



Available online at <http://aran.garmian.edu.krd>



Aran Journal for Language and Humanities

<https://doi.org/10.24271/ARN.025-01-01-SC- 28>

Preserving a Sacred Landscape: Communicating and Promoting Yezidi Tangible and Intangible Heritage

Ghiath Rammo¹, Gianfilippo Terribili²

Department of Ancient World History, College of Humanities, Sapienza University of Rome

Article Info		Abstract:
Received	April 2025	<p>The Yezidis are a Kurdish religious community with ritual traditions and a social structure that can be traced back to ancient times. Most Yezidis live in Iraq, particularly in the autonomous Kurdistan Region and the areas around Mosul, where the prominent shrine of Şêx Adî in Lalish stands as the spiritual heart of their faith. Ancient places of worship, ritual practices, and sacred oral poetry are vital in preserving Yezidi identity and ensuring the transmission of both their tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Over the past decade, persecution and forced migration have threatened the rich Yezidi tradition and its deep connection to the native land. Despite these challenges, the Yezidi community continues to strive for recovery from the devastation caused by ISIS and to safeguard its heritage through international projects and the reconstruction of sacred sites. In this context, scientific and field research can serve as a vital tool for developing targeted initiatives aimed at enhancing and raising awareness of Yezidi heritage, both within civil society worldwide and in the Kurdistan Region.</p>
Accepted	May 2025	
Published:	August 2025	
Keywords		
Yezidis, Kurdish Religions, Kurdish Studies, Sacred Landscape		
Corresponding Author		
Gianfilippo.terribili@uniroma1.it		

Yezidis: Identity and Homeland

The Yezidis are a native religious community within the Kurdish world. The majority of the Yezidis reside in present-day Iraq, particularly in the autonomous Kurdistan Region and the northwestern part of the country. Smaller communities can also be found in other Middle Eastern countries (Syria, Turkey, Armenia and Georgia),¹ in Europe (especially in Germany, where more than half of the Yezidi diaspora now lives) and in North America (USA, especially in the state of Nebraska, and Canada in London in the province of Ontario). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, an estimated 550,000 Yezidis lived in Iraq before 2010. Around two-thirds resided in Sinjar province, with the remainder in Sheikhan province, located between Mosul and Duhok. These figures were confirmed in 2021 by the Duhok Directorate of Yezidi Affairs, although at least 100,000 people have left Iraq permanently due to the devastation and violence perpetrated by ISIS groups.² The total number of Yezidis is just under one million. The region currently inhabited by them in northern Iraq corresponds to the historical settlement area of this Kurdish-speaking group, located in the upper Mesopotamian region, near the Zagros and Taurus Mountain ranges. This macroregion was, in antiquity, an important crossroads of cultures, a place of contact between ancient Semitic, Anatolian, Greco-Roman, and Iranian civilizations. During Late Antiquity, before the spread of Islam, these lands were home to significant Christian, Zoroastrian, 'Gnostic' and Manichaean groups, all of which left a cultural imprint on the region and had a lasting influence on the local religiouscape.³ The first historical records of Yezidism in its present form date back to the 12th century, when the Yezidis established an isolated community in the mountains of Kurdistan, heavily influenced by Sufi thought and tradition. Today, the Yezidis continue to exist as a non-mainstream religious group with diverse characteristics, bearing traces of beliefs and practices influenced by ancient Iranian traditions and Mesopotamian astral cults.⁴

¹ Açıkyıldız, 2010.

² Interview conducted by G. Rammo with Jafar Simo, Director of the Directorate of Yezidi Affairs in the Duhok Governorate, Iraqi Kurdistan Region, in October 2021.

³ The western margins of the Zagros Mountains serve as a transition zone between Mesopotamia and the Iranian plateau, characterized by significant cultural and environmental fluidity. Under the rule of various empires—such as the Achaemenids, Seleucids, Arsacids, and Sasanians—from the 6th century BCE to the 7th century CE, the region was a hub of important cultural and commercial exchanges, while still preserving local particularisms. For further reading on this, see e.g. Terribili and Insom, 2021; Terribili, 2023, with additional references.

⁴ Scientific literature on Yezidism has seen significant growth in recent decades. Notable works include: Kreyenbroek, 1995; Kreyenbroek and Jindy-Rashow 2006; Allison, 2001; Açıkyıldız, 2010; Kreyenbroek, 2010; Spät, 2010; Asatrian and Arakelova, 2014; Omarkhali, 2017; Jindy-Rashow, 2018; de la Bretèque, and Omarkhali, 2022.

