran.²² Bidlis was also described as the (Tabriz) gates of Azerbaijan due to its strategic location and centuries-old political, economic, and cultural links to Tabriz.²³ Only such cultural affinity and historical links can explain why Bidlis's elite classes—including its rulers and Idris-i Bidlisî (1457–1520) and his family—migrated to Tabriz when the armies of Uzun Hasan besieged Bidlis in 1468, or why the Bidlis ruler Shams al-Dīn Khan and his tribe migrated to Iran to Shah Tahmāsb when the armies of Suleiman the Magnificent took the city in 1535.²⁴

These cultural links and affinities between Tabriz, Bidlis, and its vicinity continued while both cities were under Ottoman rule. When Tabriz was under Ottoman rule in the sixteenth

¹⁶ Fuccaro, "The Ottoman Frontier in Kurdistan in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," 237–238.

¹⁷ *Iran-zamîn*: This vast geography consisted of Persian Iraq, Arabian Iraq, Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Luristan, Arran, Mughan, Khurasan, Gilan, Mazandaran, Shirvan, Kerman, Greater Armenia, Little Armenia, Tabaristan, Khuzistan, and Fars, and extended to Sind, Kabul, Khwarazm, and Mavara al-Nahr in the east, and to Niksar, Sis, and Damascus beyond the Euphrates in the west. See Hamd-Allah b. Ebibekr b. Muhammad b. Nasr Mustawfî Qazvîni, *Nuzhat al-Qulūb*, 21–22.

¹⁸ Sharaf Khan Bidlisî, *Sharafnāma: Tārīkh-e Mufasssal-e Kurdistan*, vol. 1, 339.

¹⁹ Nāsir Khosraw, *Safarnāma*, 13.

²⁰ Sinclair, *Eastern Trade and the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages: Pegolottis Ayas-Tabriz Itinerary and its Commercial Context*, 6, 101, 127–128, 134.

²¹ *Safarnāma-hā-ye Vaniziyān dar Iran*, 371, 375.

²² Kahraman and Dağlı, *Evliya Çelebi Seyahatnamesi*, 171.

²³ BOA, A. DVN. 1/37.

²⁴ Genç, *Acem'den Rum'a Bir Bürokrat ve Tarihiçi: İdris-i Bidlisî (1457–1520)*, 328–329.

century (1585–1603), Bidlis’s rulers and especially Hakkari emirs conducted their administrative matters through the pasha of Tabriz.

Bidlis’s rulers were able to politically and culturally integrate into Iranian-Islamic state bureaucracy and high culture as required thanks to factors such as loyalty to empires centered in Iran and geographical proximity. The most significant tool of this successful integration was no doubt language. Persian language and culture continued its influence for centuries in and around Bidlis via political, bureaucratic, and cultural channels through this loyalty and connection.

Persian’s Flourishing as a Language of Bureaucrats, Sufis, and Notables

The Persian language and Iranian-Islamic high culture continued to exist in Bidlis for centuries through two channels. Firstly, the internal bureaucracy of the Bidlis court and diplomatic relations with the world around it operated in Persian. This in turn meant that the rulers and others in the court, such as scribes, spoke this language. Secondly, mutual Sufi activities between Bidlis and the Iranian realm was a vehicle keeping cultural links lively. Let us now see these two channels.

a) Political and Cultural Integration and Persian Language in Bidlis

While *Sharafnāma* author Sharaf Khan proudly wrote that his ancestors, Bidlis’s rulers, ruled over these lands for 760 years, he only provided information on eighteen of these reigns.²⁵ Sharaf Khan claimed that the history of Bidlis’s rulers extended to the times before Timur, beginning the clearest information on his dynasty with Haji Sharaf b. Ziyā’ al-Dīn, Bidlis’s ruler in 1394, the year Timur came to the region. According to Sharaf Khan, Haji Sharaf welcomed Timur and professed his loyalty, while Timur in return granted him the territories of Pasin, Avnik, and Malazgird—in addition to Bidlis, Muş, and Akhlat, which he already ruled—in a charter.²⁶ Haji Sharaf’s son, Amīr Shams al-Dīn, became a loyal ally of Qara Yusuf, another Iranian shah who took all of Azerbaijan after battling Timur’s successors following his death. According to Sharaf Khan, there was a strong, father-son type relationship between the Qaraqyunlus and Bidlis’s rulers, so much so that Qaraqyunlu Qara Yusuf (1406–1420) addressed Bidlis ruler Malik Shams al-Dīn as “my son.” Bidlis ruler Amīr Shams al-Dīn supported Qara Yusuf in his struggle against Timur’s successors, and Qara Yusuf even took refuge with him once. When Qara Yusuf defeated the army of Timur’s successors and took Azerbaijan (1407–1408), he decreed the province of Bidlis belonged to Bidlis ruler Malik Shams al-Dīn due to their friendship, alliance, and kinship.²⁷ After Qara Yusuf’s death, Amīr Shams al-Dīn took Kurdistan emirs and appeared before Shahrukh, who had come to Akhlat, offered his submission, and had the charter given by his father Timur renewed in 1421. In the period in which Uzun Hasan and Shah Ismail subdued Bidlis and sent the dynasty’s members into exile in Tabriz, the city’s rule was given directly to Tabriz. Thus, Bidlis’s rulers can be said to have submitted to great empires centered in Iran such as the Timurids, Qaraqyunlus, and Safavids, whether as vassals or directly, from the time they announced their loyalty to Timur in 1394 to the time they went under Ottoman rule in 1515.

Bidlis and its surrounding area’s political and cultural integration into the Iranian realm happened much earlier than the dates suggested in the few documents that survived—most did not—in the second half of the eleventh century, when Iranian-Islamic high culture came to Anatolia. The clearest evidence for this again comes from Sharaf Khan, who wrote that the principality’s archive, which contained charters (including Timur’s charter), earlier decrees

²⁵ Sharaf Khan Bidlīsī, *Sharafnāma: Tārīkh-e Mufasssal-e Kurdistan*, vol. 1, 362.

²⁶ Sharaf Khan Bidlīsī, *Sharafnāma*, vol. 1, 372–373.

