

“In the Shade of a Tree: Religious Patterns in the Kurdistan Region from Late Antiquity to Modern Times”

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Zalm Valley, Halabjjah District Iraqi Kurdistan - ©Terribili 2009

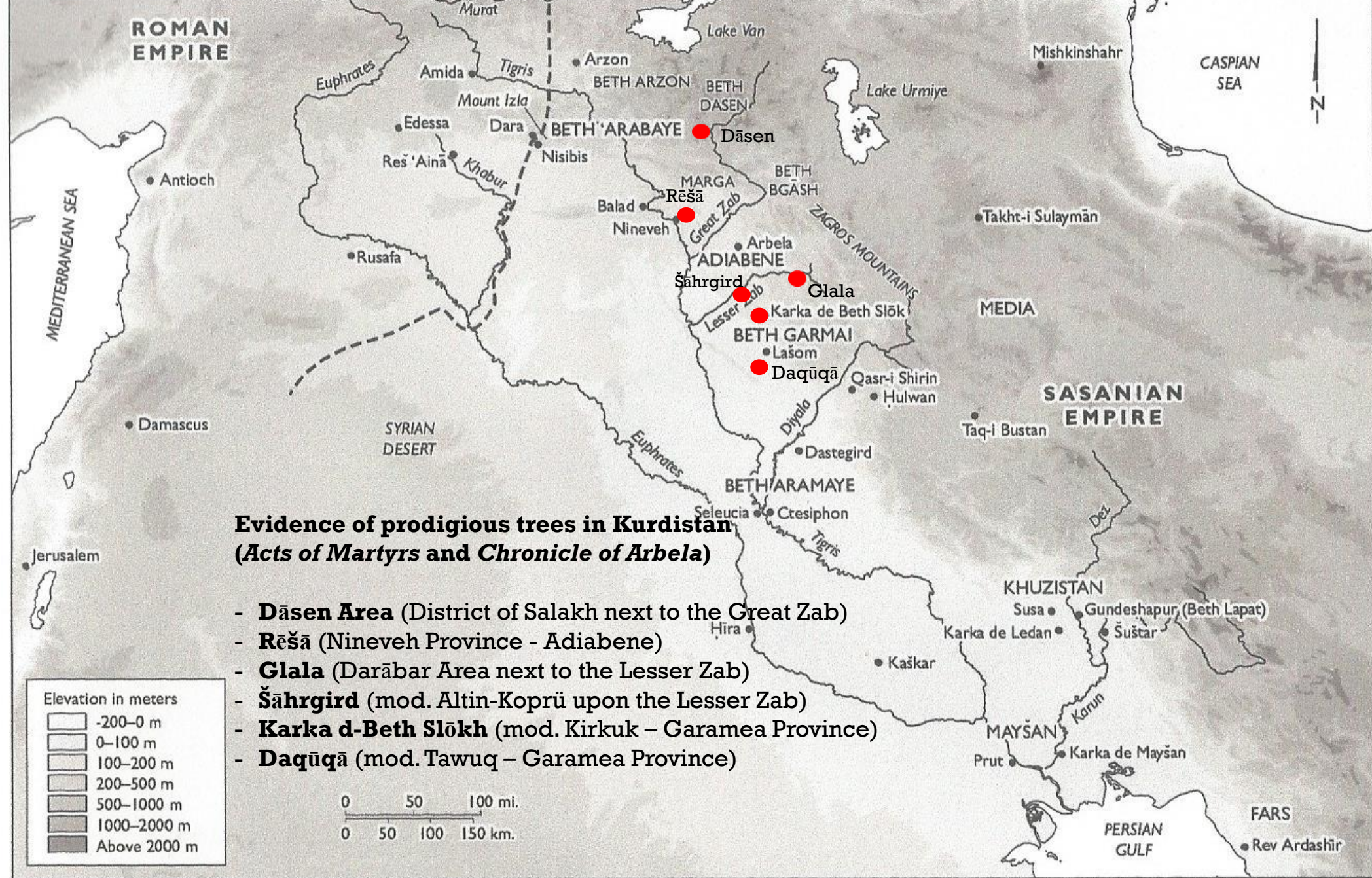


DIPARTIMENTO
DI SCIENZE DELL'ANTICHITÀ





Macro-area selected for the case study: veneration of sacred trees and its transposition in religious narrative.