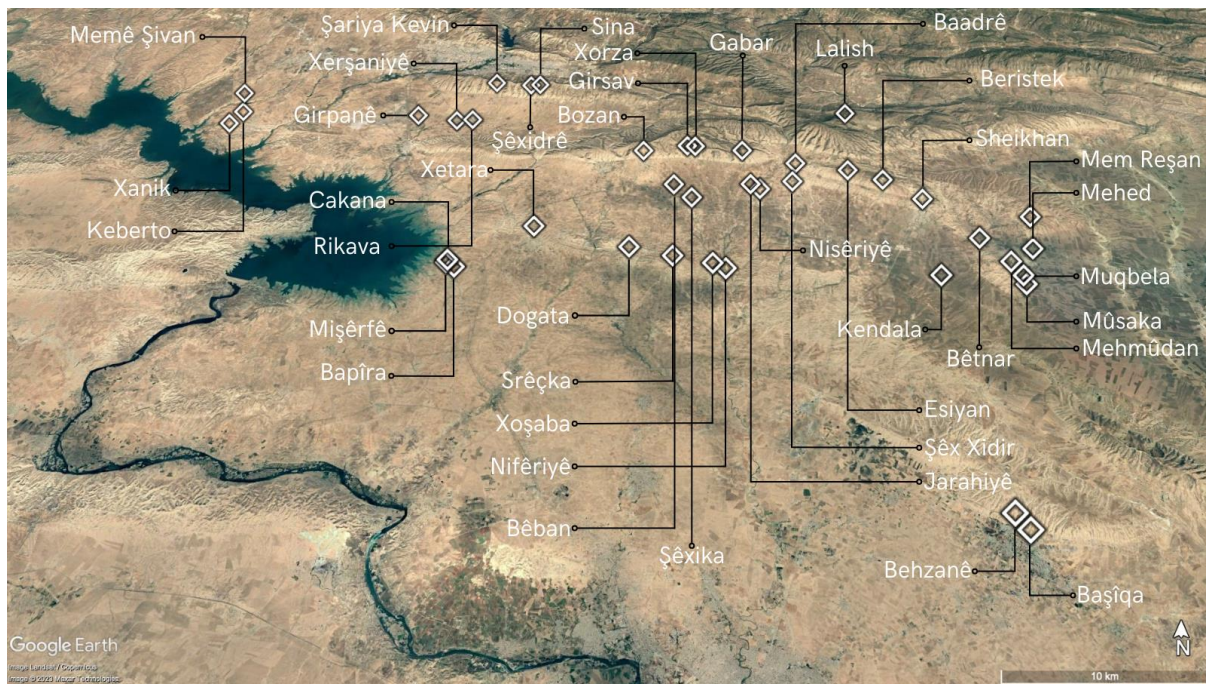


Figure 1. Location of the Yezidis in the province of Sheikhhan.

The decisive event in the genesis of Yezidism was the arrival in Kurdistan of the Sufi mystic Adi ibn Musafir (Şêx Adî) in the early 12th century.⁵ Şêx Adî chose to establish a monastic community in Lalish, where he and his followers could live a contemplative life. His ascetic lifestyle, combined with the miracles attributed to him, attracted a large number of followers from the surrounding region, including Kurds, Muslims, and Christians, further solidifying his revered authority. Over time, Şêx Adî became a central figure in the development of Yezidism, as his teachings and spiritual practices left a lasting impact on the faith. The relationship between the Yezidi community and the outside world, however, has often been fraught with tension. Throughout history, prejudice from neighboring communities, compounded by sensationalist portrayals by Western writers and travelers, has fostered a distorted view of Yezidism. As a result, Yezidis have often been misrepresented and unjustly labeled as “devil worshippers,” contributing to the marginalization and persecution of the community. These misconceptions have persisted over time, and Yezidis continue to face challenges, as aspects of their faith and practices remain misunderstood to this day. This negative connotation stems from a misinterpretation of the Yezidis’ respect for, or fear of, the principle of evil, around which various taboos are centered. Another source of misunderstanding lies in the Yezidis’ veneration of intermediary beings, particularly the Peacock Angel (Tawûsî Melek), a figure with demiurgic traits, who has often been misunderstood by outsiders as a symbol of devil worship.⁶

In the second half of the 20th century, the large-scale social planning implemented by Saddam’s regime had a profound impact on the Yezidi community and its traditional patterns of settlement, although the full extent of its implications remains difficult to assess with precision. More recently, the heinous crimes committed by ISIS in 2014 against the Yezidi population are still vivid in our collective memory. As E. Spät has emphasized, the trauma experienced during that aggression has also been expressed and culturally re-

⁵ He was born in Beyt-Far (1073-1162), in the province of Baalbek, as ‘Adî bin Musafir bin Ismail bin Musa bin Marwan bin al-Hakim bin Marwan. Regarding the centrality of this figure in the Yezidi devotional tradition and its cultural production, see in particular Kreyenbroek and Jindy-Rashow, 2006.

