



The blessed handful of light: genesis and message of the Yezidi *berat*

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ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to *berat*, the sacred object of the Yezidi religion. It is a pearl-shaped white pellet made in the holy Iraqi valley of Lalish from the local dust mixed with several ingredients. For the Yezidis, *berat* constitutes a physical testimony of their connection with the holiest place on earth and at the same time the link with the location that, according to their cosmogonic myth, has been created by God in the heavens and then descended as the first place on earth. The objective of the article is to analyse this sacred object, describe its preparation, discuss its symbolism, and its use in Yezidi religious rituals. Such an approach allows the author to conclude the article with a hypothesis about the origin of the *berat* and its connection with similar Muslim and Christian objects (*turba*, *hnana*, *Malka*), and early Islamic legend about the creation of primordial Muhammad from a handful of light resembling a pearl. The study, which is the first monograph on *berat*, is based mainly on the author's own field research in Iraq, Georgia and Turkey, Yezidi oral tradition and source texts.

Berat, the pearl-shaped white pellet, is inextricably connected with the Iraqi valley, called by the Yezidi people, the Luminous Lalish (Lalişa Nûrani) and Sheikh Adi (Şêx Adî, Şîxadî). It is where Adi ibn Musafir (d. ca. 1160), considered by them to be an embodied God or angel (*melek*), led the life of a mystic surrounded by disciples representing the various peoples living in the area. According to a legend about the very beginnings of this homeland of Yezidism, recorded at the end of the 19th century by the French Vice Consul in Mosul, Nicolas Siouffi, one day Sheikh Adi received the following divine revelation:

Although you were born in Syria, this country should not be your final abode. Move to Maraga where the Christian convent of Hanna and Mar-Hanna (John and Saint John) is located. You shall drive out the monks who live in this convent and take it over, for I give it to you.¹

However, not being accepted by the two local monks, he moved into a cave in the vicinity. Finally, the monks, who were initially hostile to Sheikh Adi, recognized him as the incarnation of their former master, fell to their knees and asked for 'a spark of his power'.² In response to their request, Sheikh Adi gave them dust from the cave and announced that it would cure the mouth disease of anyone who would

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¹N. Siouffi, *Notice sur la secte des Yézidis*, 'Journal Asiatique' series 7, vol. 20 (1882), p. 262; tr. A.R.

²Ibidem.

rub it on his lips while invoking the names of the monks. From then on, the monks settled in the cave and lived by distributing the dust to the numerous pilgrims who came there, and Adi ‘went to take possession of the convent, where he settled’.³

Today, in Lalish, one can find his mausoleum and the tombs of his followers and successors, topped by huge conical domes (*qubba*). Anyone who visits this place, having first removed the shoes to avoid staining its holy ground, has also the opportunity to see *berat*. And moreover, if he is a part of the Tradition (*Sunet*), as the Yezidis call themselves, he can take it with him as a testimony of having made a pilgrimage to the holiest place of his religion, because this white pellet is prepared in Lalish and only the Yezidis can possess it.

Berat

If we divide the sacred objects of the Yezidis into three groups: those belonging to the entire community and their leaders (like the *sanjak*⁴); those belonging to a particular group, caste, or family (like the *hadims*⁵ or *def* and *shibab*⁶); and those belonging to each individual Yezidi (like *bazinbar*⁷); then *berat*—which every pious Yezidi carries with him wrapped in a clean piece of cloth—falls into this third category.



Berat, photo by Artur Rodziewicz.

³Ibidem, p. 263.

⁴The most sacred object of Yezidism, a bronze standard topped with the image of a bird. Cf. P. Nicolaus, *The Lost Sanjaq, 'Iran and the Caucasus'* 12 (2008), pp. 217–251; A. Rodziewicz, Heft Sur—*The Seven Angels of the Yezidi Tradition and Harran*, [in:] *Inventer les anges de l'Antiquité à Byzance: conception, représentation, perception* ('Travaux et Mémoires' 25/2), ed. D. Lauritzen, Paris 2021, pp. 943–1029.