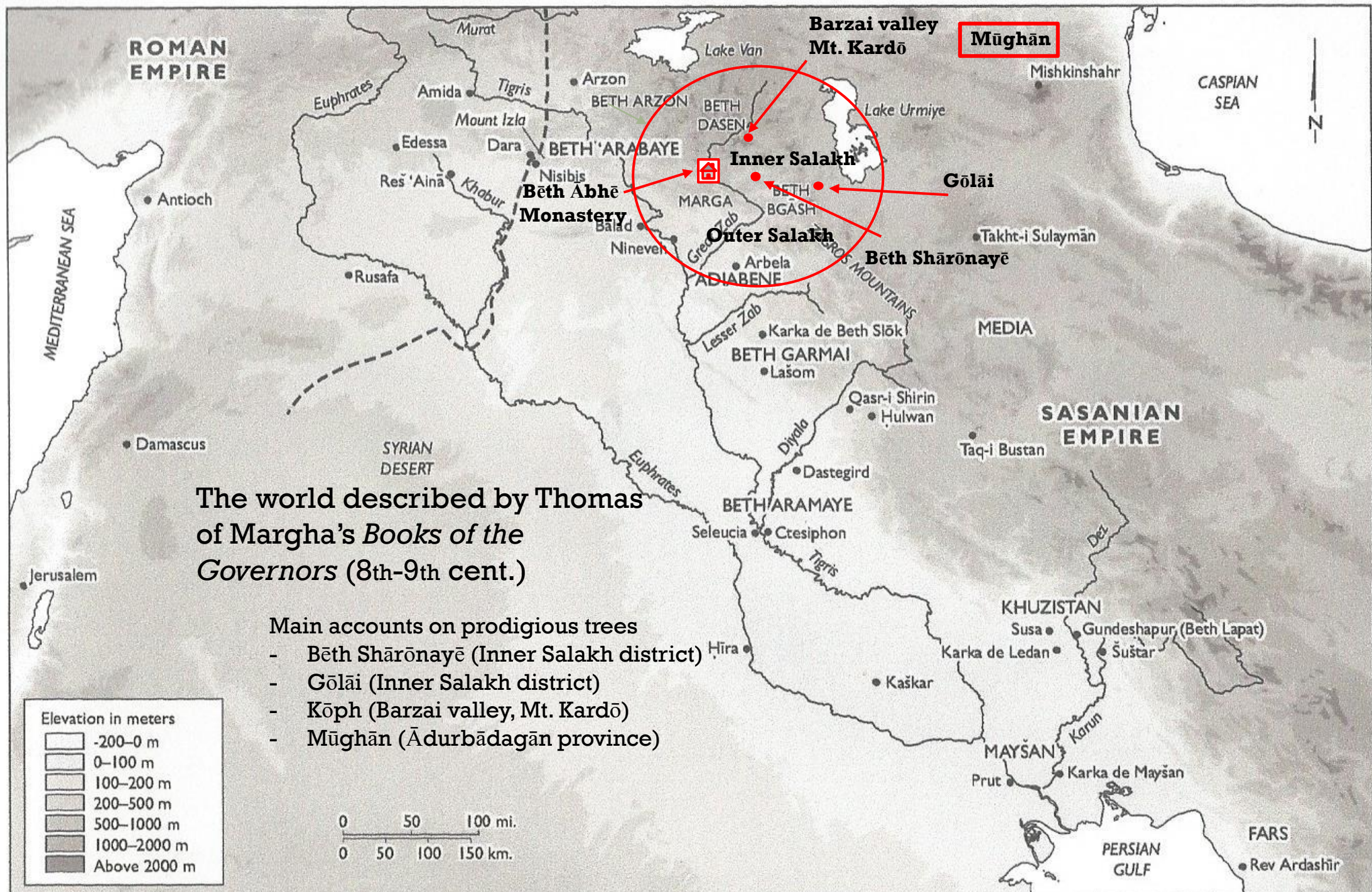


MAP 2. Major Provinces of the Church of the East, c. 600 C.E.

From the History of Karka d-Beth Slokh

Manichaeans who were in the town. The accursed man gave orders that they be put to death outside the town in a place called "White Poplar." After the holy women had been crowned, there sprung up on the site of their martyrdom a fig tree, which provided healing for all who took refuge in it. When, however, the Manichaeans saw the miracle that had taken place, they cut down the tree and set fire to the spot. But God, who does not allow his friends to be despised by foes, allowed the disease of elephantiasis to torment them, until they entirely disappeared from the town. This spot where the holy women were victorious is called to this day the "place of the fig tree," and now it has become a sanctuary for all believers: each year, when they keep the memorial of the great day of the Crucifixion, the entire community of the church—the pastor and his flock in all its ranks—go up to the great Martyrion, with the cross in front of them and behind them, and they turn aside to the "place of the fig tree" in solemn procession, accompanied by praises and sacred songs of thanksgiving befitting to God, the Lord of all, to the shaming of renegades and the pride of believers.

The Account of the Sacred Fig
of Kirkuk.



The Account of the Sacred Tree of Bēth Shārōnayē

E.A. Budge, 1893.

The Book of the Governors of Thomas Bishop of Marghâ, London: 242-243

And Jacob¹, my father according to the body, related to me, and he had heard it from his fathers, that in the district called Bēth Shārōnayē² in which our village was situated there was a great, old oak (?), which was called the "king of the forest;" [p. 110] and in the villages round about it there were heathen who used to burn incense to it, and who worshipped before it, and we wished to cut it down, but we were afraid of the heathen who worshipped it, and also of the devil which appeared therein. Now when we heard of the