⁶ On this figure, see also Asatrian and Arakelova, 2003; for a comparativist approach, see Kreyenbroek, 1992.

elaborated through traditional forms deeply rooted in the Yezidi oral tradition.⁷ The same resilience is detectable in the reconstruction of many shrines and cemeteries deliberately targeted by ISIS with the aim of erasing cultural and religious diversity in the region. According to the Kurdistan Regional Government's Yezidi Affairs Department, the Islamic State destroyed 68 historical sites, shrines, and Yezidi settlements in the Sinjar region (west of Mosul) and in the Başîqa and Behzanê areas (northeast of Mosul).⁸ The past century has profoundly affected the Yezidi community and its social fabric. War, persecution, and the resulting diaspora have forced many to abandon their homes and seek refuge abroad. Today, the preservation of cultural heritage is further undermined by the younger generation's aspiration to emigrate to Western countries. This detachment from traditional society makes it increasingly difficult to engage youth in religious commitments, such as those of the *micêwirs* (shrine guardians) or *qewals* (sacred hymn singers). Meanwhile, the re-adaptation of ritual practices within the diaspora is particularly complex, with the disconnection from the native "religious-scape" remaining one of the greatest threats to this vulnerable heritage. Together, these dynamics place an ancient tradition at serious risk of irreversible loss.

The endangered Yezidi's Cultural Heritage

The Yezidis possess a rich tangible and intangible cultural heritage, encompassing shrines and places of worship, oral religious literature, and ritual practices that highlight the uniqueness of their tradition within the broader cultural landscape of the region. It is largely through oral transmission that Yezidism perpetuates religious wisdom and preserves the memory of its social and cultural constitutive elements. Myths, legends, prayers, and devotional hymns are passed down using centuries-old mnemonic techniques by a group of specialized, professional singers known as the *qewals*, who play vital roles in the community.⁹ Here too, the deep-rooted connection to the territory is a crucial aspect, as the knowledge of these compositions is transmitted across generations, with *qewal* families traditionally settled in the region of Başîqa and Behzanê, northeast of Mosul. During specific seasonal occasions, *qewals* from these areas visit the shrines of other communities in the surrounding regions, performing the devotional and ritual recitations that fall within their traditional responsibilities.¹⁰ Throughout these journeys, the intangible cultural heritage over which the *qewals* hold custodianship and mastery unfolds across the Yezidi territory, engaging with the entire social body and intertwining with tangible symbols such as the *senceq*—the image of the peacock—¹¹ and the sepulchers of holy figures (*xas*). As a matter of fact, sacred spaces and oral religious literature cannot be separated, as these locations represent one of the primary settings in which hymns are experienced and assimilated by the Yezidi community. The revival of academic interest in Yezidi orality paves the way for a deeper understanding of the meanings this heritage conveys—not only in shaping sensorial and spiritual religious experiences, but also in fostering connections with neighboring devotional traditions.¹² The

⁷ Spät, 2022.

⁸ In the course of his survey, Dr. Gh. Rammo visited numerous reconstructed Yezidi shrines in the area surrounding Mosul, documenting them and conducting interviews with members of the local communities (Rammo, 2024a; 2024b).

⁹ See the bibliographical references in fn. 4. It is very likely that the word *qewal* derives from the Arabic root قَال، قَوْل، قَوْل (to speak, speech, speaker), referring to "someone who is able to speak appropriately," or someone who "recites an improvised metrical composition;" see, for example, Masud, J. (1992), *Al-Ra'id Modern Lexicon*. Beirut.

¹⁰ Allison, 2001, pp. 31, 34, 76.

¹¹ The *senceq* serves both as a material support and a symbolic representation of Tawûsî Melek, depicted as a bird—typically a dove or, more distinctively, a peacock. As they travel in groups of two or three to visit different congregations, the *qewals* present the *senceqs* to the worshippers, allowing them to venerate this sacred emblem and reaffirm their spiritual connection with the divine presence it embodies.

¹² Along with the works mentioned above in fn. 4, the recent essay by Kreyenbroek, 2023, further illustrates the long-term continuity of the central role played by orality in shaping the native religious traditions of the Iranian macro-region.

community's social organization has long played a vital role in ensuring the transmission of an oral heritage that preserves numerous archaisms, especially within the recitative and devotional formulas dedicated to the Yezidis' spiritual beings. However, the gradual erosion of traditional social structures—driven by forced displacement and rising emigration—has made this oral literary system increasingly vulnerable, highlighting the urgent need for targeted strategies to safeguard and revitalize this fragile heritage. The discourse on Yezidi tangible cultural heritage is deeply intertwined with the fate of its intangible counterpart. The physical structures—shrines, sacred spaces, and monuments—serve as sacralized, communal settings where oral traditions, rituals, and devotional performances are brought to life. In this dynamic interplay, the tangible and intangible dimensions of heritage reinforce and sustain one another, nurturing collective memory and shaping a resilient sense of communal identity.

This symbiotic relationship underscores the importance of preserving both aspects in tandem to ensure the continuity of the Yezidi cultural and spiritual legacy. Even though many Yezidi communities were forced to leave their native villages already during Saddam Hussein's regime in the 1980s and settle in new places of residence,¹³ many of them have managed to maintain ties with their place of origin by observing the tradition of *tewaf*, the feast of the village's protective "saint" (*xas*),¹⁴ as an epicentre of cultural identity and its transmission. Indeed, a strong bond between social ties and the land is reinforced through the veneration of spiritual entities and the sense of supernatural protection they are believed to offer. This continuity of devotion reflects a tangible form of cohesion—both familial and communal. In fact, Yezidi communities structure their collective memory through ritual practices and sacred places associated with the worship of *xas*, thereby strengthening their cultural identity and sense of belonging.