⁵*Hadims* (Ar. *khatim*, 'seals') are bronze sacred objects (mainly rings) also called *nîşans* (Pers. 'signs', 'symbols') which are held by *Pirs* and *Sheikhs* which the Yezidis believe were not made by human hands, but descended from the angelic world. They are kept in a so-called *tûrika nîşana* ('bag/sack of *nîşans*') and displayed on the occasion of special festivals. Cf. E. Spät, *Gifts from the Sky: Yezidi Sacred Objects as Symbols of Power, Tools of Healing and Seals of Divine Favour*, [in:] *Charms and Charming. Studies on Magic in Everyday Life*, ed. by É. Pócs, Ljubljana 2019, pp. 213–235.

⁶Sacred musical instruments belonging to the group of *Qewals* ('hymnists'); cf. A. Rodziewicz, *The Yezidi Wednesday and the Music of the Spheres*, 'Iranian Studies' 53 (2020), pp. 259–293.

⁷'Bracelett'—two-colour armband worn by the Yezidis.

The name of *berat* (به رات or برات), which the Yezidis use to describe this sacred object probably originates from the Arabic *bara'a(t)* (براءة) meaning 'innocence', 'release from an obligation'. In modern Kurmanji the words *berat* (برات) and *berate* (به راته) mean 'news', 'message', 'information', 'signal', 'trace' but also 'corpse', and 'dead body'.⁸ Thus—depending on whether we refer to the Arabic root or the Kurmanji word, *berat* could mean the state of 'innocence' and 'sinlessness', or 'a message of religious chastity' coming from the place where the body of the holiest person of Yezidism is buried.

One of the first references written by Yezidis regarding this white pellet comes from the petition they issued in 1872 to the Ottoman authorities to exempt them from military service. Among the several religious principles and customs enumerated here, it has been stated:

عندنا شيء يسمى بركة الشيخ عادي يعني تراب تربة الشيخ عادي قدس سره: لازم على كل نفر من طابقتنا يكون موجود عنده مقدار وموضوع في جيبه ويأكل منه عند كل صباح وإذا ما أكل منه تعمدا يكفر: وايضا لما يموت عند قرب الموت اذا لم يكن موجود من ذلك التراب المبارك تعمدا يموت كافر⁹

We have something called the Blessing [*baraka*, بركة] of Sheikh Adi, namely, the dust [*turab*, تراب] of Sheikh Adi's earth/tomb [*turba*, تربة], may his Mystery [*sur*, سر] be sanctified!

Every member of our sect must carry some [of this] and keep it in his pocket, and eat of it every morning, and if he intentionally skips eating it, it is a blasphemy. And when he dies, when death approaches, if this blessed dust [*al-turab al-mubarak*, التراب المبارك] is not present [with him], he dies an infidel.¹⁰

The word *berat* does not appear in the Arabic text, instead the object is called 'blessing' (*baraka(t)*) and 'blessed dust' (*al-turab al-mubarak*), and is described as—تراب تربة الشيخ عادي—which, depending on whether the petitioners meant by 'Sheikh Adi' the name of a place or a person, can mean both 'the dust of Sheikh Adi's soil' and 'the dust of Sheikh Adi's ashes' in the sense of 'the dust of Sheikh Adi's tomb'. However, given the similarity of the words *berat* and *baraka(t)*, it cannot be ruled out that today's Yezidis simply use a deformed form of the Arabic word for 'blessing' to describe their sacred object.

Preparation of *berat*

Berat is traditionally made in Lalish by those Yezidis of both sexes who are not married and live in chastity, called *Shkesti* (Kurm. *Şkestî*, 'the broken', 'the ruined') belonging to the group of *khilmatkars* (*xilmatkar*, 'servant') and local monks (*feqirs* and *faqras*).¹¹ Perhaps this sexual purity of *berat*-makers is somehow related to the one of the possible etymologies of the name of *berat*. However, since there are currently no nuns in Lalish, so *berat* is being prepared by the female and male

⁸M. L. Chyet, *Ferhenga Birûski: Kurmanji—English Dictionary*, vol. I, op. cit., p. 48.

