

A SHIITE TURBA FOUND AT THE ROYAL HALL OF BIDLIS CASTLE: TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSLATION*

Mustafa Dehqan

Independent researcher
mustafadehqan@yahoo.com

Vural Genç

Bitlis Eren University, Department of History
vuralgenç@hotmail.com

Abstract: This brief note explores issues of Shiite identity of the Kurdish emirs of Bidlīs by reading a recently-found Shiite *turba* at the royal hall of Bidlīs castle, in Eastern Anatolia. The present brief note confines itself to the background of Shiism in the Bidlīs emirate; a seemingly disparate case that shows persistent affinity as a starting point in thinking through discrete Kurdish orientations toward Shiite teachings.

Keywords: Shiite, Ottoman, Bidlīs, Kurdish emirate

Introduction

During the 2022 excavation season of the Bidlīs castle, the most important Kurdish emirate of the Ottoman Empire in "Van Lake basin", archaeologist Erdoğan Ödük discovered a Shiite *turba* lying on the ground at the foot of the fortification wall of the palace section of castle. It was removed from the site after its discovery and transferred to the residential area of the settlement. Although this is not the first *turba* discovered in the castle in excavations conducted so far, it is the first one with both sides inscribed finely. The *turba* or head-stone, which subsequently came to the attention of the authors and is now in the possession of the Ahlat Museum,¹ is certainly made of baked clay from either some holy lands of Karbalā or Mashhad al-Ḥusayn, in Aleppo, which was originally founded to commemorate the martyrdom of Ḥusayn by the early Umayyads. Apparently, it is used by senior members of Bidlīs ruling family during their Islamic daily prayers. It is a trace of Shiite influence over Kurdish emirs of Bidlīs as the use of a *turba* is recommended in the Twelver Shiite school of Islam and many *ḥadīths* mention the benefits of prostration or *sajda* upon *turba*, especially a *turba* made of the soil of Karbalā.

We do not know when the *turba* entered the castle, but to be safe, let us presume that it did so towards the middle of early modern times, that is, sometime between 1550 and 1650. The *turba* must have entered the castle in the generations before Abdāl Khan (d. after 1668) who was known as a *rafizi* emir of Bidlīs,² if not earlier. It belongs to a period in which Iran's political, cultural, and religious influence was at its peak in the region. This brings us back at least to the time of Aqqyunlu as the time of origin for encounters between Kurdish emirs of Bidlīs and Iranian Shiite trends. Of course, they might very well have originated before that, and might even go back to eyewitnesses of the event. There is, however, no way in which we can know this for sure.

The cultural and political integration of Bidlis into the Iranian world³ facilitated the spread of Shiite and esoteric teachings. In this context, the first non-orthodox doctrine to be followed was Twelver Shiism. Unlike the successful propaganda and spread of the Zaydī and Ismā'īlī sects, the penetration of Twelver Shiism from Western Iran into Anatolia took place towards the end of the 13th century, with the dispersal of sufi circles fleeing from the Mongol invasion. As a part of this propaganda, a Shiite *zāwīya* was constructed in Bidlis in the name of Ibrāhīm (d.837), the son of

the seventh *imām* Mūsā Kāzīm (d.799) before the 15th century. Until the second half of the 16th century, this modest *zāwīya* was disseminating the Shiite beliefs among the people of Bidlīs. The city at the same time was an important Nūrbakhshī center, a Khurāsān-originated messianic and millenarian branch of Shiism from the early 15th century. Idrīs-i Bidlīsī's father, Ḥusām al-Dīn 'Alī, espoused the Nūrbakhshī tenet as a result of Sayyid Muḥammad Nūrbakhsh's early activities in Kurdistān and Luristān in the first half of the 15th century. Sayyid Muḥammad Nūrbakhsh mentions the names of several Kurdish disciples in his *Risālat al-Hudā*, apart from Ḥusām al-Dīn 'Alī who came to Rayy from Bidlīs. When he returned to his hometown before 1465, he continued to disseminate the Nūrbakhshī teachings in the *zāwīya* he founded in his own name. His son Idrīs embraced the Shiite tenets of his father. Idrīs's Shiite tendency was so strong that he had engraved the same *nadi aliye*n prayer on his seals. Ḥusām al-Dīn 'Alī's departure from Bidlīs before 1470 and his settlement in Tabrīz interrupted the spread of Nūrbakhshī teachings in Bidlīs.⁴