²⁷ Sharaf Khan Bidlīsī, *Sharafnāma*, vol. 1, 374–387.

of sultans, and the orders and documents of Bidlis's rulers, was lost when Sharaf Khan was killed and Shams al-Dīn Khan took refuge with Shah Tahmāsb in 1535.²⁸

Despite this loss, Bidlis's rulers' relation as empirical vassals is documented, albeit to a limited extent. The few surviving documents show that Persian was the language of bureaucracy and diplomacy in the court of the Bidlis begs through these centuries. The first of these was the charter, in Persian, given to Amīr Shams al-Dīn by Qaraqyunlu Qara Yusuf. In this charter, dated 1417, Qara Yusuf declared Malik Shams al-Dīn, whom he addressed as *amīr al-a'zam va amīr al-umarā al-'Ajam*, as the most distinguished of the Iranian emirs, that he had been granted a privileged position among his peers, and that Bidlis, the attached Akhlat, Muş, and Khinis, and their fortresses were left at his disposal.²⁹

Another *ferman* from the period when Bidlis and its vicinity was under Safavid rule is quite significant, as it addressed local administrators in Persian. In this *ferman* issued by Shah Ismail (1501–1524), dated March 1514, the shah warned travelers, local administrators, and army members (veterans) not to cause too much trouble on the main route for the inhabitants of Adilcevaz and Akhlat, as they were in a miserable state, and not to embark on any drudgery such as quartering services, fodder, or mounts.³⁰ Another example belonged to his successor. It was Shah Tahmāsb (1524–1576) who proclaimed Shams al-Dīn Khan as the governor of Bidlis principality in a Persian edict in October 1533.³¹ Tahmāsb was also in contact with local Ottoman rulers around Bidlis. He wrote in 1553 in a Persian letter to Mustafa Beg, the Ottoman ruler of Adilcevaz, a territory occasionally reclaimed from Ottomans, to send a wagon of mule-load delicious Akhlat apple to his palace in Tabriz.³²

Bidlis's rulers used Persian, the *lingua franca* of the time, in their diplomatic relations with not only the Iranian realm to which they belonged, but also the Ottoman realm. The earliest example of this is the letter that Bidlis ruler Shah Muhammad sent to Murad II (121–1451).³³ Another letter was sent to Mehmed the Conqueror by Shah Muhammad's son, Sharaf, written to convey the Bidlis ruler's congratulations, as an ally of the Qaraqyunlus, on the conquest of Istanbul. Both letters reflect the Ottoman perception and sultan's imagination of the world of Bidlis's Kurdish rulers in the fifteenth century, and reveals that these rulers followed a policy of balance to continue their existence in between the Ottoman and Iranian worlds.

The second letter deserves a closer look, as it shows how the Bidlis ruler integrated himself into the Iranian world. Firstly, the letter provides examples of the eloquent construction produced in the Bidlis court, as Bidlis rulers were careful to patronize scribes competent in the literary style that prospered in Iran. Thus, Bidlis's rulers must have been aware that a scribe did more than simply compose letters: a scribe also shaped the ruler's ideology and policies and carried out sophisticated correspondence. The letter is an interesting example exhibiting the Kurdish world's admiration for the Persian language and the abilities of scribes educated in Persian under Kurdish rulers. Some of the formulations in this ruler's eloquent letter clearly show a familiarity with the Timurid cultural world in Herat. The distinctive similarities between this letter and Herat-centered Timurid diplomatic correspondence supports this claim in terms of form and style.³⁴ This masterfully penned letter not only reflects the politics of Bidlis's rulers in the mid-fifteenth century vis-à-vis the two worlds, but also shows how they were integrated into the world and intellectual environment of Persian-Islamic high culture through the language, rhetorical style, and images

²⁸ Sharaf Khan Bidlīsī, *Sharafnāma*, vol. 1, 373.

²⁹ Sharaf Khan Bidlīsī, *Sharafnāma*, vol. 1, 376–378; Tabatabai, *Farmānhā-ye Torkmanan-e Qaraqoyunlu wa Aq Qoyunlu*, 20–22.

³⁰ T SMA. e. 750/3.

³¹ T SMA. e. 748/24.

³² T SMA. e. 859/13.

³³ Feridun Ahmed Bey, *Münşeatīi's-Selātin*, vol. 1, 210–212.

³⁴ Anonymous, *Risāla fī Qawā'id wa Qawānīn al-Inshā wa al-Adab*, ff. 1–2.

they used.³⁵ In the initial period after Bidlis was taken from the Safavids and came under Ottoman rule, Bidlis's rulers continued to communicate with the Ottomans in Persian. For example, Sharaf Khan wrote down the news of Shah Ismail that he received from his spies in Persian and sent to Istanbul.³⁶ However, as discussed below, the integration into Ottoman politics and culture achieved in the first half of the sixteenth century, and thus the break from the Persian world, led to Persian's gradual replacement by Turkish.

Both Bidlis's rulers and other Kurdish rulers in its vicinity communicated with the Ottomans in Persian, as they did with the Safavids, through their talented scribes. For example, when Bayezid II (1481–1512) wanted information on the state of Shah Ismail and the Qizilbash, he wrote a letter to Rustam Bag Mukrī, a Kurdish ruler at the frontiers, and Rustam Bag replied back to the sultan also in Persian.³⁷ Persian continued to be the *lingua franca* of these Kurdish principalities even after their integration into the Ottoman realm after the battle of Chaldiran. Qasim Beg Mardisī, the Kurdish ruler of Egil, was one who reported the state of Shah Ismail to the Ottoman court in Persian.³⁸ Hakkari rulers also communicated with both of their neighbors in Persian, like the Bidlis's ruler and other Kurds. Shah Tahmāsb, in his 1534 letter to Zāhid Bag's son, Zaynal Beg, spoke of their friendship and allegiance against the enemy.³⁹ The same Zaynal Beg, when he later approached the Ottoman side, reported to Suleiman the Magnificent in Persian on the state of Shah Tahmāsb and that the sultan's son, Bayezid, was still in prison in Qazvin.⁴⁰

Another noteworthy aspect that should be added regarding the use of Persian in Bidlis pertains to gravestones. Several gravestones dating back to the early 16th century belonging to members of the dynasty can provide us with insights in this regard. When Sharaf Khan was assassinated in 1533, a famous ruba'i by Amir Shahi Sabzavari was inscribed on his gravestone inside the mausoleum built for him. In the tombs of other members of the dynasty from this period, poems by Iranian poets can also be observed. These are most commonly found in the historical cemetery of Ahlat and Zeydan. In both cemeteries, numerous tombstones from the 13th to the 16th centuries feature various Persian poems.

b) Sufism in Bidlis and its Strong Relationship with Persian

While Bidlis's palace bureaucracy conducted relations with both the Persian and Rumi worlds in Persian, the second medium facilitating Persian's influence on these lands was the cultural dynamism established with the Persian world and the two-way traffic of Sufis. It must be noted that the prominence and pervasiveness of Tabriz-centered orders—such as Hurūfiya and Nūrbakhshīya—in Bidlis, paved the way for the diffusion of Persian language and culture.⁴¹ Sharaf Khan writes that Bidlis had always been “the place where the virtuous and learned came together, a center for scholars.”⁴² As he emphasized, Bidlis was indeed the most prestigious of the cities ruled by Kurds in this period, an intellectual center attracting Sufis and scholars from across the world, most of whom hailed from Persia. The most important factor attracting Persian Sufis was Sheikh Abū Tāhir Kurdī's presence in the city, mentioned in the work of Mawlānā Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī (d. 1492) titled *Nafahāt*, alongside Sheikh Abū Najīb Suhrawardī's follower, Sheikh Ammār-i Yāsir al-Bidlīsī.⁴³ Sheikh Ammār-i Yāsir al-Bidlīsī (d. 1194–1207) was the Bidlis representative of

³⁵ For the letter, see Dehqan and Genç, “A Letter by Sharaf b. Shah Muhammad to Mehmed the Conqueror,” 209–216.