The Yezidi settlement area is notably characterized by a rich array of religious buildings that define the cultural landscape. Among these, the *mezar* stands out as the most distinctive type of shrine—dedicated to acts of worship and built in honor of a *xas*. These structures frequently contain the grave or cenotaph of the venerated figure, serving as focal points of both spiritual devotion and communal gathering.¹⁵

¹³ The Kurdish Autonomous Region was established in northern Iraq in 1970, uniting the governorates of Erbil, Duhok, and Sulaymaniyah. However, several Yezidi areas remained outside the administrative boundaries of this autonomous region. These areas were subjected to an Arabization process implemented by the Ba'ath Party regime in the years 1965, 1973-1975, and 1986-1989. Most of the inhabitants were forced to leave their villages and resettle in new collective centers, known as "مُجَمَّعات" (mujama'at), or "complexes," mostly located in areas adjacent to their original lands.

¹⁴ See below.

¹⁵ The root of the word *mezar* comes from the Arabic "مَزَار، زيارة، مَزَار"، derived from the verb "to visit," from which the noun "visit" and the passive participle "[a place that is] visited" are also derived. In Yezidi settlements, there can be multiple *mezar* dedicated to different *xas*. At the same time, it is common to find *mezar* dedicated to the same *xas* in different centers of the community.



Figure 2. Reconstruction of the Melik Şêx Hesên and Bilêlê Bilind shrines in Bapîra in 2017, following their destruction by ISIS.

More generally, all sites of pilgrimage and veneration—including open-air locations marked by natural elements such as springs, trees, and rocks—derive their sacral, curative, and regenerative qualities from their association with a *xas*. It is this spiritual connection that transforms otherwise ordinary landscapes into places of profound meaning, fashioning ritual behavior and anchoring the Yezidi community's relationship with its environment in a sacred topography.¹⁶ According to the Yezidi worldview, these figures serve as divine messengers reincarnated on Earth in human form to lead the faithful. Their recurring presence in the material world thus outlines a path of salvation, defining a true sacred history. In these figures and their earthly incarnations, the human realm intertwines with the divine, creating a continuous temporal and cosmological connection with significant soteriological implications.

The *xas* can be distinguished by their functional specializations, but more broadly, as representatives and mediators of the divine realm, they oversee the protective aspect of daily life in its entirety.¹⁷ Equally important are the narrative cycles related to the earthly existence of the *xas*, whose compositions carry deep meanings. Through these stories, moral, ethical, and spiritual principles are conveyed to the believers, guiding their actions and helping them understand humanity's role in the cosmos according to the tradition's principles. Sacred narrative and devotional practice converge, become tangible, and are experienced within the spaces of the *mezar*. In a broader sense, the *mezar* represent a tangible link to the presence of the numinous in the immanent world and to the historical and cultural memory of the community. Inside them, the faithful experience an intimate contact with the 'cratos' that arises from the sacralized quality of the place and the ritual practices that provide both spiritual and psychological support.

In the historical regions of Yezidi settlement, mausoleums and places of worship serve as repositories of visual identity through their distinctive architecture, notably their conical pinnacles. These structures stand as landmarks of a living religious experience, with the silhouettes of their crenellated domes rising

¹⁶ Kreyenbroek, 1995, pp. 73-74.

¹⁷ On this aspect, see in particular Kreyenbroek, 1995, pp. 83-84, 91-101; Asatrian and Arakelova, 2014, pp. 53-107.

above the villages and neighborhoods where Yezidis reside. At their summit stand the so-called *hilêl*, consecrated objects consisting of a double or triple sphere made of metal, typically bearing symbolic effigies of the sun, the moon, or the peacock. Taken together, the conical domes define the distinctive physiognomy of the region's religiouscape, setting them apart from the nearby Muslim mosques and Assyrian-Chaldean churches.

The consistency of architectural features contributes to shaping the cultural environment of these settlement areas in terms of religious belonging. Despite their overall homogeneity, the typology, status, and function of Yezidi devotional spaces may vary. In addition to the *mezar*, at least three other types of structures are associated with the veneration of local *xas*: these are the so-called *nîşan*¹⁸, *kevir*¹⁹ and *rêgir*²⁰. The *nîşan* symbolically represents the *xas* typically featuring a single space with a square floor plan, sometimes topped by a small dome. The *kevir*, in contrast, consists of a simple pile of 'sacralized' stones, serving as a point of reference for individual devotion.

Lastly, the *rêgir* is a small marker, made up of columns and conical-shaped niches, designed to indicate the presence of a devotional space. Studying the levels of commissions and patronage associated with these pious structures would provide valuable insights into the social networks and dynamics within the Yezidi community. By examining who commissions these sacred spaces, who supports their maintenance, and the roles different individuals and families play in this process, we can better understand the internal organization, hierarchies, and the ways in which religious and communal bonds are formed and reinforced.

