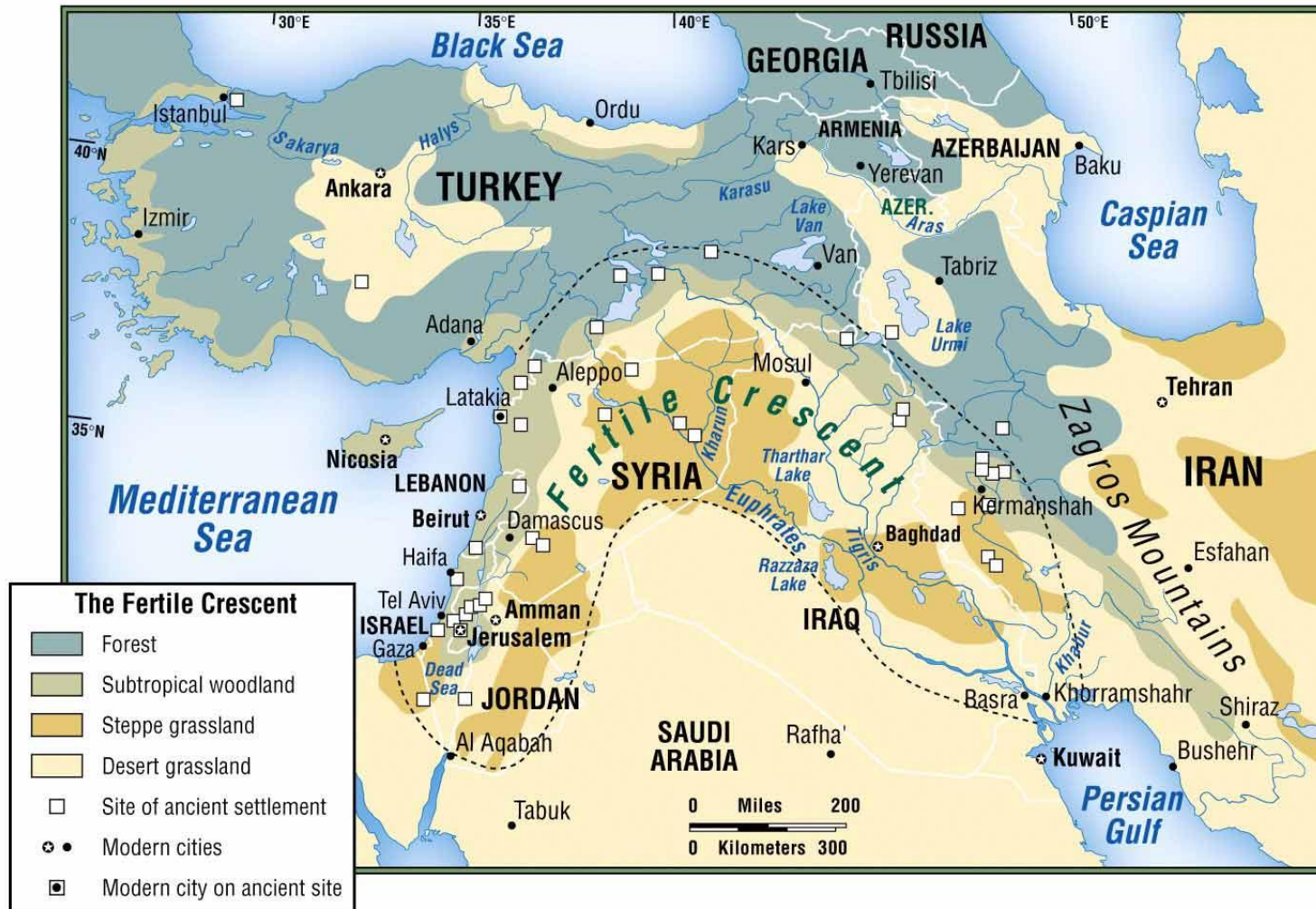


The Age of Empires



The Kurds are an indigenous people of Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia, with a close genetic relationship to Jews and Armenians¹. From 100,000 years ago people, including the ancestors of the Kurds, have continuously inhabited an area of mountains, valleys and plains that extend from the Mediterranean Sea in the west to Elam and the Persian Gulf in the east and to the southern shores of the Black Sea and Caspian Sea in the north. The region spans much of the Fertile Crescent, with eastern Anatolia, northern Mesopotamia and Elam being one of several regions around the world where pastoralism and agriculture originated by 10,000 BC, if not before², urban settlements originated by 6000 BC, and cuneiform writing originated by 3200 BC³. The earliest civilisations in Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia include the egalitarian Halaf/Halafian culture (6100 – 4500 BC)⁴, which had no written language, and the confederation of Elam (from the fourth millennium BC), where a distinct form of cuneiform writing had developed 300 years after the earliest Sumerian script. The Elamites lived east of the Zagros Mountains and spread south to the Persian Gulf at a time when the Sumerians dominated southern Mesopotamia.

New archaeological and genetic evidence suggests that in around 4000 BC, the Sumerians similarly spread south: from Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia into southern Mesopotamia⁵, where they established city-states, ruled by a priesthood and centred around a ziggurat temple to the city god, building on former Ubaidian settlements. They subsequently established administrations in northern Mesopotamia. The Kurds are often associated with the northern mountain ranges and Sumerian words stemming from *kur* refer to ‘mountain people’⁶.

Then there were the civilisations that spread north, including the Ubaidian civilisation (5900 – 3600 BC) that gradually replace the Halafian culture, and was, in turn, incorporated into the Uruk civilisation (4400 – 2900 BC). Co-existent with the Uruks, were other indigenous peoples with advanced cultures, including the Hurrians of Anatolia and the Kassites of the Zagros Mountains. Like the Elamites and Sumerians, the Hurrians and Kassites spoke ‘language isolates’. The term refers to a distinct language with no known historical or linguistic relationship to any other language within the current classification of language families.

¹ Hennerbichler, Ferdinand (2012). Origin of the Kurds. *Advances in Anthropology*, Vol. 2, 2, p. 64-79.