³⁶ TSMA. e. 858/64.

³⁷ Feridun Ahmed Bey, *Münşeatü's-Selâtin*, vol. 1, 353–354.

³⁸ TSMA. e. 750-12.

³⁹ TSMA. E. 858/80.

⁴⁰ TSMA. E. 754/5.

⁴¹ For details see, Genç, *Acem'den Rum'a Bir Bürokrat ve Tarihi: İdris-i Bidlīsī (1457–1520)*, 23–28.

⁴² Sharaf Khan Bidlīsī, *Sharafnāma*, vol. 1, 345.

⁴³ Sharaf Khan Bidlīsī, *Sharafnāma*, vol. 1, 341–345.

a *tariqa*, the succession of which extended from Junayd of Baghdad to Hasan al-Basrī and Caliph Ali. Sayyid Muhammad Nūrbakhsh (d. 1464) described the sheikh as a “saint, mentor, scientist of objective and esoteric knowledge, the only saint of his time, interpreter of Islamic law,” showing his Sufi affinity as a follower of Najm al-Dīn Kubra (d. 1221), the founder of the Kubrawiyya movement, as well as the fact that the sheikh’s presence in Bidlis played an important role in the city being a center of Nurbakhshi/Kubrawi propaganda.⁴⁴ Sheikh Ammār-i Yāsir al-Bidlīsī’s profound influence made Bidlis attractive for Persian Sufis at the end of the fifteenth century. For example, Sheikh Najm al-Dīn Kubra came to Bidlis to learn the teachings of the *tariqa* on the advice of Sheikh Ismail Qasrī, in whose convent he stayed in Khuzistan.⁴⁵ The presence of Mawlānā Abd al-Khallāq, son of Sheikh Hasan Khizānī, successor to Sheikh Abd Allāh Badakhshānī, and whose *tariqa* lineage dated back to Ala al-Dawlah Samnānī (d. 1336), is another example of how this Sufi dynamism made Bidlis an important center.⁴⁶

Bidlis was sufficiently culturally intertwined with Iran to respond promptly and positively to Sufi propaganda. That Sayyid Muhammad Nūrbakhsh’s Sufi propaganda in Iran paralleled that in Bidlis can thus be explained.⁴⁷ This propaganda made Iran a frequent destination for the Sufis of Bidlis. Idris-i Bidlīsī’s father, Husām al-Dīn Alī Bidlīsī (d. 1504), came to Ray with his family after joining the Nūrbakhshī *tariqa* centered around Ray as a result of Seyyid Muhammed Nūrbakhsh’s propaganda. After his education on *tariqa* doctrine, Husām al-Dīn Alī Bidlīsī returned to Bidlis and worked to propagate the teachings. When he had to leave Bidlis a while later, he chose another Nūrbakhshī center, Tabriz, for his residence. Husām al-Dīn Alī Bidlīsī’s presence there meant that the teachings of the of Shiite-Nūrbakhshī *tariqa* were also spread there, as well as the Shiite-Nūrbakhshī circle.⁴⁸

It seems that Bidlis was a base for “marginal” groups like the Hurūfīs as well as the Nūrbakhshīs. The Hurūfī text *Istivānāma*, written by Abū al-Yaqīn Ghiyās al-Dīn Muhammad ibn Husayn ibn Muhammed Husayn al-Astarābādī in Bidlis in the first half of the fifteenth century, in the lifetime of Husām al-Dīn Alī and his ancestors, clearly shows the propagation of Hurūfī teachings in Bidlis. In this text, Ghiyās al-Dīn Astarābādī, a Hurūfī dervish, states that he was sent to the Bidlis Castle, the residence of the son of Fazl Allah Astarābādī (d. 1394), Amīr Nūr Allah (d. 1425).⁴⁹ According to the *Istivānāma*, the Bidlis community’s acceptance of *tariqa* teachings—like the communities of Tabriz, Gilan, and Shirvan—shows this integration.⁵⁰ Indeed, the fact that Hurūfī dervish Haji Isa-ye Bidlīsī was in touch with Aliyy al-A’la, a Hurūfī caliph and Fazl Allah Astarābādī’s son-in-law, while *Istivānāma* author Ghiyās al-Dīn Astarābādī met with Husām al-Dīn Yazdjardī, another Hurūfī dervish and the man responsible for the care of Fazl Allah Astarābādī’s family after his death in his *zawiya*, in Bidlis indicates that the city was a frequent destination for Hurūfī elites. Further, the fact that the *Istivānāma*, an important Hurūfī text, was written there also shows that Bidlis was center accepted by Hurūfīs.⁵¹

Traces of the teachings of Sheikh Badr al-Dīn (d. 1420), another heterodox inclination, can also be followed in Bidlis. Badr al-Dīn’s mystic teacher, Sayyid Husayn-i Akhlatī (d. 1397), was “the master of jafr, objective and esoteric knowledge” from the Akhlat town of Bidlis.⁵² Akhlatī, a prominent Sufi with a deep impact on the intellectual circles of the Timurid court, closely followed by personalities like Sharaf al-Dīn Alī Yazdī (d. 1454), and was in touch with

⁴⁴ Hāfez Husayn Karbalāī Tabrizī, *Rawdat al-jinān va jannat al-janān*, vol. 2, 335–36.

⁴⁵ Hāfez Husayn Karbalāī Tabrizī, *Rawdat al-jinān va jannat al-janān*, vol. 2, 333.

⁴⁶ Sharaf Khan Bidlīsī, *Sharafnāma*, vol. 1, 345–346.

⁴⁷ Bashir, *Messianic Hopes and Mystical Visions: The Nurbakhshiya Between Medieval and Modern Islam*, 68–69.

⁴⁸ Genç, *Acem’den Rum’a Bir Bürokrat ve Tarihi: İdris-i Bidlīsī (1457–1520)*, 29–30.

⁴⁹ Abū al-Yaqīn Ghiyās al-Dīn Muhammad ibn Husayn ibn Muhammed Husayn al-Astarābādī, *Istivānāma*, f. 38a; For Fazlallah Astarābādī and Hurūfism, see Bashir, *Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis*.

⁵⁰ al-Astarābādī, *Istivānāma*, ff. 40a–42b.

⁵¹ al-Astarābādī, *Istivānāma*, ff. 40b, 80b.

⁵² Sharaf Khan Bidlīsī, *Sharafnāma*, vol. 1, 351; Bruinessen, *Kürtlük, Türklük, Alevilik*, 97–98.