Within this framework, the *mezars* serve as a focal point for communal identity, reflecting the intimate relationship between the individual, the protective presence of spiritual intermediaries (the *xas*), the experience of the sacred, and the connection to ancestral land. The model of this bond is found in the Lalish Valley (Duhok province), with its numerous shrines and sacred sites.²¹ The Lalish Valley is the sacred heart of Yezidism, home to the burial site of the community's founder, Şêx Adî, and the destination for the great annual pilgrimage that every Yezidi must undertake at least once in their lifetime. Within this symbolically rich space, the Festival of Assembly occurs each year. This event marks the major Yezidi collective pilgrimage and provides a moment for believers to strengthen their connection to the tradition.

In terms of architectural structure and external appearance, *mezars* share identical features, even when located in geographically distant centers. The basic design consists of a room of varying size, often square-shaped, topped with a notched conical dome. Inside the *mezar*, worshippers believe they receive a spiritual force that supports them in their daily lives. Devotional practices typically involve the recitation of prayers and invocations, seeking the intercession of the sacred figure venerated at the site or requesting healing from illness.

The Yezidis believe that these sacred places serve as a meeting point between the human and divine realms, with the experience being accessible on an individual level, both spiritually and sensorially. When a *mezar* consists of more than one room, beyond the one dedicated to the *xas*, the space becomes a hub for various activities within both the local and neighboring communities. In this way, the *mezar* transcends its role as a mere place of devotion, evolving into a center for socializing and gathering during community

¹⁸ Lit. "symbol, indication, sign"; cf. Middle Persian *nîšān*, "sign, mark, banner," (Mackenzie, 1971, p. 60).

¹⁹ Lit. "stone, rock."

²⁰ In this case, the term is a compound of *rê* = "path, road" + *gir* = "hill, mound." According to Chyet, 2020, vol. 1, p. 203; vol. 2, p. 268, the term *rêgir* can also mean "obstruction, obstacle, hindrance."

²¹ See extensively Açıkyıldız, 2009.

festivities—a space for sharing and communication. In addition to acts of charity, secular activities such as managing village affairs or resolving various issues can also take place within its walls.

The care of each shrine is entrusted to a *micêwir*, a guardian responsible for overseeing the sacred space and welcoming worshippers by reciting prayers and lighting *çira*—oil lamps used during special occasions. Inside the shrine, the *micêwir* also performs the blessing of the *perî*, which consists of colored fabrics hung on the walls and knotted by the faithful as a symbol of their vows. Every *micêwir*, on the eve of Wednesday and Friday, enters the *mezar* at sunset— either alone or accompanied by visitors—to recite prayers and light the *çira*. The *micêwir* operates within a liminal space, situated between the profane world and the spiritual domain, and marked by the immanent presence of the *xas*. In fulfilling their hereditary duty, *micêwirs* serve as key mediators between the believers and the numinous, playing a crucial role in preserving Yezidi intangible cultural heritage through the continuity of devotional practice.



Figure 3. A *micêwir* performing the ritual lighting of the *çira* (oil lamps) in the Şêşims shrine, Bozan, a key practice in Yezidi devotional life.

From Scientific Fieldwork to Awareness-Raising and the Valorization of Cultural Heritage in the Kurdistan Region

The precarious balance that supports the preservation of Yezidi tangible and intangible heritage within the rich cultural landscape of the Kurdistan Region demands a multifaceted and dynamic approach. In this context, the field survey carried out by Dr. Ghiath Rammo in October 2021 in the Yezidi area of Sheikhan holds particular significance for the present discussion.²² This investigation enabled the recording,

²² The mission was made possible thanks to the generous support of the Italian Archaeological Mission in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (MAIKI) – Sapienza University of Rome, and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

mapping, and documentation of Yazidi shrines across thirty-seven towns and villages—some of which have been abandoned due to long-standing emigration and the recent devastation caused by ISIS. The research focused specifically on *mezar* and minor shrines, surveying 202 of them and collecting an extensive range of photographs and videos. To gain a more thorough understanding of this under-researched reality, 80 local individuals were interviewed, many of whom were *micêwirs* (guardians of the shrines). These individuals provided invaluable insights into the history, traditions, and rituals associated with the communities and their ritual places. Thanks to their cooperation, a detailed picture emerged of the presence and function of the *xas* shrines in the living Yazidi society of the area.²³

As a matter of fact, by taking part in the individual and community's daily celebrations, it was possible to closely observe ritual practices, the commemoration of significant holidays, and the intensity of devotional experiences at the *mezars*. This direct engagement helped to dissolve the boundary between the researcher and the living tradition, fostering a comprehensive understanding of the rites performed within spaces the community recognizes as sacred.



Figure 4. Shrine of Şêx Şemsê Şemsanî in Girpanê. The sun is an important symbol for the Yazidi; during prayers, worshippers turn towards it at sunrise and sunset.