coming of the pious Mār Īshō³-zekhâ into our country, and concerning the vine which he withered by his coming, when he had drawn near to the villages round about us, our priests went to bring him to us. And we commanded them that in coming back to us with the Bishop their way should be by the side of that tree, and they took that way. Now when the Bishop came near to the tree and saw its beauty, which was caused by the exceeding care [shewn] to it, and learned that it was the god of the heathen who dwelt in these villages, without coming down from the animal³ upon which he rode, or the matter causing him any astonishment, he lifted up his eyes and hands to heaven, and cried to the Lord, saying, "O Lord of heaven and earth, uproot this god who receiveth together with thee worship and tithes;" and at his word the branches of that tree turned downwards, and its roots [grew] upwards, and thus was brought to nought the falsehood of the error of the devil which dwelt therein.

Excerpts from the account of the sacred tree of Mūghān

E.A. Budge, 1893.

The Book of the Governors of Thomas Bishop of Marghâ, London: 511-512

he answered and said to them, “Where is this Yazd, the son of a whore, whom ye and your fathers have served?” And they went with him and shewed him from the top of a hill a mighty oak¹ tree, situated in a valley, which was called the “chief of the forest,” and which owing to length of time and the care with which they had tended it, had grown to a great height,² and had acquired great breadth in its girth, and great density³ of foliage. And he asked for an axe, and they brought him [one], and he girded up his loins, and

time, and the tree fell, and he hewed down all its ancient strength and thickness with three strokes of the axe; and he smote and cut down also the rest of the branches which were round about it, and which those erring people called the “children of Yazd.” And

Later clues on local-popular beliefs associating trees with ‘Iranian’ concepts of divine being (i.e. Yazd/Ohrmazd).