Shah Nimat Allah Valī and his circles and was presented by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Dawwānī (d. 1502) as a great master.⁵³ Like Sufis, scholars of Bidlis also contributed significantly to this cultural integration with the Persian world. Mawlānā Muhy al-Dīn Akhlatī, who Sharaf Khan presented as the only person in the science of mathematics and astronomy, was personally brought from Akhlat by Nāsir al-Dīn Tūsī (d. 1274) after the Maragha Observatory was founded.⁵⁴

c) Persian and Elite Education in Bidlis

The Persian language, the *lingua franca* in the vast geography from the Indian subcontinent to Central Asia, from the Caucasus to Istanbul and Baghdad throughout the Middle Ages, was also Bidlis's literary language. There is no doubt of the fact that Persian was a language in which the educated elites, ruling classes, and court members read and wrote, encouraging those who wrote books to find a wider readership. It is precisely for this reason that the scholars and Sufis of Bidlis already wrote their works in Persian at the beginning of the fourteenth century. In Bidlis in 1308–9, one of the disciples of Ammār b. Muhammad b. Ammār b. Matar b. Sahāb al-Shaybānī al-Bidlīsī, renowned as Ammār-ı Yāsir al-Bidlīsī, compiled the *Kitābu Bidāyat al-Mubtada ila Nihāyat al-Muntaha*, which discussed the beginnings of the *tariqa*, the followers, the conditions and benefits of the service to the sheikh, the differences between sharia, *tariqa*, and truth *maqams*, and explained Sufi terms in Persian.⁵⁵ The famous work of Hurūfī dervish Ghiyās al-Dīn Astarābādī, mentioned above, was written in Bidlis in Persian. Astarābādī's contemporary, Husām al-Dīn Alī, who migrated from Bidlis to Tabriz after 1469, wrote an important part of his books in Persian. Idris-i Bidlīsī's father, Husām al-Dīn Alī, wrote a commentary on Caliph Ali's *Khutbat al-Bayān* in Tabriz in 1487.⁵⁶ This tradition would continue for many years in Bidlis, where Persian was the language of history, literature, and mysticism. It is quite understandable that an important portion of the books by Husām al-Dīn Alī Bidlīsī's son, Idris-i Bidlīsī, who was proud of his Persian identity, were in Persian. Although his father was from Bidlis, Idris-i Bidlīsī was born and raised in Iran.⁵⁷ Even his correspondence with the Ottoman sultans and court members was in Persian, alongside the history he wrote for the Ottoman dynasty entitled *Hasht Behesht*.⁵⁸ In this dynastic history, a turning point in Ottoman historiography, Bidlīsī created an imperial image for the Ottoman sultans. The only book on Kurdistan's sixteenth-century dynastic rulers, and Bidlis rulers, penned by Bidlis ruler Sharaf Khan in 1597 was also in Persian.⁵⁹ Even if Sharaf Khan had not grown up in Shah Tahmāsb's palace and not received a good education, he would have written his work in Persian to garner a wide readership in accordance with the spirit of the times.

While we know that dynastic members, authors, poets, and Sufis used perfect Persian, the only information on how the Persian language was established amongst the Bidlis public comes from Ismaili preacher and intellectual, Nāsir Khusraw, who explicitly mentions Arabic, Persian, and Armenian among the languages spoken in Bidlis when he visited there in the winter of 1046–47.⁶⁰ However, it is appropriate to say that the people of

⁵³ For the Mamluq and Timurid intellectual circles in which Akhlati was included, see Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran: Sharaf al-Dīn 'Alī Yazdī and the Islamic Republic of Letters*, 114–122.

⁵⁴ Sharaf Khan Bidlīsī, *Sharafnāma*, vol. 1, 352.

⁵⁵ Ammār b. Muhammad b. Ammār b. Matar b. Sahāb al-Shaybānī al-Bidlīsī, *Kitābu Bidāyat al-Mubtada ila Nihāyat al-Muntaha*, ff. 1b–2a.

⁵⁶ Husām al-Dīn Alī al-Bidlīsī, *Sharh-e Khutbat al-Bayān-e Amīr al-Muminīn Ali*.

⁵⁷ For the intellectual activities of Husām al-Dīn Alī and Idris-i Bidlīsī, see Genç, *Acem'den Rum'a Bir Bürokrat ve Tarihi: İdris-i Bidlīsī (1457–1520)*.

⁵⁸ For Bidlīsī's letters in Persian, see Genç, "Şah ile Sultan Arasında Bir Acem Bürokrati: İdris-i Bidlīsī'nin Şah İsmail'in Himayesine Girme Çabası," 43–75; Genç, "İdris-i Bidlīsī'nin II. Bayezid ve I. Selim'e Mektupları," 147–208.

⁵⁹ For detailed information on Sharaf Khan, see Dehqan and Genç, "Reflections on Sharaf Khan's Autobiography," 46–61; Dehqan and Genç, "Why Was Sharaf Khan Killed?," 13–19.

⁶⁰ Nāsir Khosraw, *Safarnāma*, 13.

Bidlis were much more familiar with Persian than Arabic. Sharaf Khan praises the *qaside* written in Persian by Sheikh Hasan Khizānī's son, Mawlānā Abd al-Khallāq, on the beauty of Bidlis, his city.⁶¹

Another important example showing the influence of the Persian language and Iranian-Islamic high culture in Bidlis is Shukrī-i Bidlīsī, another distinguished *Selīm-nāme* writer from Bidlis who lived between the second half of the fifteenth and first half of the sixteenth century. Shukrī-i Bidlīsī, who received a good madrasa education in Bidlis, underlines that he was also skilled in chancery-style writing and proudly mentions that he could write poetry in Turkish, Persian, Arabic, Kurdish, Armenian, and Hindi. Shukrī-i Bidlīsī's linguistic ability was actually the result of Bidlis's rich intellectual environment, dominant since the fourteenth century. The ability to write poetry in more than one language gives us an idea of the city's cosmopolitan life. After his education, Shukrī-i Bidlīsī headed to Iran in search of his first career, alongside his fellow countrymen. His travel to Herat and Gilan gives us clues, as he must have traveled under the auspices of the local rulers and achieved a position consonant with his literary abilities. After experiencing the cultural atmosphere of these places, Shukrī claims there were very few books he could not find; he was able to study all major Persian books in both verse and prose.⁶²

Persian Fades in the Court of Bidlis

It was under the administration of Sharaf Khan (d. 1533) that Turkish began replacing Persian in the khanate's bureaucracy, coinciding with the rise of Turkish in the Ottoman bureaucracy. In fact, the Ottomans had used Turkish in their bureaucracy since the fourteenth century, but some surviving documents from this period also show their familiarity with the use of Persian. From the 1360s onwards, the Ottomans seemed quite content to benefit from the cultural heritage of Persian in their state administrative practices. Towards the end of the fourteenth century, important cultural centers of western Anatolia came under the Ottoman sphere of influence, leading to the flourishing of Turkish.⁶³