² First evidence of farming 23,000 years ago, *Science Daily*, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/07/150722144709.htm>

³ Ronan, Mark (2013). The puzzle of proto-Elamite. *History Today*, Vol. 63, 1, p. 6.

⁴ Frangipane, Marcella (2007). ‘Equality’ and ‘inequality’: Are they useful concepts in classifying societies? *World Archeology*, Vol. 39, 2, p. 151-176

⁵ Al-Zahert, Pala, Battaglia, Grugni et al, (2011). In search of the genetic footprints of Sumerians: a survey of Y-chromosome and mtDNA variation in the Marsh Arabs of Iraq. *Evolutionary Biology*. <http://bmcevolbiol.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2148-11-288>

⁶ Henerbichler (2012), *op. cit.*

In ancient texts, there is no reference to ethnic affiliations. People were distinguished by their location, language and customs, with waves of migration, an evolution of languages and the unknown extent of intermarriage making the history of this region, let alone identifying a particular people's ancestry, both complex and contentious⁷.

What is known is that by 1000 BC people in the region spoke a number of Indo-European and Semitic languages⁸, modern Kurds speaking an Indo-European language that falls within the Indo-Iranian subgroup. As for the origin of these languages, one widespread hypothesis is that around 4000 BC, if not before, proto Indo-European language speakers from the Pontic-Caspian steppe and Caucasus, north of the Black Sea and Caspian Sea, brought their language to Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia, with waves of in-migration increasing around 2500 BC. This hypothesis infers that the indigenous people adopted the Indo-European language of the immigrants.

A more recent hypothesis regarding the origin of the Indo-European language family is supported by genetic studies, analysis of more than 100 ancient and contemporary Indo-European languages and substantial evidence, globally, that the spread of agriculture and culture contributed to the spread of major language groups and shaped their diversification. This hypothesis proposes that the Indo-European language group originated in Anatolia before spreading and diversifying with the spread of agriculture and culture between 9,500 and 8,000 years ago⁹.

The presence of Semitic languages in Mesopotamia is traced back to between 3500 – 3000 BC, when a people known as Akkadians migrated to central Mesopotamia from the Syrian-Arabian deserts¹⁰. By 2500 BC, Akkadian descendants known as Assyrians identified as a distinct people who spoke an Akkadian dialect although they remained under homage to the Sumerians and then to the bilingual Akkadian Empire, which extended throughout Mesopotamia between 2334 – 2154 BC¹¹.