- Grigor Magistros (11th cent.) mention of the Aramazd’s oak (Armenian *kalnin aramazdean*).
Russel 1987. *Zoroastrianism in Armenia*:164.

- Medieval Armenian text mentioning “Ohrmazd of the grove” (Arm. *mairekon Aramazd*).
Russel 1987. *Zoroastrianism in Armenia*: 163, 388.

- At the beginning of 20th cent. Empson reported that a Kurd tribe (the Târhôya) associated divine being (*Yezîd*) to tree worship.
Empson. 1928, *The Cult of the Peacock Angel*: 178

Zarathustra and the Kešmar cypress (Burzēn-Mihr Fire Temple, Khorasan - NE Iran)

- Sources of the legend:

Zarduštnāma

Shahnāma

Wizigard ī Dēnīg

Persian Rivayat

Summary: Zarathustra brought the prodigious cypress from the heaven to the the king Wištāsp's court. The tree was planted before the portal of the newly-edified fire temple to commemorate the king's conversion.

- Description of the Kešmar sacred space and related customs by Ḥamza Eṣfahānī *Mowāzana bayn al- 'arabī wa'l- 'ajamī*:

«in the time of the Persian kings there was at Nīšābūr a tree called *sarv-e sahī* (the cypress of the worthy) under which Persian notables gathered for a few days every year to worship it; it served as Mecca to the 'Ajam (i.e. Iranians). Several thousand people lived on the votive offerings and sacrifices to that tree, and several thousand pictures (*naqš*) and songs (*ṣawt*) had been made to describe it».

(tr. A'lam 1993, s.v. Cypress, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*)

The legend of the spirit of Zarathustra and the tree on Mt. Asnavand
(Ādur-Gušnasp Fire Temple – Ādurbādagān, NW Iran)

«Ensuite, il [i.e. Ohrmazd] mit l'esprit (*rūh*) de Zoroastre dans un arbre qu'il fit pousser au plus haut de *Illiyūn* puis planta au sommet d'une montagne d'Ādarbaygān appelée le mont Asnavand».

Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Niḥal* (tr. Gimaret-Monnot 1986. *Livre des religions et des sectes*: 642)

«Les Amahraspand formèrent alors une tige de *hōm* (i.e. the ritual and sacralised plant) de la hauteur d'un homme, belle, de couleur fraîche et introduisirent la *frawahr* (i.e. the pre-existent soul) de Zoroastre dans cette tige. De là des lumières infinies, les Amahraspand la déplacèrent pour la poser sur la montagne Asnavand...Planté au sommet de l'arbre, là où se trouvait le nid des oiseaux, le *hōm* poussait sur l'arbre, toujours frais, vert de couleur».

Dēnkard VII (tr. Molé 1967. *La légende de Zoroastre*: 19)



**The site of Takht-e Solaymān
(Takāb province – Iranian Azarbaijan)
Ruins of the Ādur-Gušnasp fire temple**



Mt. Sabalān
(Ardabil Province - Iranian Azarbaijan)



Mt. Sabalān from Meškīnšahr castle



Mt. Sabalān from Dašt-e Moghān area



Memories on Mt. Sabalān; the sacred mountain and its prodigious tree

Grigor Magistros – 11th cent.

«The cedar of Sabalān, about which the Parthians say that three cities were built of its branches, whilst its root and trunk were transformed into rock: Spandiar erected it as a monument».

(Grigor Magistros, *Letter XV (K 76)*, tr. Russel 1987: 190)

Qazvīnī – 13th cent.