⁹I. Joseph, *Yezidi Texts*, 'American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures' 1909 (25), p. 153; M. Lidzbarski, *Ein Exposé der Jesiden*, 'Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft' 51 (1897), p. 595.

¹⁰Tr. A. R.

¹¹Cf. Kh. Salih, *The Yazidian Religion as a Religion of Canonizing the Elements of Nature*, 'Lalish' 38 (2013), p. 23.

guardians of Lalish: *Day Kabani* (*Day Kebanî*, 'Mother—Housekeeper') and *Baba Chawush* (*Baba Ç'awîş*, 'Father-Usher' or 'Father of the servants'), the celibate superior of the *khilmatkars*.



Cave of *Berat* in Lalish, photo by Dietmar Cerjak.

There are no strict rules for the preparation of *berat*, but it is usually made in the summer, on a hot day, so that it would dry well.¹² The production process involves the *Şkestî*, who make *berat* from four ingredients. They fetch water from the White Spring (Kaniya Sipî), while *farash*¹³ brings earth from the Cave of *Berat* (*Şikefta Berata*).¹⁴ Then they sit on a roof with a bowl called *dana barata* ('seed/grain of *berat*') and, chanting sacred hymns, mix these ingredients with salt and, which may surprise, leaven (*havên*). From this mass small pellets are formed and placed on the roof to dry. This process is somewhat reminiscent of kneading dough for bread, which is also reflected in the language, since the Yezidis, out of respect for the sacred soil, do not call the dust they use *axa berata* ('earth for *berat*'), but *arê berata* ('flour for *berat*').

¹²One can encounter the opinion of some Yezidis (although those with whom I spoke about *berat* did not confirm this) that *berat* is also made during the festival of *Şevberat* ('the Night of Berat'), understood as the Night of Innocence or Night of Reconciliation, commemorating the mystical revelation given to the Yezidis, when the foundations of their religion were laid. This festival has the same name as the Muslim festival associated with the Night of Forgiveness or the Night of Assignment (Ar. *Laylat albara'at*, Pers. *Shab-e barat*). The Yezidi festival is also celebrated on the same moment as the Muslim one, i.e. the night between the 14th and the 15th day of the *eight month* of the Islamic calendar (*Sha'ban*).

¹³The person whose duty it is to light fires at sacred places.

¹⁴According to *Day Kabani*, interviewed by Peter Nicolaus, the dust is brought by her from Sheikh Adi sanctuary and *berat* is produced in the Cave of *Berat*.



***Arê berat* and *berat*, photo by Artur Rodziewicz.**

Then *berat*, thus prepared, is distributed among the pilgrims arriving in Lalish. It can be obtained in a few places, in particular at the White Spring, from *feqir* at the gate to the Sheikh Adi mausoleum, where pilgrims make monetary donations for the occasion, and from a *sheikh* or *feqir* at the cave below the sanctuary where a shrine and the tomb of Sheikh Adi's mother Stiya Es is located. The patron saints of the latter two places where the sacred Yezidi pellets are distributed are also connected by a legend about the miraculous power of *berat*: when Stiya Es, pregnant with Adi, was attacked by Ottomans in the Yezidi town of Ba'adre, many *berats* from Lalish appeared and formed a great wall that hid her and the unborn child and protected them from oppressors.¹⁵

***Berat* in religious practice**

Probably the first record of the practice of using *berat* comes from the mid-19th century, from Layard, who in the *Nineveh and its Remains* mentioned the 'balls of clay' that are

taken from the tomb of the saint. These are sold or distributed to the pilgrims, and regarded as very sacred relics – useful against diseases and evil spirits. (...) There are always several Sheikhs residing in the valley of Sheikh Adi. They watch over the tomb, and receive pilgrims; taking charge in rotation of the offerings that may be brought, or selling the clay balls and other relics.¹⁶