Bidlīs not only hosted the Shiite tenets but also esoteric doctrines during these years. *Istivānāma*, the most basic text of the Ḥurufism, demonstrates the fact that Bidlīs was an important Ḥurufī center in the early 15th century. The Ḥurufī text, penned by Abu al-Yaqīn Ghiyās al-Dīn Muhammad ibn Husayn ibn Muhammad Husayn al-Astarābādī in Bidlīs in the first half of the 15th century, shows the traces of the spread of Ḥurufī teaching in Bidlīs. Astarābādī, the author of *Istivānāma* says that he was sent to the Bidlīs castle by Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī's (d.1394) son Amir Nūr Allāh (d.1425).⁵ Darwish Haji Isa-yi Bidlīsī, who spread Ḥurufī teachings in his lodge in Bidlīs, was an important sufi who met Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī's son-in-law.⁶

From the fifteenth century, the ancestors of Sharaf Khan Bidlīsī (d. 1600), Kurdish chieftain and historian, have been associated with Shiite Iran.⁷ Sharaf Khan, the grandfather (d. 1533) was closely associated with both Shah Ismail and his successor, Shah Tahmasb, in political, cultural, and religious matters. In 1528, when he constructed a monumental complex known as Sharafiya, he specifically ordered the name of Ali to be engraved on the base of the minaret. Today, on two sides of the octagonal base of this minaret, within two square frames, the name of Muhammad appears on the outer contour, while Ali's name is inscribed four times within it. This distinctive feature sets it apart from the Sunni tradition of reverence for Alī. In Sunni contexts, had it been similar, the names of the other three caliphs would likely have been included as well. The exclusive presence of Ali's name, without mention of the other caliphs, strongly indicates Sharaf Khan's adherence to the Shia belief, which does not recognize the legitimacy of the first three caliphs. This underscores his deep commitment to Shia doctrine and serves as a clear example of the Shia inclination among the emirs of Bidlis.

To put it more clearly, Iran, after the second half of the 15th century became a safe harbor for the Bidlīs' emirs and members of the Rōjikī tribe, where they took refuge in case of threat and received political and military support. The first immigrant group was settled in the important Shiite center, in Qum. Having been settled in Qum's periphery Kurdish emirs of Bidlīs accepted the supreme authority of the perfect guide (*murshid-i kāmīl*), the Safavid shah, and integrated into the Safavid military system.

Several Safavid chronicles from the reign of Shah Tahmasb provide remarkably insightful information in this regard. In many parts of these chronicles, the emirs of Bidlis are depicted as loyal followers of the Ardabil Shrine and as long-standing devotees of the Safavid shahs.⁸

Considering the fact that those who did not espouse the Qizilbāsh doctrine could not be integrated and risen within the Safavid military bureaucracy, it can be said that both the Kurdish dynasty of Bidlīs and the Rōjikī tribal members embraced the Qizilbāsh doctrine and recognized the absolute authority of the Shah, who was a perfect guide.⁹ The first generation of Kurdish ruling family members or tribesmen born in Iran was shaped in a Shiite environment. For instance, in 1543, Sharaf Khan was born in Qum Shiite area, in Iran,¹⁰ and had a great Shiite alliance and affiliation.¹¹

The Shiite tendencies of the emirs of Bidlīs emerged once again in their negotiations with the

Ottoman side when they tried to return from Iran to the Ottoman Empire, in 1578.¹² In his letter to the governor of Van, Murad III asked Hüsrev Pasha to send one of his men to negotiate with Sharaf Khan in Nakhchiwān, and that his submission would be accepted under the one condition that he had to abandon his “rafz” and “ilhad”. In fact, this was an open invitation of Sharaf Khan to Sunnism by the Ottoman sultan. The missive dispatched by Hüsrev Pasha, on the occasion of the arrival of Sharaf Khan to Van in the winter of 1578, is quite interesting in this respect. In his report Hüsrev Pasha informed the sultan that Sharaf Khan turned away from Qizilbāsh side, repented his superstitious beliefs and deviant sect then obeyed the practices of Prophet (*sünnet-i seniyyeye riayet, mezheb-i bâtil ve meşreb-i âtıllarından tövbe*).¹³ These statements also demonstrate that Ottoman authorities were aware of Qizilbāsh background of Sharaf Khan who espoused the Shiite doctrine under the auspices of Shah Ṭahmāsp.¹⁴ This invitation is the clearest proof that the Kurdish emirs of Bidlīs and the Rōjiki tribe belonged to the Safavid sect and recognized the supreme authority of the *murshid-i kāmīl*.

Sharaf Khan, who laid claim to the emirate of Bidlīs, was killed with his companions in a battle directed against pro-Shiite Celali rebels.¹⁵ Many of the senior Kurdish officials of Bidlīs spent at least part of their lives in Safavid Iran.¹⁶ Bidlīs was also once a territory ruled by Shiite dynasties, notably the early Safavids.¹⁷ And, finally, the *turba* that is published here for the first time completely removes any doubt that there were some very strong Shiite tendencies among the rulers of Bidlīs. From a broader point of view, the presence and spread of Shiism in Bidlīs was a natural result of its political, mystical, and cultural integration into the Iranian world.