«It is related that the Prophet (i.e. Mohammed) said:

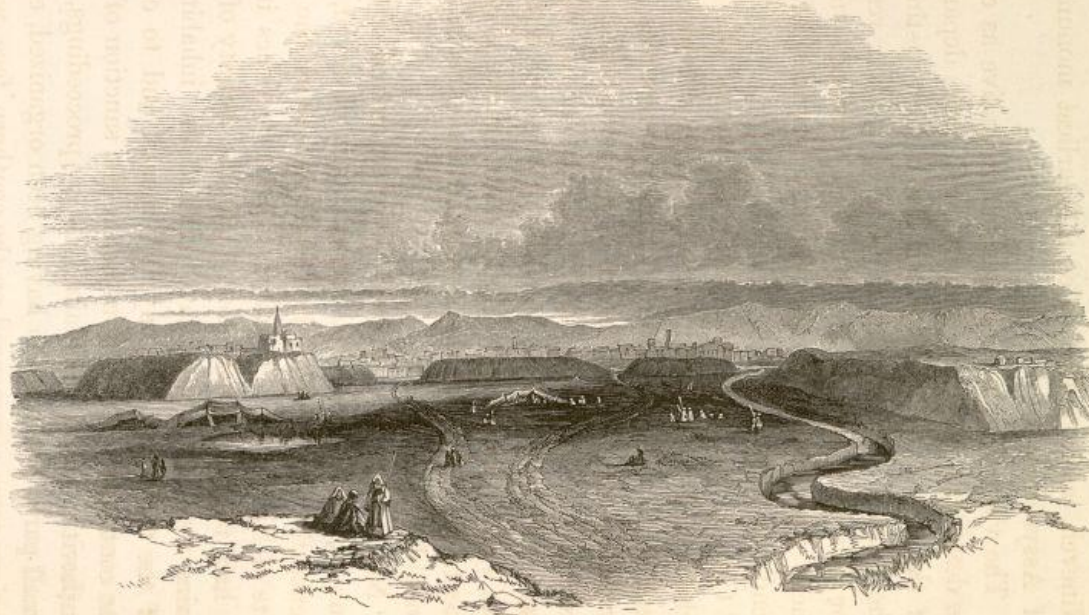
Sabalān is a mountain between Armenia and Ādarbaijan. On it is one of the graves of the prophets. He said further: On the top of the mountain is a large spring, the water of which is frozen on account of the severe cold; and around the mountain are hot springs to which sick people come. At the foot of the mountain is a large tree, and under this there is a plant to which no animal will draw near. If it comes near it, the animal flees away; if it eat of it, it dies».

(Qazvīnī *Ātār al-belād wa akbār al-‘ebād*: 189; tr. Jackson 1899. *Zoroaster*: 195)

The shrine of Nabi Yunus' in Mossul and the gourd Tree

A.H. Layard, 1849.

Nineveh and its Remains, vol. 1, London: 131



THE TOMB OF JONAH, KOUYUNJIK, AND THE RUINS OPPOSITE MOSUL.

Merian, Matthäus

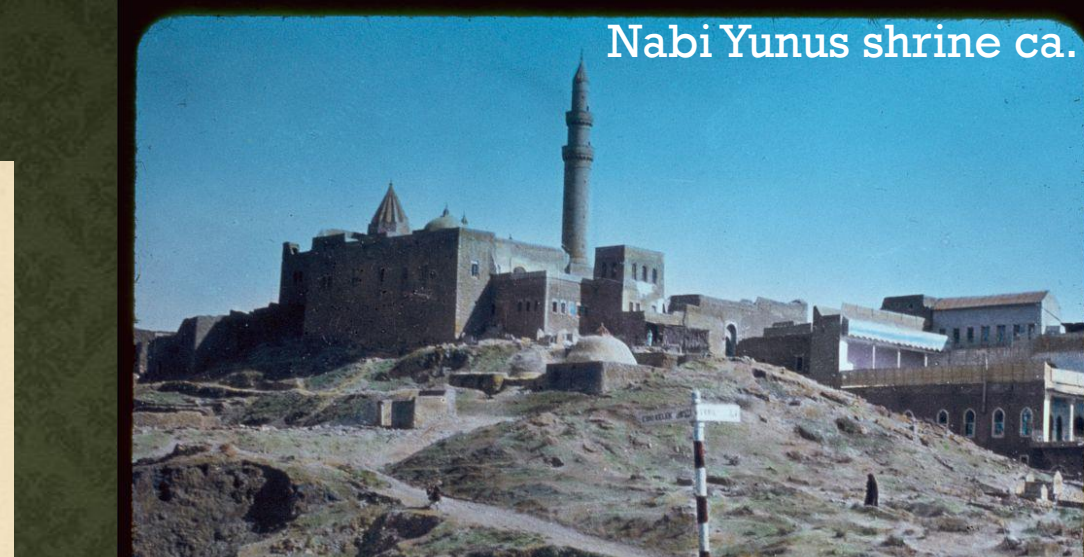
Copperplate engraving.