⁷ For instance, biblical references refer to Jews living in Haran in eastern Anatolia, whilst Abraham resided in Ur in southern Mesopotamia, before joining his family in Haran and migrating to Canaan around 1900 BC. By 1200 BC the Jews of Canaan spoke a Canaanite language called Hebrew. Before this, they would have spoken a proto-Indo-European language and/or Akkadian. During their exile in Babylon, they adopted Aramaic, a Semitic language that had absorbed and replaced Akkadian, which had earlier absorbed and replaced Sumerian language and/or Akkadian. During their exile in Babylon, they adopted Aramaic, a Semitic language that had absorbed and replaced Akkadian, which had earlier absorbed and replaced Sumerian.

⁸ Hanish, Shak (2008). The Chaldean Assyrian Syria People of Iraq: An Ethnic Identity Problem. *Digest of Middle Eastern Studies*, 17 (1), p. 32– 47.

⁹ Bouckaert, Lemey, Dunn, Greenill, Alekseyenko, et al. (2012) Mapping the Origins and Expansion of the Indo-European Language Family. *Science*, 337 (6097), p. 957–960

¹⁰ The Semitic language belongs to the Afro-asiatic language family

¹¹ The Akkadian language gradually become more dominant so by 2,000 BC the Sumerian language was only used for ceremonial, literary and scientific purposes.

From 2400 BC, increased migration and urbanisation resulted in multiple city-states jostling for power, as well as exchanging beliefs, language and customs. Among the people of these city-states were the language isolate speakers (the Hurrians, Kassites and Elamites), the proto-Indo-European language speakers (the Mittani, Hittites, Medes and possibly the Gutis, although the Gutis may have spoken a language isolate), and the Semitic language speakers (the Akkadians, Assyrians and Amorites, with the Chaldeans arriving from 1000 BC).

In the north, around 2154 BC, the Assyrian kings rebelled against their Akkadian overlords and established independent city-states in Assur and Nineveh, both of which were former Sumerian administration centres. For short periods the Old Assyrian Empire fell under Babylonian and Mitanni-Hurrian rule, but otherwise survived until 1393 BC, when it lost its independence to the Mittani – Hurrian Empire.

In the south, sources contradict as to the early history of Babylonia. Berosus, a Chaldean historian and priest living in the late fourth and third century BC, claims the first dynasty of Babylonia was that of eight Mede kings who ruled between about 2400 and 2200 BC. Some conjecture these Mede kings were Elamites. Other sources claim that the Gutis of the Zagros Ranges went south, overthrew the Akkadians in Babylon in 2230 BC, and ruled Babylon for 100 years, before being overthrown by the Elamites. The Semitic speaking Amorites established their Babylonian dynasty between 1895 – 1595 BC, which extended throughout Mesopotamia under Hammurabi (1792 – 1750 BC). Both the Assyrians and Babylonians wrote in Akkadian cuneiform.

Between 1500 BC and 1300 BC, the Mittani – Hurrian Empire expanded from the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the modern border of Iraq and Iran in the east, during a power vacuum in the Assyrian and Hittite empires. Co-existing with the Middle Assyrian Empire, the Hittite Empire lasted from 1600 BC until 1180 BC, during which time it covered Anatolia, western Syria and the northern Levant. The Kassites spread out from the Zagros Mountains, and ruled Babylonia between 1595 BC and 1155 BC, thus co-existing with the empires of the Hittites, Assyrians and Elamites.

Hence, it is thought the ancestors of the Kurds were a mix of indigenous people, some of whom spoke a language isolate (the Sumerians, Hurrians, Kassites, Elamites and Lullubi) and others who spoke a proto Indo-European language (the Mittani, Hittites, Gutis and Medes). Modern day Kurds often identify with the Medes.

