

BIRGÜL AÇIKYILDIZ, *The Yezidis: The History of a Community, Culture and Religion* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2014). Pp. 304. \$28.00 paper. ISBN: 9781784532161

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Yezidis, a long persecuted and misunderstood religious community in the Middle East, made headlines in August of 2014 as a result of the vicious attacks by the Islamic State against them in their ancestral homeland in northern Iraq. In light of the delicate and continuously perilous struggle for survival faced by the Yezidis currently, this publication should be considered as timely and important. It is in fact a reprinting of Birgül Açıkyıldız's significant contribution to the scholarship on the history, religion and culture of the Yezidi community, originally published in 2010. As the author explains in the introductory chapter, the book aims to give a "comprehensive and comprehensible" introduction to Yezidi culture, religion, and society (p. 1). She mainly achieves this aim. However, as I will try to demonstrate below, her work suffers slightly from a number of weaknesses mainly related to the organization and structure of the presented material.

The main strength of the work is that the author, as opposed to the previous scholars of Yezidi history who focused mainly on the origins, early history, and religious practices of the modern Yezidis of northern Iraq, examines the full historical and geographic range of Yezidism, not just in northern Iraq but also in Turkey, Syria, and Transcaucasia (mainly Armenia). For that, in addition to traditional historical sources and materials, she relies on the results of extensive and impressive fieldwork amongst the Yezidi communities, which she carried out in northern Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Armenia between 2002 and 2005. Moreover, she proposes an interesting typology of Yezidi places of pilgrimage and architectural monuments and suggests a convincing chronology for them based on the comparative study of dated Islamic monuments. She also considers an extraordinary group of statuary tombstones in the shape of horses found in the Republic of Armenia and Turkey today, and proposes that they should be attributed to the Yezidi community.

If the impressive anthropological fieldwork amongst the Yezidis, which constitutes the second half of the book, would be expanded and published as a separate work, I suspect that the overall result would be much more impressive than the current work. The latter suffers significantly because of the first half of the book, which purports to give information about the origins, history, and development of the Yezidi communities and their religious belief system. In fact, at times the book seems like a curious amalgamation of two quite different books: A second half written by an imaginative and highly original anthropologist and art historian, relying on very impressive fieldwork, and a first half—a rather uninteresting history—rehashing old ideas.

To be sure, the first half of the book, that is the two chapters following the introduction, scarcely makes any contribution to the existing historiography on the Yezidis, which incidentally stretches back to the second half of the 19th century. So, we read that, when Shaykh 'Adi (d. 1162), the central figure in Yezidi religion, arrived in the northern part of Iraq in the 12th century, there was a group of local people called Shamsani, from whom the current Yezidi family of sheikhs traces its descent and who were originally Manichaeans and worshippers of the sun. According to the author, they were attracted by Shaykh 'Adi's influential personality and his mystical ideas, which were in tune with their own beliefs. Thus, they developed mutual cooperation and defended against their common enemy, the Abbasids. As the author continues, we learn that by the 14th century, Yezidism reached as far east as Suleimania and as far west as Antioch (Antakya). The region between Diyarbakir and Siirt belonged to the Yezidis, and Sinjar was already one of their strongholds. We also learn that while the Yezidi tribes were allying with Ottomans and Safavids

to survive in the various Kurdish regions, Sheikhan and Sinjar continued to develop as the two main Yezidi strongholds.

From the 17th century, the author argues, the Yezidi strongholds were periodically raided by the Ottoman governors of Mosul, Baghdad, and Diyarbakir and were also attacked by the semiautonomous Kurdish principality of Amadiya. The main pretext for these attacks was to convert the Yezidis to Islam; however, the Yezidis were also seen as “brigands who harmed the Muslim inhabitants, refused to serve in the Ottoman army and evaded paying tax” (p. 51).

Unfortunately the readers would have no idea why the same Ottoman administration that saw the Yezidis as “brigands” and attacked them periodically from the 17th century on, chose to appoint important Yezidi chieftains to significant positions in the administration of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century. As the author admits: “Sultan Selim I appointed the Yezidi chief ‘Izz al-Din emir of the Kurds, governing Aleppo . . . Moreover, several Yezidi tribes were given major administrative and political responsibilities over the lands that were occupied by the Ottomans” (p. 48). Could the changing Ottoman attitudes regarding the Yezidis in the 17th century be related to the well-researched historical phenomenon of the general economic crisis in the empire, which was mostly about global economic and environmental changes? It is difficult to answer such questions reading the historical portions of the work, since, unfortunately, the author fails to put the history of the Yezidis in its proper Ottoman context.

Luckily for the reader, the historical platitudes of the first half are followed by a highly original second half, presenting the author’s fieldwork on the religious and social life, as well as the material culture, of the Yezidi communities. As far as this reviewer knows, this work is the first of its kind when it comes to examining the material culture of the Yezidis in such detail. Also, as she analyzes the religious beliefs of the Yezidis and the place of the supreme divine being, the Peacock Angel (*tāwūsi melek* or *melek tāwūs*) in their religion, the author convincingly argues that many religious and mythological traits associated with Yezidism may have come from and were heavily influenced by Islamic traditions, as well as earlier Manichean and Zoroastrian ideas, giving them a highly syncretic character. In addition, I think art historians would find her suggestion that the characteristic fluted conical-domed buildings associated with Yezidi architecture might be modeled on the Shi’i mausoleums of Mosul, principally constructed in the period of Badr al-Din Lu’lu’ (d. 1259, sultan of Mosul), highly interesting. Badr al-Din Lu’lu’ was a former Armenian slave and the first mamluk to transcend servitude and become a sultan in the medieval Middle East, as far as we know. She argues that it might have been a deliberate choice of Lu’lu’ to cover his monuments with the well-known Armenian-styled domes to make reference to his origin.

Everything considered, this work is an impressive piece of scholarship and I highly recommend it. Finally, the book would have looked better if I. B. Tauris had dealt with the many distracting printing errors still occupying the pages of the work in its reprint.

NAVID FOZI, *Reclaiming the Faravahar: Zoroastrian Survival in Contemporary Iran*, Iranian Studies Series (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2014). Pp. 238. \$59.50 paper. ISBN: 9789087282141

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As the first contemporary ethnographic study of Zoroastrians in Iran, *Reclaiming the Faravahar* is a sophisticatedly eclectic and highly motivating analysis of a religious minority. Two main questions guide Navid Fozi throughout the book: How can Zoroastrians’ distinctiveness as a