The mapping and documentation effort not only produced a substantial body of original data but also opened new avenues for displaying, disseminating, and interpreting this material. Following Dr. Rammo's PhD dissertation in 2023, these reflections gained prominence, leading us to adopt a fresh approach focused

²³ For references to data and scientific results, see Gh. Rammo's works in fn. 8.

on raising awareness of the Yezidi community and reaching a much wider audience beyond the academic sphere. With this spirit, MAIKI Sapienza organized in Rome and in collaboration with ISMEO – Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l’Oriente and Istituto Internazionale di Cultura Kurda the first event aimed at raising awareness in civil society, featuring a photographic exhibition—entitled “Luoghi di memoria. Comunità yezida e spazio sacro”,²⁴ an accompanying catalogue,²⁵ and a series of public gatherings dedicated to discussions on Yezidi Cultural Heritage, as well as guiding visitors through the exhibition panels.

Held at the public library Biblioteca Europea,²⁶ the exhibition (14 March – 12 April 2024) is structured around 16 textual and photographic panels and follows a consistent storytelling that offers a comprehensive survey of the Yezidi community. Its main focus lies on both the tangible (e.g., shrines) and intangible (e.g., ritual practices, oral hymns, social institutions) cultural heritage of the Yezidis, while also addressing the group’s current condition in the Kurdistan Region, their resilience in the aftermath of trauma, and the pressing challenges of safeguarding this rich legacy for the future. Following the same integrated scheme, the exhibition was subsequently presented in collaboration with the cultural association Pro Natura in Turin at Polo del ’900 (01-22 March 2025),²⁷ at the Archdiocese of Alessandria in the church of San Giacomo della Vittoria (11-30 April 2025),²⁸ and at the N. Ginzburg Library in Turin (01-30 June 2025).²⁹

Furthermore, in 2025, the initial project expanded significantly through new collaborations with ISMEO and the Jordan Center for Persian Studies and Culture at the University of California, Irvine.³⁰ On that occasion, the narrative focus was broadened to encompass the religious diversity of the Western and Central Zagros, with the inclusion of a dedicated section on the Yārsān community (also known as Ahl-i Haqq or Kaka’i). The temporary exhibition—titled “Sparks of Light from the Zagros: The Sacred Landscapes of the Yezidi and Yārsān Communities” and hosted at the Jordan Center (02–09 February 2025)—was also accompanied by an outreach catalogue in English.³¹

Alongside the Yezidis, the Yārsāns represent an ancient and indigenous tradition of the region, sharing several cultural elements with the Yezidi community. In both traditions, devotional hymns and music hold a central role in nurturing religious experience and ensuring the transmission of cultural heritage.³² To showcase the legacy of devotional music and song within these traditions, the inaugural event featured a performance by Ostad Ali Akbar Moradi, one of the most renowned interpreters of Yārsān sacred music. He also offered the audience valuable insights into the symbolic meanings of traditional instruments and the

²⁴ i.e., “Sites of Memory: The Yezidi Community and Sacred Space”.

²⁵ Rammo, 2024c.

²⁶ The Biblioteca Europea (part of the Rome Library System) is an institution that serves as a solid point of reference for the citizens of Rome, offering a space for study and multicultural exchange.

²⁷ Polo del ’900 is a multifunctional center that serves as a key point of reference for historical, social, economic, and cultural research on the twentieth century. It offers citizens spaces for events, exhibitions, and performances, as well as reading rooms, libraries, archives, and meeting areas.

²⁸ The Archdiocese of Alessandria is a Catholic institution actively engaged in promoting interfaith dialogue and the value of peaceful coexistence within society.

²⁹ The Natalia Ginzburg Library is part of the Biblioteche Civiche Torinesi system and organizes a vibrant annual program of events dedicated to inclusivity and cultural diversity.

³⁰ We are deeply grateful to Prof. Touraj Daryaee and Prof. Carlo G. Cereti for their enthusiastic support of the initiative, their efforts in organizing a rich program of presentations at UCI, and their generous contribution of valuable insights.

³¹ Rammo and Terribili, 2025. We extend our heartfelt thanks to photographers Hadi Bolandbakht, Foad Goudarzi, and Bahman Zarei for their generosity in sharing their powerful and evocative photographs of the Yārsān community living in the provinces of Kurdistan and Kermanshah, Iran.

³² For a broad understanding of this religious community see Hamzeh’ee, 1990; Mir-Hosseini, 1995; van Bruinessen, 2014. Kreyenbroek and Kanakis, 2020; Kreyenbroek, 2022. For the historical roots of native religious particularism in the Zagros Mountain region, see the groundbreaking work by Crone, 2012. For a recent survey of the religious fabric in Kurdistan, see van Bruinessen, 2020.

roles played by various musical and literary genres in ritual contexts. The multifaceted structure of the events—coupled with the synergy between academic collaboration and public outreach—holds strong potential to engage a wide audience and to foster deeper public awareness of the values of inclusiveness, tolerance, and cultural diversity. The application of the aforementioned principles to similar initiatives in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq could yield highly positive outcomes—both in terms of enhancing the region’s still underexplored cultural heritage and in stimulating multicultural dialogue within local society.