It is generally known that Persian influence, observed in the reign of Murad II, flourished under Mehmed II and his son Bayezid II as an instrument of the empire's vision after the conquest of Istanbul. Patronizing the Persian writers in the palace, these sultans assembled an intellectual circle around them consisting of Iranian Sufis, litterateur, bureaucrats, poets, and scholars. Contemporary sources are full of examples depicting how these Iranian protégés were privileged in the palace.⁶⁴ Interestingly, in the second half of the fifteenth century, when Persian was on the rise among rulers and elites, balance gradually shifted in favor of Turkish and the circles patronizing Turkish writers increased. During the reign of Murad II, many books were translated from Arabic and Persian into Turkish. In fact, this was the continuation of the casting of the Turkish as a literary language. Thus, Turkish became the language of the bureaucracy.⁶⁵ Although this may seem paradoxical, both languages developed in different circles. It is generally accepted that, after the destruction of the Seljuk and Ilkhanid authorities, local rulers in Anatolia who did not know Persian and Arabic transformed Turkish into a written language. On the other hand, after the destruction of Ilkhanid authority, some bureaucrats and scribes were also patronized by the Anatolian principalities and, of course, the Ottomans.⁶⁶ Until the sixteenth century,

⁶¹ Sharaf Khan Bidlīsī, *Sharafnāma*, vol. 1, 345–346.

⁶² Şükri-i Bidlīsī, *Selīm-nāme*, 388–389; for further information on Shukrī-i Bidlīsī see, Özcan, *Şükri-i Bidlīsī*, 254–256.

⁶³ Darling, "Ottoman Turkish: Written Language and Scribal Practice, 13th to 20th Centuries," 171–174.

⁶⁴ For further information, see Genç, *Acem'den Rum'a Bir Bürokrat ve Tarihi: İdris-i Bidlīsī (1457–1520)*, 194–200, 253–266; İnan, "Imperial Ambitions, Mystical Aspirations: Persian Learning in the Ottoman World," 76–78; Kuru, "The literature of Rum: The making of a literary tradition (1450–1600)," 548–592.

⁶⁵ For further information, see Mansuroğlu, "The Rise and Development of Written Turkish in Anatolia," 250–64; Kuru, "The literature of Rum: The making of a literary tradition (1450–1600)," 550–558.

⁶⁶ See Darling, "Persianate Sources on Anatolia and the Early History of Ottomans," 126–144.

Ottoman sultans continued to conduct multilingual correspondence, as the scribes in the *divan* bureaucracy came from diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Ottoman relations with the world around them enabled the making of a multilingual early Ottoman bureaucracy. Until the first quarter of the sixteenth century, Ottoman sultans corresponded in Arabic with Meccan rulers and Mamluks, and in Persian with the Turco-Persian world.⁶⁷ For the first time, Yavuz Sultan Selim went beyond standard bureaucratic patterns and sent letters to Shah Ismail in Turkish. In the first half of the sixteenth century, with institutionalization of Turkish, changes in the cultural policy were also evident in the imperial bureaucracy. Kanuni Sultan Süleyman corresponded with both the eastern and western world mostly in a standardized Turkish to reflect his political and cultural prestige. These sultans' conscious preference to correspond in Turkish, even with the Safavid shahs, can be explained by the emergence of a new cultural consciousness.⁶⁸ Moreover, the use of Turkish in bureaucracy, literature, and historical writing led the Ottomans to create a new identity, setting them apart from the other Muslim world.⁶⁹

Turkish was the primary language used in documents produced by the *divan* bureaucracy. However, this does not mean that Persian had lost its influence in the palace. Persian still constituted an important portion of the texts produced by the Ottoman bureaucracy and literary world, and Ottoman scribes imitated their Iranian colleagues.⁷⁰ As Persian was patronized in the palace, it was the language of works written and presented to the sultans, who also wrote poetry in this language. In addition, Persian continued to be used in *tahrir*, *ruzname*, and *inamat* registers and some bureaucratic financial records. The obvious distinction here is that Persian was used sparingly in the bureaucracy, as correspondence with administrators within the empire's borders was almost entirely conducted in Turkish.

Persian Marginal Stability

Bidlis's integration into the Ottoman administrative system after 1515 changed Persian's fate as the *lingua franca* of its courts, rulers, and the Kurdish rulers in its vicinity. In the first quarter of the sixteenth century, Bidlis's rulers continued to communicate with Istanbul in Persian, but gradually abandoned this tradition. Due to imperial decrees, all kinds of *berats* and *timar* records from the capital were dispatched in Turkish and, following this tradition, Bidlis's khans began patronizing scribes who also knew Turkish. This transformation took place during the time of Bidlis ruler Sharaf Khan the grandfather, who corresponded with Istanbul in both Persian and Turkish. Integration into the Ottoman administrative-bureaucratic system and cultural world underlay this transformation. Further, it is also interesting that this cultural transformation coincided with a period in which Persian permeated Ottoman Turkish in the Ottoman palace.⁷¹ However, this does not mean that, in Bidlis, Turkish completely replaced Persian, as Persian only lost its status as the court's bureaucratic and diplomatic language. The ruling class and city elites maintained interest in Persian.

For most of its history, Bidlis was under the influence of Persian language and culture. It was only in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that the Ottoman world became most affected by Persian language and Iranian court culture. Beginning with the reign of Mehmed II, Iranian poets and literati—such as Maālī and Kāshifī, who were commissioned by the palace—wrote Persian historical works for the ruler. This tradition became firmly established in the Ottoman palace in the reigns of subsequent sultans as well. During the

⁶⁷ Şahin, *Empire and Power in the Reign of Süleyman: Narrating the Sixteenth-Century Ottoman World*, 215–216.

⁶⁸ Şahin, *Empire and Power*, 223–227.

⁶⁹ Darling, "Ottoman Turkish: Written Language and Scribal Practice, 13th to 20th Centuries," 173.

⁷⁰ Darling, "Ottoman Turkish: Written Language and Scribal Practice, 13th to 20th Centuries," 171.