From the series of engravings of the Holy Scriptures
1625/27.

(Jonah 4,5–11).



Nabi Yunus shrine ca. 1970



The Marshmallow/Althaea tree (*khiṭmī*) of Nīnawā and the Prophet Shabāhā al-Jarmaqānī

«Shabāhā has also told:

This particular tree used to speak to me a lot, both in sleep and in a waking condition; although mostly in my dreams. When I had heard something (or: a story, *ḥadīthan*) from it (in my sleep), I used to write it down in a volume (or: on parchment, *fī jild*) after I had woken up because I did not want to forget it.

One night the marsh mallow came to me in a dream and said: “Know that I am an idol (*ṣanam*) of Mercury....”».

(Ibn Waḥshiyya, *al-Filāḥa an-Nabaṭiyya*, 155-157; tr. Hämeen-Anttila 2006. *The Last Pagan of Iraq*: 222)

The Yezidi Myth and Cosmic Tree

«This world was the ocean. In the middle of the world there was a tree.
It was called the 'Endless Tree' (*Dara Herherê*). God came [and] in the form of a bird sat
On this Tree. It is said that Jibrā'îl came [and] stood in front of Him».

(Yezidi myth in Kurmanji reported and translated by Omarkhali 2009-2010: 213.)

«That was the tree named Ghew
Its head below, its roots above
The angels took the light from the uppermost height
The King was one (aspect) of that.»

(Yezidi Prayer of Belief (*Dû'a Baweriyê*); Omarkhali 2009-2010: 214.)

Honoured mulberry trees In Iraqi Yezidi villages



The Yezidi Living Tradition

Google Earth
Dept of State Geographer
17 Google
17 Basarsoit
e Landsat / Copernicus

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Names given to the
Mulberry trees

Bashiqa – «Sitt Nafisa»
= the Lay Nafisa

Gabara – «Abdi Resh»
= the Black Servant

Behzani – «Shaykh Baliko»

(Acikyildiz 2009.
The Sanctuary of Shaykh Adi: 310;
Empson 1928.
The Cult of the Peacock Angel: 178)