With this specific aim, a new Erasmus+ Project has recently been launched and entitled “Transition: Preserving the tangible and intangible Cultural Heritage of Minority Communities in the Kurdistan region of Iraq and in Yemen, through Capacity Building of university staff members”.³³ The “Transition” action is coordinated by the University of Duhok and involves expert units from various Kurdish, Yemeni, and European universities.³⁴ It thus promotes, from within Kurdish higher education institutions, a unique and ground-breaking teaching environment focused on minority groups. Rooted in a multidisciplinary approach, the initiative encourages a culture of collaboration among universities, academic communities, and other stakeholders, including policy makers. By strengthening institutional capacity in universities, the initiative aims to support the emergence of a new generation of heritage specialists, equipped with the critical skills needed to engage with both the tangible and intangible heritage of non-mainstream groups and to communicate its value for the benefit of society at large.



Figure 5. The *micêwir* Pîr Zêdo Pîr Ali in Baadrê, *Nişana Îzî*.

³³ The project has been funded under the call: ERASMUS-EDU-2024-CBHE-STRAND-1 — Capacity building in the field of higher education Strand 1.

³⁴ The project involves the University of Duhok, the University of Zakho, the University of Sulaimani, and the University of Soran (Kurdistan Region of Iraq); the University of Aden and the University of Taiz (Yemen); the University of Évora (Portugal); as well as UNIMED and Sapienza University of Rome (Italy).

Conclusive remarks

The Yezidi settlement area in the Sheikhan district holds significant potential for the development of sustainable tourism—including at an international level—not only as a means of economic support for local communities, but also as a powerful driver for the preservation and enhancement of the region's rich tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Strategically located at the crossroads of civilizations, Sheikhan has long stood as a vivid expression of the cultural and religious diversity that has historically shaped the broader Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The centuries-long coexistence of multiple religious groups has shaped a unique socio-cultural landscape, offering visitors an authentic experience of interfaith legacies, historical sites, and enduring ritual practices.

The implementation of scientific research—through survey campaigns, mapping, and anthropological fieldwork—contributes significantly to the design of ethno-cultural itineraries that invite visitors into immersive and ethically engaged forms of tourism. These routes could retrace the paths of centuries-old devotional networks, connecting shrines, pilgrimage sites, and natural sanctuaries across the region, while fostering a deeper understanding of the values at the heart of Yezidi spirituality and worldview. The promotion of “slow tourism” models—such as dispersed hospitality systems (hotel diffused),³⁵ guided walking tours, community-based experiences, and participation in local festivals—can encourage a more respectful and sustainable engagement with this territory and its people. Such dynamics would help prevent the disintegration of cultural heritage and counter the social factors that drive outward migration. The case of the twin towns of Bozan and Alqosh offers perhaps the clearest examples of the potential for community-based tourism development in the area. The two towns, located less than 4 km apart, still preserve their old-fashioned atmosphere and host living Yezidi (Bozan) and Christian (Alqosh) communities.

The spiritual centers scattered across the settlements and the surrounding hilly landscape conceal an invaluable tangible and intangible heritage. Notably, the ancient Christian monastery of Rabban Hormizd, dating back to the 7th century, houses a large collection of manuscripts in Syriac and Arabic. It also serves as the focal point for springtime communal festivals that involve the entire Kurdish society. The Yezidi mezar of *Şêşims* in Bozan also enshrines ancient ritual practices, while the nearby Lalish sanctuary (approximately 40 km away) stands as a mesmerizing center of spiritual activity. Moreover, the range of attractions could be easily expanded to include two other centers of Kurdish folklore and cultural tradition, such as the historic towns of Aqrah (approximately 70 km) and Amadiya (approximately 100 km). Thus, the characteristics of the Bozan and Alqosh area make it an ideal case study for designing the enhancement of Cultural Heritage through the revitalization of local traditions, the promotion of slow tourism, and the organization of dispersed hospitality systems.

By nurturing a sense of belonging and creating opportunities, initiatives aimed at enhancing regional heritage can empower communities to stay connected to their environment and traditions, transforming heritage from a fragile legacy into a dynamic resource. In an increasingly homogenized world, where cultural uniformity undermines unique identities, the Sheikhan area stands out as a place of exceptional diversity. This rich heritage is not only deserving of protection, but also of being actively shared and reinterpreted in ways that promote intercommunal dialogue and support inclusive growth.

³⁵ The concept refers to a hospitality model where hotel rooms are not concentrated in a single building but are spread across various smaller buildings or private homes in a town or area, offering an experience that is more integrated with the local environment and community. More broadly, community-based tourism is a growing trend that is seeing significant economic development in several European countries and is increasingly appealing to an audience with cultural interests.