Transcriptio

Observe

muhr-i mashhad-i Ḥusayn ‘alayhi al-salām
 nādi ‘Alīyyan maẓhar al-‘ajā’ib
 tajidhu ‘awnan laka fi al-nawā’ib
 kulli hammin wa ghammin sayanjālī
 bi-wilāyatika yā ‘Alī yā ‘Alī yā ‘Alī

Reverse

muhr-i mashhad-i Ḥusayn ‘alayhi al-salām
 Muḥammad, ‘Alī, Ḥusayn
 Muḥammad, ‘Alī, Ḥusayn
 Muḥammad, ‘Alī, Ḥusayn
 Muḥammad, ‘Alī, Ja’far
 nādi ‘Alīyyan maẓhar al-‘ajā’ib
 tajidhu ‘awnan laka fi al-nawā’ib
 kulli hammin wa ghammin sayanjālī
 bi-wilāyatika yā ‘Alī yā ‘Alī yā ‘Alī

Translation

Observe

The *turba* of the shrine of Ḥusayn, peace be upon him
 Call ‘Alī, the epitome of miracles
 You will find him by your side in all troubles and difficult situations
 It will relieve you of all your suffering and sorrow
 I swear on your authority, O ‘Alī, O ‘Alī, O ‘Alī

Reverse

The *turba* of the shrine of Ḥusayn, peace be upon him
Muḥammad, ‘Alī, Ḥusayn
Muḥammad, ‘Alī, Ḥusayn
Muḥammad, ‘Alī, Ḥusayn
Muḥammad, ‘Alī, Ja‘far
Call ‘Alī, the epitome of miracles
You will find him by your side in all troubles and difficult situations
It will relieve you of all your suffering and sorrow
I swear on your authority, O ‘Alī, O ‘Alī, O ‘Alī



Reverse



Obverse

Notes

- * We are grateful to Yunus Emre Karasu and Erdoğan Ödük for their assistance in reaching this turba. Thanks are also extended to Azad Örmek and Sara Soysal who provided information about the turba and the circumstances in which it was found.
- ¹ It is a museum of the town of Ahlat which is situated on the northwestern shore of Lake Van, in Turkey's Bidlīs province in Eastern Anatolia
- ² See M. Dehqan and V. Genç, "Kurdish Power Holders in Seventeenth-Century Bidlīs: A Brief Introduction", *Kurdish Studies* 10/2 (2022): p. 158.
- ³ For further information see, Vural Genç, "Cultural Impact of Persian Language in and around Bidlis", *Iranian Studies*, 57, (2024), pp. 27–45.
- ⁴ See V. Genç, *Acem'denRum'aBirBürokratveTarihçi:İdrisiBidlīsî14571520*, TTK, Ankara, 2019, pp. 23-27.
- ⁵ Abu al-Yaqīn Ghiyās al-Dīn Muhammad ibn Husayn ibn Muhammad Husayn al-Astarābādī, *Istivānāma*, Millet Library, AEFrs 269, f. 38r.; for the biography of Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī and his tenets see, Sh. Bashir, *FazlallahAstarabadiandtheHurufis*, Oneworld Publications, Oxford, 2005.
- ⁶ See Abu al-Yaqīn Ghiyās al-Dīn Muhammad ibn Husayn ibn Muhammad Husayn al-Astarābādī, *Istivānāma*, ff. 40v., 80v.
- ⁷ See Scheref, Prince de Bidlis, *Scherefnameh ou Histoire des Kourdes*, Ed. V. Véliaminof-Zernof, St.-Petersbourg: Commissionnaires de l'Académie Impériale des Science, 1860-62, vol.1, p. 390.⁸
- ⁸ See, Vural Genç, *Osmanlılar ve Safeviler Arasında Bidlis: 1502-1723*, *Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları*, İstanbul 2024, pp. 90, 137, 143.
- ⁹ See N. A. Falsafī, *Zindigāniyi Shāh 'Abbāsi Awal*, Dānishgada-yi Tehran, Tehran, 1965, pp. 173-175; R. Yıldırım, *MenākıbyEvliya(Buyruk):TarihselArkaPlan,MetinAnalizi,EdisyonKritikMetin*, YKY Yay., İstanbul, 2020, pp. 89-91.
- ¹⁰ For details, see M. Dehqan and V. Genç, "Reflections on Sharaf Khān's Autobiography", *Manuscripta Orientalia* 21/1 (2015): 46-61; idem, "Why Was Sharaf Khan Killed?", *Manuscripta Orientalia* 21/2 (2015): 13-19.
- ¹¹ See W. S. Chahanovich, *OttomanEschatologicalEnthusiasm:Ps.Ibnal'Arabī'sTreeof Nu'mānanEarly-Modern Islamic Esoteric Apocalypse in the Service of Empire* (Doctoral Dissertation, Harvard University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2021), p. 113
- ¹² See Scheref, *ScherefnamehouHistoiredesKourdes*, vol. 1, p. 455; Gelibolulu Mustafa Âli, *Künhü'l-Ahbār: DördüncüRükn,Tıpkıbasım*, TTK, Ankara, 2009, ff. 491v.-492r., 497r.-497v.
- ¹³ See Gelibolulu Mustafa Âli, *Nusretnāme*, Ed. H. Mustafa Eravcı, TTK, Ankara, 2014, p. 186
- ¹⁴ See A. DVN. MHM. d. 37/876, h. 987.
- ¹⁵ See Dehqan and Genç, "Why Was Sharaf Khan Killed?", 17ff.
- ¹⁶ See Scheref, *ScherefnamehouHistoiredesKourdes*, vol. 1, p. 394ff.
- ¹⁷ See *ibid.*, 110, 133, 161, *passim*.