Little is known about the Medes except from what is gleaned from Berosus about an early Mede dynasty in Babylonia, as already described, but there is little corroborating evidence for such a dynasty, except that Medes are worthy of mention in biblical texts. For instance, in Genesis 10:2 the Medes are described as descendants of Japheth, a son of Noah. Otherwise, what is known about the Medes is gleaned from Assyrian and Babylonian texts (850 – 550 BC), Greek historians writing in the fifth century BC, other biblical references and limited archaeological diggings. The six tribes of Media lived as pastoralists in the Zagros Mountains and the Kermanshah - Hamadan region of northwest Persia, with pottery found in the region dating to 1400 BC. By the first millennium BC, tribal chiefs had accumulated wealth by breeding valuable horses and Bactrian camels, supplying specialised warriors to outside armies, and from

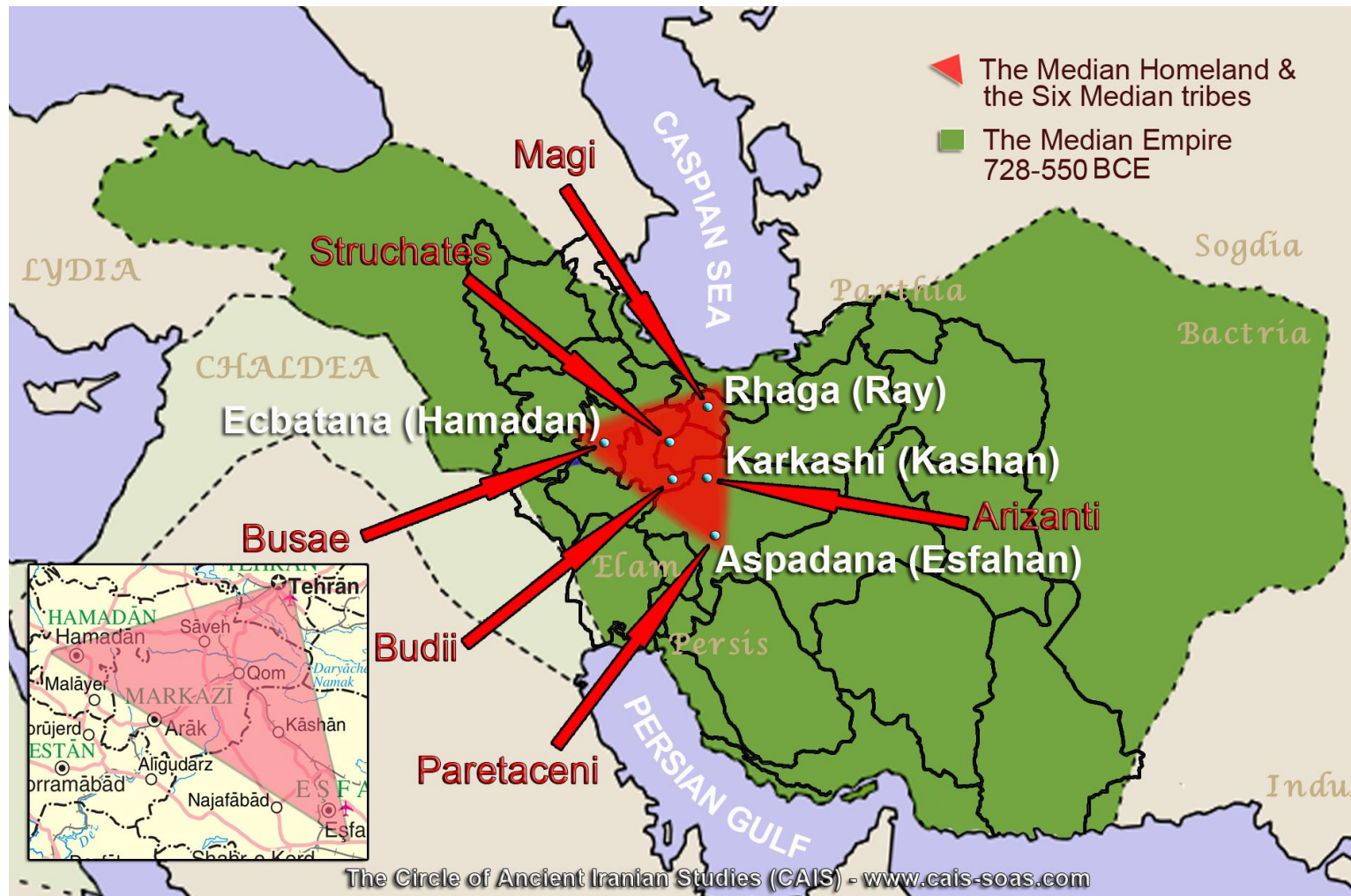
custom and trade, for they controlled the northern gate into Persia. With this wealth, they built fortress complexes featuring fire temples, ceremonial columned halls and storehouses.