Lalish Shrine

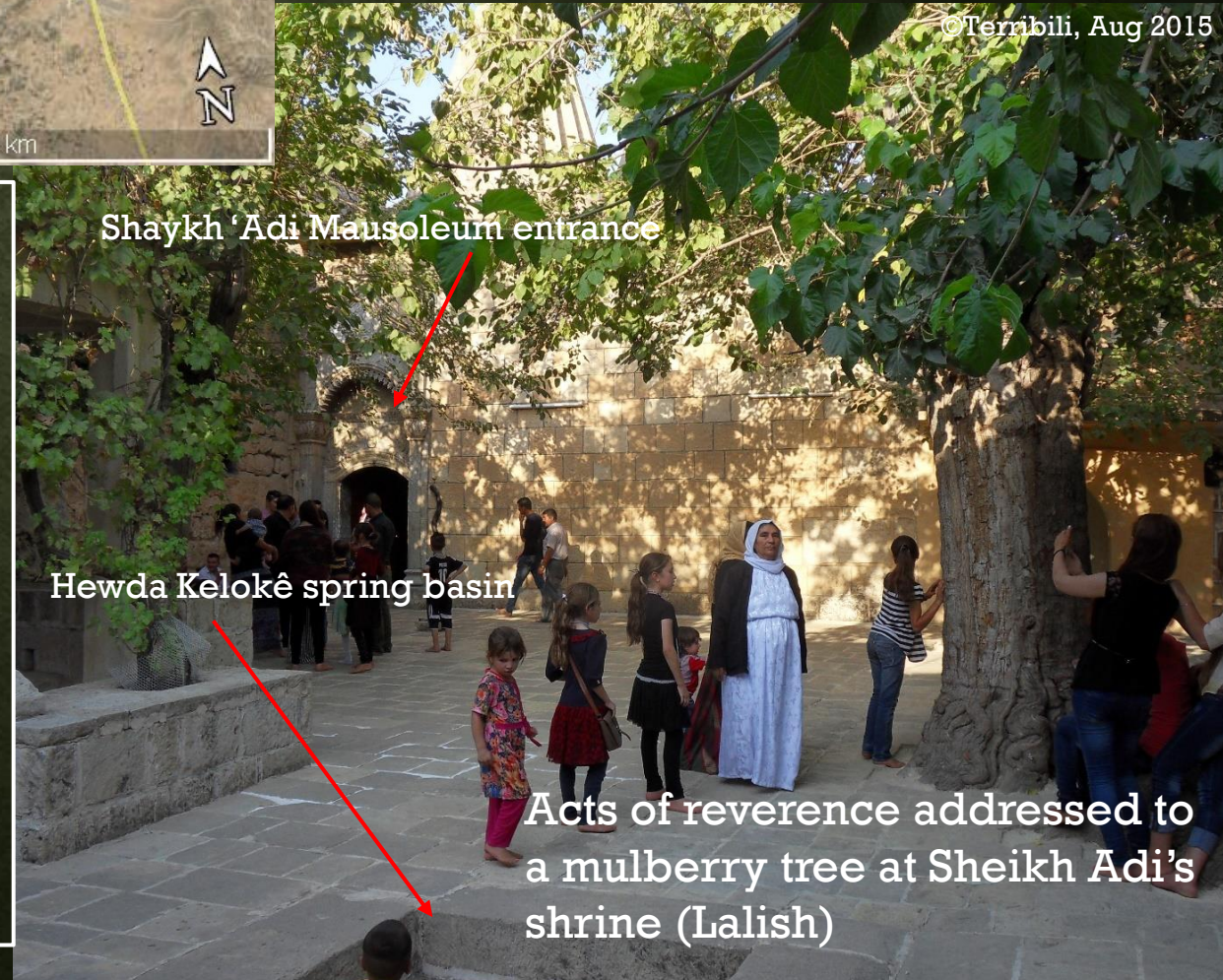


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Shaykh 'Adi Mausoleum entrance

Hewda Kelokê spring basin

Acts of reverence addressed to
a mulberry tree at Sheikh Adi's
shrine (Lalish)



Conclusions

A comparative and integrated analysis of evidence on the theme of the prodigious tree allow to appreciate the balance between rhetorical-narrative devices and socio-religious realities.

Despite the use of *topoi* and deformations, sources of different origins and purposes describe through a diachronic and spatial continuity a consistent framework characterizing the popular beliefs of this macro-region.

The collected sources highlight intertwined dynamics among sacred places, religious narrative, local society and dominant cultures.

Along with other recurrent constituents (i.e. sacred mountains, healing sources, natural caves) the sacred tree was part of the local religious complex and its sacred landscape.

Popular beliefs and practices associated to the sacred trees persisted in this macro-region till the current era especially within native religious traditions (i.e. Yezidi, Yaresan)

Many thanks for your attention!

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