List of References

- Açıkyıldız B. (2009). The Sanctuary of Shaykh 'Adī at Lalish: Centre of Pilgrimage of the Yezidis. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 72(2): 301–333.
- Açıkyıldız B. (2010). *The Yezidis: The History of a Community, Culture and Religion*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Allison C. (2001). *The Yezidi Oral Tradition in Iraqi Kurdistan*. Richmond (Surrey): Curzon Press.
- Asatrian G. and Arakelova V. (2003). Malak-Tāwūs: The Peacock Angel of the Yezidis. *Iran & the Caucasus* 7: 1–36.
- Asatrian G. and Arakelova V. (2014). *The Religion of the Peacock Angel: The Yezidis and Their Spirit World*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Chyet M.L. (2020). *Ferhenga Birûskî. English - Kurmanji Dictionary*. London: Transnational Press.
- Crone P. (2012). *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolts and Local Zoroastrianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- de la Bretèque E.A. and Omarkhali, Kh. (2022). The Yezidi Religious Music: A First Step in the Analysis of the Acoustic Shape of Qewls. *Oral Tradition* 35: 119–140.
- Hamzeh'ee M.R. (1990). *The Yaresan: A Sociological, Historical, and Religio-Historical Study of a Kurdish Community*. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag.
- Jindy-Rashow K. (2018). *Yezidism: Beliefs, Mythology and Castes*. Baghdad [in Arabic].
- Kreyenbroek Ph.G. (1992). Mithra and Ahreman, Binyāmīn and Malak Tāwūs: Traces of an Ancient Myth in the cosmogonies of Two Modern Sects. In Ph. Gignoux (Ed.), *Recurrent Patterns in Iranian Religion: from Mazdaism to Sufism*. (Studia Iranica Cahier 11): 57–79. Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes.
- Kreyenbroek Ph.G. (1995). *Yezidism: Its Background, Observances and Textual Tradition*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press.
- Kreyenbroek Ph.G. (2010). Orality and Religion in Kurdistan: the Yezidi and Ahl-e Haqq Traditions. In Ph.G. Kreyenbroek and U. Marzolph (Eds), *A History of Persian Literature, Vol. XVIII, Oral Literature of Iranian Languages: Kurdish, Pashto, Balochi, Ossetic, Persian and Tajik*: 70–88. London and New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Kreyenbroek Ph.G. (2022). The Religious Textual Heritage of the Yārsān (Ahl-e Haqq). *Oral Tradition* 35(2): 331–340.
- Kreyenbroek Ph.G. (2023). *Early Zoroastrianism and Orality*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Kreyenbroek Ph.G. and Jindy-Rashow K. (2006). *God and Sheikh Adi Are Perfect: Sacred Poems and Religious Narratives from the Yezidi Tradition*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Kreyenbroek Ph.G. and Kanakis Y. (2020). "God First and Last:" Religious Traditions and Music of the Yaresan of Guran. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Mackenzie D.N. (1971). *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Masud J. (1992). *Al-Ra'id Modern Lexicon*. Beirut: The House of Science for Millions.
- Mir-Hosseini Z. (1995). Faith, Ritual and Culture among the Ahl-e Haqq. In Ph.G. Kreyenbroek and C. Allison (Eds), *Kurdish Cultural Identity*: 111–134. London: Zed Books.
- Omarkhali K. (2017). *The Yezidi Religious Textual Tradition: From Oral to Written*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Rammo Gh. (2024a). La comunità Yezida e lo spazio sacro. Fruizione e tradizione rituale dei Santuari Yezidi. In M. Ramazzotti (Ed.), *Costeggiando l'Eurasia. Archeologia del paesaggio e geografia storica tra l'Oceano Indiano e il Mar Mediterraneo*: 193–210. Roma: Sapienza Editrice.
- Rammo Gh. (2024b). The Yezidi Shrine: Architecture, Myths, and Rituals. *Sēnmurw* 3: 127–171.
- Rammo Gh., Ed. (2024c). *Luoghi di memoria. Comunità yezida e spazio sacro*. Bologna
- Rammo Gh. and Terribili G. (2025). *Sparks of Light from the Zagros: The Sacred Landscapes of the Yezidi and Yārsān Communities*. Rome: ISIAO.
- Spät E. (2010). *Late Antique Motifs in Yezidi Oral Tradition*, Piscataway: Gorgias Press.
- Spät E. (2022). Singing the Pain: Yezidi Oral Tradition and Sinjari Laments after ISIS. *Oral Tradition* 35: 77–102.
- Terribili G. (2023). The Sacred Mountain in the Arsacid-Sasanian Landscape of Western Zagros. Spaces, Narrative Patterns, and Numinous Manifestations. *Sēnmurw* 2: 135–189.
- Terribili G. and Insom C. (2021). In the Shade of a Tree. Holy Figures and Prodigious Trees in Late-Antique and Medieval NW Iran. In C. Barbati and V. Berti (Eds), *Iranianate and Syriac Christianity (5th–11th Centuries) in Late Antiquity and the Early Islamic Period (Veröffentlichungen zur Iranistik)*: 333–366. Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- van Bruinessen M. (2014). Veneration of Satan among the Ahl-e Haqq of the Gûrân Region. *Fritillaria Kurdica* 3: 6–41.
- van Bruinessen M. (2020). *Mullas, Sufis and Heretics: The Role of Religion in Kurdish Society*. Piscataway: Gorgias Press [2nd edition].