In the eight century BC, Media had become a loose confederation of autonomous city-states, which defended their territory in numerous wars against the Neo Assyrian Empire (911 BC – 612 BC)¹².

According to the Greek historian, Herodotus, the first elected Mede king of kings was Deioces, who came to power in 727 BC and built the Median capital Ecbatana, located near the modern city of Hamadan in Iran. He describes Ecbatana as being protected by seven massive concentric walls. However, this description could be of a second city, also called Ecbatana, located in Azerbaijan, with other Mede cities including Rhages on the southern shore of the Caspian Sea, and Charex and Behistun on the north-west Iranian plateau. According to Herodotus, the second Mede king was Phraortes, who conquered Persia but suffered heavy losses to the Assyrians and was killed in a battle with the Indo-European speaking Scythians. His son, Cyaxares, became the third Mede king. Cyaxares led a Median army to conquer the Assyrian city of Assur in 614 BC. He then cemented an alliance with Nabopolassar, king of Babylonia, by marrying his daughter or granddaughter, Amytis, to Nabopolassar's son, Nebuchadnezzar II. In 612 BC, he led an army of Medes, Persians, Elamites and Scythians south to the Assyrian capital of Nineveh, while Nabopolassar advanced north. Together they captured Nineveh. The significance of this victory is celebrated in the Kurdish calendar, which begins in 612 BC. Hence, the year 2016 of the Gregorian calendar is 2628 in Kurdish calendar.

The Assyrian Empire was subsequently divided, with the Babylonians taking southern and central Mesopotamia, and the Medes taking the north. According to the Greek historian, Xenophon, Media absorbed central Anatolia (Cappadocia), Armenia, the Guti and Kassite kingdoms of the Zagros-Taurus mountain ranges and Mannai (peopled by Hurrians), Elam and the greater part of the Iranian plateau. This was achieved by forming alliances as much as battle, as indicated by biblical sources (e.g. Jeremiah, 51: 11, 28) referring to 'the kings of Media' and a treaty with Lydia, cemented by Astyages, son of Cyaxares, and fourth Mede king, marrying the sister of Croesus, king of Lydia (western Anatolia) in 585 BC. Thus Media, Babylonia, and Lydia coexisted. According to Herodotus, the federation lasted until 550 BC, when the army of Astyages, who had no son, was defeated by his half Mede-half Persian grandson, Cyrus. Some sources claim the Mede defeat was due to Zoroastrian Mede nobles and soldiers handing over Astyages, who followed the old religion, and defecting to the army of Cyrus, who was Zoroastrian (although Cyrus's religion is much debated). Writing 30 to 60 years after Herodotus, Xenophon presented an alternate history, claiming that Astyages was succeeded by his son, Cyaxares II, who passed the kingship to his Persian son-in-law, Cyrus in 537 BC, two years after Cyrus led a Mede-Persian army and conquered Babylon¹⁴. Cyrus is known as Cyrus the Great and was the founder of the Achaemenid Empire.

¹² The Assyrian pastoralist kings date back to 2,500 BC, when they were subservient to the Akkadians. The Assyrian had three successive empires. The first dated 2,150 – 1,850 BC, and the second 1,392 BC – 1,056 BC.



Map of the Median Empire and the tribes of Media.
 Source: http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Images2/Maps/Median_Empire_and_modern_Iran.png

Many scholars describe the Achaemenid Empire as a Mede-Persian empire, with Medes persisting in the Achaemenid aristocracy, military and administration, and a Median priestly caste, known as Magi, acting as religious functionaries, as well as having administrative and economic duties. The Magi were engaged throughout the reign of the Achaemenids, as they were for the Medes and Elamites. It is controversial whether the Magi were always Zoroastrian. Some scholars suggest they originally followed the old religion focused on the sun God, associated with Mithra (i.e. Yazidism), before adopting the teachings of Zoroaster in the fourth century BC¹⁴.