⁷¹ İnan, "Imperial Ambitions, Mystical Aspirations: Persian Learning in the Ottoman World", 78; Genç, *Acem'den Rum'a Bir Bürokrat ve Tarihi: İdris-i Bidlisi (1457-1520)*, 190-197.

reign of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, the establishment of an official “shāhnāma writer” position in the palace gave Persian an official status in the Ottoman court. Thanks to the tradition of “shāhnāma writing,” established around the 1550s, Persian enjoyed its strongest period in the Ottoman palace until the end of the century. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, with the decline of official support for this tradition of historical writing, Persian’s prestigious position in the Ottoman court was lost. At this time, we see that the Persian language was no longer in use, especially in the field of historical writing. Yet, Persian continued to be used in the Ottoman palace particularly in financial affairs. From this perspective, it can be argued that, from the seventeenth century, Bidlis and Istanbul were not so different in terms of their palaces’ lack of support for Persian as a literary language. In other words, Persian’s decline as a literary and historical language in Istanbul and Bidlis nearly paralleled each other.⁷²

Although Turkish replaced Persian in Bidlis’s palace bureaucracy as a result of its integration into the Ottoman administrative system, Persian preserved its prestige as the language used by rulers and the educated elite to write literature, history, and mysticism books, and was even used in grave-stone inscriptions. While Turkish had become a dominant language in relations between the Kurdish principality and Ottoman world to which it was connected, it is important to note that Persian’s use among Bidlis’s dynastic members and educated elite did not diminish completely. On the contrary, dynastic members were proficient enough to write books in and translate from Persian. It was, in a way, necessary at the time for Sharaf Khan (d. 1601) to write the Kurdish history *Sharafnāma* in Persian. After his father, Shams al-Dīn Khan, took refuge in Shah Tahmāsb’s court, it was not surprising that Sharaf Khan, who benefited from a good education alongside the princes of Shah Tahmāsb’s palace in Qazvin and knew the language as well as a native speaker, wrote this book in Persian. However, the reason he chose this language was both to find readership across the wide area in which Persian was read and spoken and to promote the legitimacy of his dynasty to the world around him. Sharaf Khan completed his book and sent a copy to the Kurdish *begs* of Kilis (Husayn Jānbūlād) and Ardalān (Halo Khan). This move could have been intended to show the Bidlis ruler’s dynastic supremacy, and thus help gain legitimacy, but also shows that there were people who read and wrote Persian in the palaces of other Kurdish rulers.⁷³ There is no doubt that among the belongings of Sharaf Khan, who was an intellectual, there were precious books, looted after his death.

With Sharaf Khan’s murder, the connection was severed between Bidlis’s rulers and the Persian side.⁷⁴ While the rulers succeeding Sharaf Khan knew Persian, the fact that they translated or commissioned translations of some books from Persian to Turkish suggests that the area using Persian as literary language was shrinking. Sharaf Khan’s grandson, Bidlis ruler Abdal Khan b. Ziyā al-Dīn Khan (1610–1655), did not write a history in Persian, but he did commission the translation of Qazvīnī’s famous book *Nuzhat al-Qulūb* into Ottoman Turkish. This translation shows that Persian still had a respected place in the Bidlis court and dynastic members still knew it very well, but the need to translate it for greater understanding points to the presence of a community that no longer understood Persian.⁷⁵

Like his grandfather, Abdal Khan was interested in literature and books. Indeed, Evliya Çelebi stresses the large number of Persian books in the palace library looted after his defeat (1655), including twenty volumes of the *Shāhnāma*, two hundred illuminated books, and

⁷² Yıldız, “Persian in the Service of the Sultan: Historical Writing in Persian under the Ottomans during the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries”, 145–163; Woodhead, “An Experiment In Official Historiography: The Post of Şehnāmeçi in The Ottoman Empire, c. 1555-1605”, 157-182.

⁷³ Alsancaklı, “Historiography and language in 17th-century Ottoman Kurdistan: A study of two Turkish translations of the *Sharafnāma*,” 175.

⁷⁴ For detailed information on the killing of Sharaf Khan, see Dehqan and Genç, “Why Was Sharaf Khan Killed?,” 13–19.

⁷⁵ *Tercüme-yi Nüzhētü’l-Kulub*, ff. 1a-1b.

about a thousand volumes including the *divans* of Hāfez, Saʿdi, Nezāmī (d. 1209), Jāmī, Sāʿib, Anwarī, and Khaqānī. Çelebi writes that the khan was very talented in Persian, wrote a great deal in the language, and was a master of poetry like Jāmī, Hāfez, and Sāʿib. Further, Abdal Khan's son and successor, Ziyāʾ al-Dīn Khan, also had an interest in writing and literature, like his father and grandfathers.⁷⁶

One of the first cultural activities enacted by Abdal Khan's son, Sharaf Khan (1668–1691), after becoming ruler, was having the *Sharafnāma* translated into Turkish, reasoning that this would enable its understanding. Around the same time, the ruler of Palu also had his scribe, Şem'i, translate the *Sharafnāma*, meaning that Persian was gradually leaving the courts of Kurdish rulers and Ottoman Turkish was gaining currency. But still, Persian had a respected status in the courts of Kurdish rulers, and these translations are key evidence proving it was still known in these courts. Also, the Palu ruler's scribe presented Persian as the most esteemed and sweetest language, after Arabic, clearly reflecting educated elite Kurds' perception of Persian in the seventeenth century. Further, translation of the *Sharafnāma* in the Bidlis court is interpreted as an action intending to prove Bidlis's prestige, and its rulers superiority over other Kurdish rulers, rather than an absence of readers of Persian.⁷⁷ On the other hand, it should be mentioned that these translation activities were a phenomenon also observed in the Ottoman palace in the same period.⁷⁸

In 1734, Dürri Efendi of Van's brother, Abdülbaki Sadi Efendi (d. 1161/1748), translated *Hasht Behesht* into Turkish on the orders of Mahmud I.⁷⁹ The purpose this translation was the same as that of Abdal Khan and Sharaf Khan: widening the reader base by making Persian texts more understandable. This means that literacy in Persian was decreasing in both the court and among the educated classes.

Persian's Perpetual Prestige: From Bidlis to Cizire and Beyond

Persian language and culture had not yet begun to disappear in Bidlis. While translation from Persian to Turkish in the Bidlis court in the seventeenth century meant that Turkish replaced Persian as the literary and bureaucratic language, there were still many who read and wrote Persian in the palace. Similarly, while the close Safavid border was not as permeable as it had once been, Persian culture was still quite dominant in Bidlis and its surroundings. Evliya Çelebi's detailed accounts of Bidlis from the spring of 1655, depict a city and society intertwined with Persian language and culture. Çelebi describes Bidlis as one of the oldest towns of the Azerbaijani lands and comments on its integration into the Persian, rather than Rumi, world: its streets were covered by grapevines called Kheybān-e Raz; the renowned Amīrak, Shīrak, Baghdu, and Avih vineyards he likened to the gardens of Isfahan; Sharaf Khan Mosque was covered by Persian and Isfahan carpets; the court garden with its high pavilions full of saplings brought from Tabriz and Nakhchivan, and the Vineyard Bath (Hamām-e Bāgh) in this garden, whose windows were also brought from Tabriz and inscribed by Muhammad Rezā Tabrīzī; the merchants who took merchandize to and brought it from Persian lands; Chawgān Square, which took its name from the game of polo; and Abdal Khan's patronage of an Iranian storyteller (qessa-khan) named Monlā Delāver-e Isfahānī.⁸⁰ This detailed description is also reminiscent of how Bidlis's rulers closely followed the cultural policies of Persian shahs. For example, it was not a coincidence that after Qaraqyunlu Jahanshah named his largest compounds in Tabriz Gök Madrasa and Gök Masjid, his vassal and loyal ally, the Bidlis ruler, named the city's largest square Gök Maydan (Maydān-e Kabūd).⁸¹

⁷⁶ Kahraman and Dağlı, *Evliya Çelebi Seyahatnamesi*, 146–147, 334–340.