References

- Abu al-Yaqīn Ghiyās al-Dīn Muhammad ibn Husayn ibn Muhammad Husayn al-Astarābādī, *Istivānāma*, Millet Library, AEFrs 269.
- BOA, A. DVN. MHM. d. 37.
- Bashir, Shahzad, *Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis*, Oneworld Publications, Oxford, 2005.
- Chahanovich, Walter Sasson, *Ottoman Eschatological Enthusiasm: Ps.-Ibn al-'Arabī's Tree of Nu'mān as an Early Modern Islamic Esoteric Apocalypse in the Service of Empire*, Doctoral Dissertation, Harvard University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2021.
- Dehqan, Mustafa and Vural Genç, "Reflections on Sharaf Khān's Autobiography", *Manuscripta Orientalia* 21/1 (2015): 46-61.

- , "Why Was Sharaf Khan Killed?", *Manuscripta Orientalia* 21/2 (2015): 13-19.
- , "Kurdish Power Holders in Seventeenth-Century Bidlīs: A Brief Introduction", *Kurdish Studies* 10/2 (2022): 143-168.
- Falsafī, Naṣr Allāh, *Zindigānī-yi Shāh ‘Abbās-i Avval*, Dānishgada-yi Tehran, Tehran, 1965.
- Gelibolulu Mustafa Âli, *Kühü'l-Ahbâr: Dördüncü Rûkn, Tıpkıbasım*, TTK Yay., Ankara, 2009.
- , *Nusretnâme*, Ed. H. Mustafa Eravcı, TTK, Ankara, 2014.
- Genç, Vural, *Acem'den Rum'a Bir Bürokrat ve Tarihçi: İdris-i Bidlîsî 1457-1520*, TTK, Ankara, 2019.
- Genç, Vural "Cultural Impact of Persian Language in and around Bidlis", *Iranian Studies*, 57, (2024), pp. 27-45
- Genç, Vural, *Osmanlılar ve Safeviler Arasında Bidlis: 1502-1723*, Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, İstanbul 2024.
- Scheref, Prince de Bidlis, *Scheref-nameh ou Histoire des Kourdes*, Ed. V. Véliaminof-Zernof, St.-Pétersbourg: Commissionnaires de l'Académie Impériale des Science, 1860-62.
- Yıldırım, Rıza, *Menâkıb-ı Evliya (Buyruk): Tarihsel Arka Plan, Metin Analizi, Edisyon-Kritik Metin*, YKY, İstanbul, 2020.

ბიდლისის ციხესიმაგრის სამეფო დარბაზში ნაკოვნი შიიტური ტურბა: ტრანსკრიფცია და თარგმანი

მუსტაფა დეჰჰანი

დამოუკიდებელი მკვლევარი
mustafadehqan@yahoo.com

ვურალ გენჩი

ბითლის ერენის უნივერსიტეტი, ისტორიის დეპარტამენტი
vuralgenc@hotmail.com

წინამდებარე კომენტარი ეხება ბიდლისის ქურთი ემირების შიიტური იდენტობის საკითხს. კვლევა ეფუძნება აღმოსავლეთ ანატოლიაში ბიდლისის ციხესიმაგრის სამეფო დარბაზში ახლახან აღმოჩენილ შიიტურ ტურბას. წინამდებარე კვლევა არ სცდება ბიდლისის ემირატში არსებული შიიზმის კონტექსტს. ეს, ერთი შეხედვით, განსხვავებული შემთხვევაა, აჩვენებს, რომ შიიტურ მოძღვრებაზე ქურთული დისკრეტული ორიენტაციების გათვალისწინებით მსჯელობისას ამოსავალი უნდა იყოს აზრი მათი მდგრადი მსგავსების შესახებ.