Berat is used in many Yezidis' religious practices, from daily prayers to funerals. It may also play the role of a talisman, as mentioned by Layard, which when held allows one to pray for help to Tawûsî Melek.¹⁷ At sunrise and sunset, Yezidis lay kisses on it, thus emphasizing

¹⁵The legend was shared with me by Peter Nicolaus, who recorded it in Ba'adre in 2022.

¹⁶A. H. Layard, *Nineveh and its Remains*, vol. I, London 1849, pp. 283 and 303.

¹⁷Cf. J. Guest, *Survival Among the Kurds*, pp. 223–224; Kh. F. Al-Jabiri, *Stability and Social Change in Yezidi Society* (PhD diss. at Oxford University), Oxford 1981 [1982], pp. 210–211, 374–375.

their physical bond with their holy homeland. For *berat* serves not only as a proof of having made the pilgrimage to Lalish, but it also represents its substitute for those who are far away. Those who live outside Iraq or do not have the opportunity to travel to Lalish can receive *berat* during the annual ceremonial visit of their *Pirs* and *Sheikhs*, who have brought it from their own pilgrimage.



***Berat* distribution by a *sheikh* at the Stiya Es shrine in Lalish, photo by Artur Rodziewicz.**

Berat can also be obtained in other situations, e.g. during the Parade of the Peacock, when *Qewals* and clergymen visit Yezidi villages in the (Iraqi)¹⁸ countryside to display the most holy object of Yezidism, *sanjak*, symbolizing the Peacock Angel (Tawûsî Melek). The description of the custom of handing out *berat* during this festival is mentioned, for instance, in a text of unidentified authorship that compiled the principles of Yezidism, known since the late 19th century as The Black Scripture (*Meshefa Resh*):

The contractor takes a load of dust [تراب] from Seikh 'Adî['s tomb]. He fashions it into small balls, each about the size of a gall nut, and carries them along with *sanjaks* to give them away as blessings [البركة, *al-baraka*].¹⁹

They dip them [*sanjaks*, during the New Year Festival] in water, and send with each one a handful of earth from the tomb of Sheykh 'Adî. And this earth they make into little pellets like gall-nuts, which they hawk about and sell for money as amulets for the dead and those newly married.²⁰

¹⁸Currently, the ceremony is only held in Iraq, although it has previously been celebrated in other Yezidi-populated regions: in Syria, Turkey, Armenia and Georgia.

¹⁹I. Joseph, *Yezidi Texts (Continued)*, 'American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures' 1909 (25), p. 227.

²⁰O. H. Parry, *Six Months in a Syrian Monastery*, London 1895, p. 382.

In addition to playing the role of a talisman and a piece of Sheikh Adī's holy land, *berat* is also used during oath-taking, as according to the Yezidi beliefs, the solemn swearing in the presence of *berat* has a special binding power, and breaking it would have horrific consequences. Furthermore, *berat* is used during the ritual of reconciliation, when it is exchanged between conflicting parties, the ritual of establishing a Brother or Sister in the Hereafter and during burial rites.

If the reconciliation ceremony takes place in Laliş, the representatives of the conflicting parties go, accompanied by the religious head of all the Yezidis, *Baba Sheikh* ('Father of the Sheikhs' or 'Sheikh-Father' also called the Old Man of Mergehe), in front of the gate to the mausoleum of Sheikh Adī, where a *feqir* is standing. *Baba Sheikh* receives two *berats* from him, delivers a short sermon, and then kisses the *berats* and passes them on to the representatives of the parties, who then shake hands in agreement and exchange the *berats*. If the ceremony is held at another place, *berat* is given to the disputing parties by a *pir* or *sheikh*.²¹