⁷⁷ Alsancaklı, "Historiography and language in 17th-century Ottoman Kurdistan," 173–177.

⁷⁸ Alsancaklı, "Historiography and language in 17th-century Ottoman Kurdistan," 188.

⁷⁹ Abdülbaki Sadi Efendi, *Terceme-i Heşt Bihişt*, f. 3a.

⁸⁰ Kahraman and Dağlı, *Evliya Çelebi Seyahatnamesi*, 131, 144–145, 152–154, 171–172.

⁸¹ Sharaf Khan Bidlīsī, *Sharafnāma*, vol. 1, 345.

In the autumn of 1046, Persian traveler Nāsir Khusraw listed Persian among the languages spoken in Bidlis, and Evliya Çelebi provided interesting information on how commonly this language was used in the seventeenth century. Çelebi describes that madrasa students knew all the most popular Persian texts—such as *Bustān* and *Gulistān* by Saʿdi and the *divans* of Hāfēz, Fuzūlī, and Sāʿib—by heart, but were not so adept at reading Arabic. He comes to the same conclusion for Van, stating that the children of Van tended to write poetry and speak Persian.⁸² The fact that Ibn Nuh, author of the *History of Van*, conversed about Mukus with his masters in Persian, shows that eighteenth-century scholars and madrasas around Bidlis and Van also preferred Persian as a spoken language.⁸³ This can be deduced from the fact that Persian was among the languages taught in the madrasas of Bidlis, such as *Ikhlasiya* and *Sharafiya*. Naturally, the books of major Persian poets and writers—including Saʿdi (d. 1292), Hāfēz (d. 1390), and Attār (d. 1220)—were copied several times in the madrasas of Bidlis and its surrounding. In other words, as tools of cultural transmission, these popular texts paved the way for learning and teaching Persian.

Persian was the preeminent language in Bidlis and other Kurdish principalities, including Hakkari and Cizire, and would continue its dominance in the reading and literary practices of these cities' madrasas and ulama circles for many years.⁸⁴ The commentary of Mullā Abd al-Rahmān al-Khidrī ibn Mullā Haydar b. Mullā Muhammad al-Bokhtī (d. 1121/1709) on Saʿdi's *Gulistān* reflects the perpetuity of Persian prestige in both madrasas and ulama circles. Mullā Muhammad al-Bokhtī completed his Persian commentary in Parwāriyān district in 1090/1679–80 as a guidebook to *Gulistān* for beginners. At the beginning of his commentary, he underscored the fact that most such commentaries on *Gulistān* were in Arabic, which posed a problem for beginners unable to read the language well.⁸⁵ The impetus for Shukrullah b. Mawlānā Ahmad Qadi of Çemişgezek—another individual from the ulama circles of Çemişgezek, a place presented by Sharaf Khan as the first that comes to mind when Kurdistan is mentioned—to write an Arabic-Persian poetic dictionary must have been the same. By doing so, Shukrullah, the grandson of Mawlānā Zakariyā Qadi of Isfahan, demonstrated Persian's usage in the ulama circles and madrasas of Çemişgezek.⁸⁶ Mullā Abd al-Rahmān's emphasis on language and Shukrullah's personal attempts show that Persian remained prevalent in last quarter of the seventeenth century. Indeed, Farīd al-Dīn Attār's books were still being read in these madrasas in the nineteenth century.⁸⁷ Persian commentaries by Kurdish scholars on Aristotelian logic texts demonstrate the importance of Persian in Kurdish madrasas.⁸⁸ Kurdish notables and poets educated in these madrasas wrote both Persian and Kurdish poetry. An unknown sixteenth-century Kurdish notable of Bidlis, Darwish Mahmūd Kalachirī, whom Sharaf Khan presented as Idris-i Bidlisi's disciple, a "second Idris," knew Persian well enough to write poetry.⁸⁹ Mele Ehmed Jiziri (1570–1640), another product of these madrasas, could also write Persian poems. A number of Persian poems by Mullā Abd al-Rahmān al-Khidrī (d. 1121/1709), a possible dynastic member of the rulers of Cizire, have also survived.⁹⁰ As previously mentioned, the libraries of Bidlis rulers Sharaf Khan and Abdal Khan

⁸² Kahraman and Dağlı, *Evliya Çelebi Seyahatnamesi*, 175, 272.

⁸³ "Ostād: Jāyī hast Mukus migūyand shanīdāi? Nuh: Āre shanīdam. Ostād: Jāyī nikūst havā-ye khob wa khāk-e khoshtar dārad." Ibn Nuh, *Van Tarihi*, 99–100.

⁸⁴ Zinar, "Medrese education in northern Kurdistan," 2–4.

⁸⁵ Mullā Abd al-Rahmān al-Khidrī ibn Mullā Haydar b. Mullā Muhammad al-Bokhtī, *Sharh-e Gulistān*, ff. 1b, 36a/b.

⁸⁶ Shukrullah b. Mawlānā Ahmad b. Mawlānā Zakariyā, *Zuhret al-Adab*.

⁸⁷ Leezenberg, "Elī Teremaxī and the Vernacularization of Medrese Learning in Kurdistan," 724, 729.

⁸⁸ For these commentaries, see MS Personal, Aqāyārī Collection, Khuy/Iran.

⁸⁹ For details, see Dehqan and Genç, "Darwish Mahmud: An Unknown Sixteenth Century Kurdish Notables," 35–39.

⁹⁰ Mullā Abd al-Rahmān al-Khidrī ibn Mullā Haydar b. Mullā Muhammad al-Bokhtī, *Sharh-e Gulistān*, ff. 1a, 36b–38a.

were filled with books in Persian, and Hakkari ruler Ibrahim Khan's scribe also mentions that Ibrahim Khan had such a library.⁹¹ It should also be pointed that the circulation network of these libraries' books included educated elites such as dynastic members, the administrative classes, the scribe and *munshi* classes, and madrasa masters.