The region inhabited by the Kurds continued to be of strategic importance. Through the region traversed the Silk routes, linking East and West from the first millennium BC. Successive invasions came from the west and east, with many wars being fought upon its soil. Yet the Kurds survived under the names of K/Cardochoi, Kurti/e, Mad, May, Maday and Madaya, with 'Kurd' being coined by the Parthians and Sassanians in the fifth century AD.

Against each invader, the ancestors of modern day Kurds, resisted. Xenophon reported that in 401 BC, the Karduchoi people, located east and south of the Botan River, an area covered by modern day Diyarbakir, Nusaybin and Zakho, were independent of Achaemenid rule. Alexander the Great occupied Media in 330 BC. During the Parthian era (247 BC–226 AD), there were seven semi or fully independent principalities: Mada (Media); Elymais (Luristan); Kerm (Kermanshah); Mukriyan (Mahabad); Shahrezur (Sulaimani); Barchan (Barzan); and Sanak (Sahna). The Medes rebelled against the Greeks in 221 BC, and against the Sassanians in 220s AD, when Madig, King of the Kurds, led a successful rebellion that was subsequently squashed despite fierce resistance.

The Cardiochoi/Carduchi/Carduene/Carduchian people of Western Media (Cappadocia/eastern Anatolia) around Lake Van fought the Greeks and Romans. They came under Roman rule four times between 66 BC and 384 AD and under Byzantine rule between 578 and 640 AD.

In 637 AD Islam came to Kurdistan. The Kurds already had their own religions and refused to submit. For four years they fought a bloody war against the Arab invaders. Subsequent rebellions against Islamic caliphates occurred in 833, 838, 846, 903 and 905 AD. Between the 10th and 13th centuries, independent Kurdish principalities were ruled by dynasties, including the Shaddadi in Armenia (951 – 1174) and the Marwanids in Diyarbakir (990 – 1096). In eastern Kurdistan (north-west Iran), there were the dynasties of Khurasani (754 – 770), Annazid (990 – 1117), Rawadid (995 – 1221) and Hasanwayhid (959 – 1015).

¹⁴ Anderson, S.D. (2014). *Darus the Mede: A reappraisal*. PhD, Dallas Theological Seminary, *UMI Dissertation Publishing by ProQuest*.

¹⁵ <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/magi>



Kurdish Independent Kingdoms and Autonomous Principalities circa 1835:

BABAN - Independent kingdom or principality and its approximate domain

ARDALAN - Autonomous vassal principalities and khanates

Rewanduz - Capital

Arbil - A major populous city

— - International boundaries

— - Boundaries of autonomous principality

Kurdish principalities circa 1835

Source:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/a/a5/Kurdish_states_1835.png/1024px-Kurdish_states_1835.png

Based on

http://www.institutkurde.org/images/cartes_and_maps/kurdish_independent_kingdom.jpg

Salahuddin Ayyubi (b. ? – 1193) was a Kurd who founded the Ayyubi Empire in 1171, and with help from Kurdish regiments, defeated Richard the Lionheart and the Crusaders, taking Jerusalem in 1187. By 1260, the Ayyubi Empire had been defeated by the Mamluk and Seljuk Turks. The last Seljuk monarch created a province called Kurdistan with its capital near Ecbatana. The province extended from Sinjar in the west to Kermanshah in the east.

Kurdish principalities suffered during the invasions of Turkic tribes from Central Asia in the eleventh century, the Mongols in the thirteenth century and the Tartars in the fourteenth century. During the empires of the Ottomans (1299 – 1922) and Safavids (1499 – 1736), twenty Kurdish emirates emerged, although the Kurds continued to rebel against their overlords.

Under the yoke of the Safavids, the Yezidi rose up between 1506 and 1510 and in 1609 – 1610 a famous siege, called the Battle of Dimdim was fought near Lake Urmia. Against the Ottomans, 30,000 Kurds rebelled in 1605, Yezidi in Sinjar rebelled in 1640, and in 1655, Abdul Khan, Prince of Bitlis, led another rebellion. All were brutally squashed.