Yezidis believe that exchanging *berat* makes people brothers (or sisters). For this reason (contrary to what is claimed in the quoted passage of the *Meshefa Resh* and by a few other authors),²² as I have been told by the Yezidis, spouses do not exchange *berat* to avoid being siblings. However, according to Yezidi tradition, those who decide to become Brothers or Sisters in the Hereafter (*Birê/ Xûşka Axiretê*) put, as reported by the Yezidi, Khalaf Salih,

berat in a glass of water and both of them drink from that holy water and then they become hereafter brother or sister to each other and consequently their witness at the doom's day.²³

The last earthly ceremony in which *berat* is used concerns only those who led a pious life. It is performed by a *sheikh* or *pir* who touches the dying person's mouth with a *berat*, or, while preparing a corpse for burial, the *berat* (or its crushed crumbs) is applied by a *sheikh* or *pir* to the eyes and ears of the deceased, and during the burial ritual it is placed together with the body in the grave.²⁴

It is worth returning here to the remark about the practice of *berat* consumption made in the Yezidi petition quoted before. Most Yezidis I asked about this passage reacted very emotionally, claiming that nothing like this happens because nobody eats *berat*. Of course, it may be an error. However, the sentence about eating *berat* may be a way of describing the custom of kissing it as a kind of 'mystical meal'. In fact, the most common use of a *berat* that can be observed by outsiders is to bring it close to the lips and place a kiss on it. It is possible that the authors of the text had in mind this kiss when a trace of holy dust is left on the lips and what to non-Yezidi observers may resemble eating. It is also possible that the comment about eating *berat* is a trace of the practice of using *berat* for milk fermentation. As mentioned, one of the ingredients of *berat* is leaven, which has a very practical application, because according to Yezidi beliefs, in some situations it can be used to prepare *mast* (curdled milk). However, it should first be noted that the addressees of the Yezidi petition, from which the quoted passage comes, were not their own people. Its purpose was not to catalogue the principles of

²¹S. A. Grigoriev, V. Ivasko, D. Pirbari, *Laliş Nûrani*, Ekaterinburg 2018, p. 204.

²²Cf. [Isaac of Bartella], *Monte Singar: Storia di un popolo ignoto*, op. cit., pp. 45–46; Ph. Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism—its Background, Observances and Textual Tradition*, Lewiston 1995, p. 159.

²³Kh. Salih, *The Yazidian Religion . . .*, op. cit., p. 24. Original spelling. Cf. G. Asatrian, *The Holy Brotherhood: The Yezidi Religious Institution of the 'Brother' and the 'Sister' of the 'Next World'*, 'Iran and the Caucasus' 3/4 (1999/2000), pp. 79–96.

²⁴Cf. [Isaac of Bartella], *Monte Singar*, op. cit., p. 50.

Yezidism and describe its practices for their own use, but to present the most popular of them to Muslims, who were not unfamiliar with the practice of eating crumbs of holy dust. In fact, apart from Yezidism, also in other religions—especially among Muslims and Christians with whom the Yezidis came into contact—one can come across similar practices of collecting and even eating holy dust.



Clan reconciliation ceremony in Lalish – source: public profile
اعلام باباشيخ الايزيدية راگه هاندنا بابن شينخي نيزديان (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=906354403394364> [20, 02, 2022])

Turba

In the religious practice of the Shi'i form of Islam, there is an object called *turba* (تربة) in Arabic and *mohr* (مهر) in Persian. It is a small disc or tablet that is used during daily prayers. The name of this object as *mohr* ('seal'), is due to the fact that it looks like a seal. It usually bears a convex inscription, which is imprinted on the forehead of the praying person during prostration (*sajda*).²⁵ A *turba* is made of pressed and often lightly baked earth, preferably from Karbala (so called *Turba Husayniyya*), where Husayn ibn Ali's mausoleum is located. Due to the miraculous healing properties attributed to it, a *turba* made of this earth is often referred to in Persian as *khak-e shifa* (خاک شفا, 'healing soil').²⁶

Originally, however, the *turba* was not baked. Shi'ism even faced a separate debate over the question of whether the soil of Karbala could be fired, and whether the process of baking would change its ontological status.²⁷



Turbas and berat, photo by Artur Rodziewicz.