The best evidence of Persian's influence in the region, even after integration into the Ottoman administrative system, are building inscriptions and gravestones. Many building inscriptions in and around Bidlis were in Persian. The most important examples include the Sharafiya compound completed in 1529 and Sheikh Abū Tāhir Kurdī's tomb repaired by Abdal Khan in 1664–65.⁹² The Ulu Cami inscription repaired by Osman Ağa in 1651 must also be added to this list. When Mahmūdī ruler Khoshāb Sulayman Beg finished building his fortress in 1052/1643, the inscription was engraved in Persian, the necessity of the time. His successor, Ewliyā Beg, continued this tradition on his stone bridge built in 1082/1671. In Bidlis, the tradition of Persian building inscriptions continued, as into the nineteenth century as evidenced in inscriptions on the lodge of Sheikh Garīb (dated to 1297/1879–1880) and those of Mullā İbrahim (dated to 1864) are proof of this. However, it was not only dynastic rulers and the elite classes who followed this tradition, the majority of civilian gravestones were also inscribed in Persian until the nineteenth century, showing the extent of this cultural influence. Today, Khayyām's *rubaies* and other Persian poems can be seen on the gravestones of Bidlis's cemeteries.⁹³

Although Persian fell out of usage as a bureaucratic language in the Bidlis court in the beginning of the sixteenth century, and as a literary language in the first half of the seventeenth century, it remained the *lingua franca* of the Kurdish rulers and palace elites around Bidlis. Hakkari rulers continued this tradition for the longest time. Mīrzā Muhammadi Yazıcı, scribe of Hakkari ruler Ibrahim Khan at the beginning of the eighteenth century, wrote his dynastic book *Mukhtasar Ahvāl al-Umarā* in Persian, in the name of his patron. The short addendum to this book, written at the end of the nineteenth century, was also in Persian. In preparing the book, Mīrzā Muhammadi said that he used the books from the khan's palace.⁹⁴ It is clear that all the scribes Mīrzā Muhammadi claimed were present in the court knew Persian. Indeed, he reports that the letter to the Persian shah was written by Mīrzā Alī, another court scribe.⁹⁵

Hakkari rulers communicated with Istanbul in Persian from time to time, even in the nineteenth century. Hakkari ruler Nūr Allah Khan still had a significant number of the letters he sent to the sultan in 1827 written in Persian.⁹⁶ Alongside the *bey*s, the Hakkari people also had their letters sent to the center written in Persian. The 1827 letter Hakkari notables, including tribal *aghas*, sent the sultan was also written in Persian.⁹⁷ Hakkari Nestorian patriarch Mar Simon wrote a letter in Persian thanking the sultan for the salary he was granted in 1850.⁹⁸ It should also be noted that Sheikh Ubeydullah corresponded in Persian with Sultan Abdulhamid II and other Ottoman officials between 1879 and 1880.⁹⁹

Conclusion

Bidlis and its surroundings (other Kurdish principalities) remained within the zone-of-influence of the Persian language and Iranian-Islamic high culture—the “Persianate world”—for centuries, as it remained under the rule of Persian-centered empires and was closer to Iran

⁹¹ Mīrzā Muhammadi Yazıcı, *Mukhtasar Ahvāl al-Umarā*, 98.

⁹² For the Sharafiya compound, see Dehqan and Genç, “An Unpublished Inscription from Bidlis.”

⁹³ For Persian inscriptions and gravestones, see appendix.

⁹⁴ Mīrzā Muhammadi Yazıcı, *Mukhtasar Ahvāl al-Umarā*, 98.

⁹⁵ Mīrzā Muhammadi Yazıcı, *Mukhtasar Ahvāl al-Umarā*, 118–120.

⁹⁶ HAT. 288/17298-L; HAT. 448/22333-B; HAT. 448/22333-C; HAT. 801/37091-D.

⁹⁷ HAT. 801/37091-E.

⁹⁸ A. DVN. 59/61.

⁹⁹ See Sabri Ateş, *Sheikh Ubeidullah Rebellion: The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism*, (forthcoming).

in cultural and geographical terms compared to Anatolia as a whole. Bidlis's connection to Tabriz and the Persian world in political, economic, and cultural terms facilitated cultural and commercial activities between the two worlds. Sufis, scholars, poets, and merchants traveling between Iran and Bidlis provided an intertwined network in which Persian language and culture flourished. This literary and cultural influence began to bear fruit by the fourteenth century. Many books were written in Persian in Bidlis or by individuals from Bidlis. It is important to bear in mind that Idris-i Bidlīsī, the author of the first Ottoman dynastic history in Persian (*Hasht Behesht*), and Sharaf Khan, the author of the first Kurdish history in Persian (*Sharafnāma*), were products of this cultural atmosphere. While the former, with his style and rhetoric, deeply influenced Ottoman historical writing in the first half of the sixteenth century, the latter penned a voluminous history unique to its field. Bidlis rulers, the most intellectual of the rulers of Kurdistan, not only established relations with the Persian world on the basis of ancestry and as vassals, they also closely followed the cultural policies of the sultans in Tabriz for many years.

From the fifteenth century onwards, Persian became the language of dynastic rulers, scholars, literary figures, and Sufis. Elites from Bidlis used Persian in their works and personal correspondence. Under the auspices of Bidlis's ruling class, Persian learning and writing mushroomed. The ruling elites were educated in their palaces in this language and madrasas also taught it. Almost everyone who went through a madrasa education knew Persian language and literature very well. Many Persian classics were copied in the palace scriptorium on the orders of Bidlis's rulers. The Bidlis elites who learned Persian could create new opportunities in both Iran and the Ottoman world. In the world of the Bidlis principality, learning Persian was a necessity, not something done out of personal curiosity. Based on this evidence, it is no exaggeration to say that the people of Bidlis were much more familiar with the Persian language and Iranian-Islamic high culture than with Arabic. Knowing Persian—the *lingua franca* of the vast geographic realm from the Indian subcontinent to Transoxiana, from Shirvan to Istanbul and Baghdad—was an incredible advantage for the literate people of Bidlis.

The rise of Turkish as the language of bureaucracy and the emergence of a new cultural consciousness in the Ottoman court at the beginning of the sixteenth century also changed the Bidlis khans' Persian writing habit. Thus, Bidlis khans began corresponding with the Ottoman rulers *issa* in Turkish, as per the bureaucratic custom. However, the Persian language continued its presence in and around Bidlis for centuries after its integration into the Ottoman administrative system. Bidlis khans continued to use Persian in their correspondence with the Safavid shahs and sometimes sent emissaries to these shahs. It can even be said that during the 16th and 17th centuries, while under Ottoman rule, the rulers of Bidlis never completely severed their ties with the Safavid shahs. At times, during this period, they even ruled the city in the name of shah and were counted among "shah-sevens". Although seventeenth-century translations from Persian in the khans' palace show the shift towards Turkish, Persian retained its superiority as the language of literary, historical, and mystic works, inscriptions, and gravestones even after the sixteenth century. Many gravestones and building inscriptions in the area are in Persian, even those from the nineteenth century, showing the continuity of this influence. The Persian language's influence in Bidlis also implied the influence of Persian literature on these lands, as evidenced in the hundreds of volumes in Persian in the Bidlis palace library. Persian language and high culture were not only common among dynastic members and the city's elite classes, but also enjoyed acceptance among the people. Persian left its mark on the city's literary and spoken language and cultural history. Via the Bidlis rulers who wrote in and translated from Persian, the hundreds of volumes in Persian in their libraries, the city's scholars, authors, and Sufis who wrote in Persian, and the Persian *divans* madrasa students knew by heart, the people of Bidlis internalized Persian language and culture to the extent that they included Khayyām's and Amir Shahi Sabzavari's *rubaiies* and other Persian poems on their gravestones.

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