After years of war between the Ottomans and Safavids, the first division of Kurdistan was formalised in 1639. Sixteen Kurdish principalities came under Ottoman rule and four under Safavid rule. These principalities remained largely independent in administration and economic affairs until the late nineteenth century, when the Ottoman and Qajar rulers (who followed the Safavids) began centralising their administrations.

Throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century, Kurds periodically rebelled against their overlords. In the nineteenth century, Kurds fought for their independence -

- Against the Ottomans in:
 - 1806 – 1808, and intermittently thereafter until 1851, led by Abdurrahman Pasha in Baban, which had been ruled by the Baban dynasty since 1649. Abdurrahman Pasha was the last prince of Baban;
 - 1811 led by Mir Muhammad (also known as Pasa Kor) in the Soran principality. Over two decades he expanded the autonomous principality, incorporating the Bahdinan emirate of Amadiyah, as well as Erbil, Zakho and Duhok, with the intention of creating an independent Kurdistan with a capital in Rawandoz. He was supported by the Qajars and Russians in his fight against the Ottomans.
 - 1843 – 1847 led by Bedir Khan Bey, ruler of Cizre-Botan, seeking an independent Kurdistan. Although the revolt was brutally squashed the Ottomans granted autonomy to a province called Kurdistan that covered Diyarbakir, Mus, Van, Hakkari, Botan and Mardin between 1847 and 1864.

- 1853 – 1855 led by Yazdan Sher, nephew of Bedirkhan Bey, against the Ottoman appointed governor of Bitlis in Hakkari province. Yazdan Sher gathered thousands of fighters and took control of Bitlis, Mosul and Van, again with the intent of establishing an independent Kurdistan. The rebellion ended when he was betrayed by a British agent and imprisoned.
 - 1879 – 1881, led by the Naqishbendi Sheikh Ubaidullah Nahri [also spelled Ubeydullah/Obeidallah], a religious leader from the powerful Semdinan family who demanded an independent Kurdistan, free of Ottoman and Qajar control. He briefly established a semi-independent principality over Bohtan, Badinan, Hakkari and Ardalan in the power vacuum created by the Russian – Ottoman War of 1877 – 1978, with help from local Kurdish tribes and Nestorian Christians. Attacked by both the Ottomans and Qajars, he was forced to surrender and was sentenced to exile in Istanbul and later, Mecca, where he died in 1883. Having rebelled against both overlords, he is often considered the father of Kurdish nationalism.
 - 1907 – 1912, led by Sheikh Abdusallam Barzani in Bahdinan. The Sheikh was captured and executed by the Ottomans in 1914.
- Against the Qajars in:
 - 1880 – 1881, when Sheikh Ubaidullah led 10,000 of fighters into Qajar controlled territory. They were joined by another 15,000 Kurdish fighters and took several towns including Mahabad, but failed to take Urmia. They were militarily defeated and forced to withdrew into Ottoman territory, where Sheikh Ubaidullah was captured by the Ottomans, with help from British and Russian ambassadors;
 - 1918 – 1922, led by Ismail Agha Shikak, also known as Simko, who declared a Kurdish republic but was defeated by Reza Khan, later to become the first Pahlavi shah.
 - Against the British in:
 - 1915, when Sheikh Mahmoud led over 1,000 Kurdish cavalry against the British, with huge losses on both sides. However, Kurdish disgust at Ottoman command and British humanitarian relief during the famine of the war years led to the Kurds temporarily abandoning the struggle.

During World War I, Kurdistan was subjected to three war fronts: the Caucasus, the Persian and the Mesopotamian Fronts. It became a theatre of war between the Ottoman, British and Russian armies, Kurds being conscripted by each army. Civilians suffered from the destruction of war and widespread famine resulting in the depopulation of towns and villages. In addition, Russia used Armenians against the Kurds, and the Ottomans, threatened by a joint Kurdish-Armenian effort in 1909 – 1910 to form an independent Kurdistan, established a Kurdish cavalry that was used against the Armenians and Assyrians. While this was occurring, the Ottomans deported 700,000 Kurds from eastern Turkey and northern Syria, of whom up to 500,000 perished due to starvation, exposure or ill treatment. Similarly, an estimated 1.5 million Armenians were killed or perished over a 12 year period.

After World War I, the region was carved into the modern nation states of Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. In all four countries, Kurds continued to fight for their freedom.



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