Let us pay attention to terminology, namely to the general meaning of the Arabic word *turba*: 'earth', 'dust', 'soil'. In Muslim legends and *hadiths*, the matter from which both the earth and Adam's body were made and into which the body turns again after death is described by this very word. Therefore, the term has also acquired the meaning of the place where the ashes of the deceased are buried:

²⁵Cf. *Quran* XLVIII 29.

²⁶Cf. R. Gleave, *Prayer and Prostration: Imāmi Shi'i Discussions of al-sujūd ʿalā al-turba al-Husayniyya*, [in:] *The Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shi'ism: Iconography and Religious Devotion in Shi'i Islam*, ed. P. Khosronejad, London 2012, pp. 233–253.

²⁷*Ibidem*, pp. 243–248.

'tomb', and a domed mausoleum, 'qubba'.²⁸ This ambiguity, by the way, can be seen in the fragment of the Yezidi petition, which refers to the dust of the Sheikh Adī's *turba*, that is, of the soil or of the tomb.

The belief in the primordially of the *turba* and its relationship with the particular tomb is evident in the Shi'ī belief that the land of Karbala was created by God '24,000 years before he created the Ka'aba'²⁹ and that 'the soil of Karbala is a piece of Paradise'.³⁰ For this reason, and because it was there where Imam Husayn died a martyr's death and where his tomb is located, this soil is, according to Shi'ites, sacred and has miraculous properties. According to Shi'ite *hadiths*, it is a source of blessing (*barakat*) and the prostration on the earth of Hoseyn's tomb illuminates the seventh heaven and removes the seven veils. For this reason, prayers during which the *turba* is used have a special power. It is also believed to have healing properties and cure all ailments (with the exception of a deadly disease). In case of illness, *turba* crumbs dissolved in water should be consumed. According to a hadith from the collection of Ibn Babawayh (d. 380/991):

He who eats dirt and then dies, then do not pray over him [making him equal to one who has committed suicide] unless he ate of the dirt of the tomb [of Hoseyn – *tin al-qabr*]. In it is a cure for all ills, though the one who eats it out of greed, will not be cured by it.³¹

This prescription is worth noting in the context of the remark about the consumption of *berat* by Yezidis, which, although it seems improbable, may be an evidence either of a similar custom to that in Shi'ism, or of an attempt to describe *berat* to other believers by analogy with a tradition known in the Islamic world.

In addition to the above analogies, the Shi'ite *turba* and the Yezidi *berat* are connected by another custom. For in Shi'ism, too, it is advisable to place a bit of sacred dust along with the body in the tomb. A bit of *turba* can also be applied to the face of the corpse. There is also a practice of mixing a bit of *turba* with camphor to anoint the forehead and hands of the deceased.³²

Hnana

Perhaps it is not a mere coincidence that the Shi'ite *turba* looks almost identical to the Christian tokens made of lightly baked pressed clay, which starting from Late Antiquity were distributed among the pilgrims who visited places where holy men lived. It was believed that such blessed tokens consisting of a mixture of water, oil, clay and dust (or relics) of a saint are carriers of miraculous power that heals and protects its owner.³³ They were called in Greek 'seals' and 'imprints' (σφραγίδες or

²⁸T. Leisten, *Turba*, [in:] *Encyclopaedia of Islam: New Edition*, vol. X., ed. P. J. Bearman et al., Leiden 2000, pp. 673–675.

²⁹R. Gleave, *Prayer and Prostration* . . . , op. cit., p. 241.

³⁰'خاک کریلا قطعهای از بهشت است': <https://portal.anhar.ir/node/947#gsc.tab=0> [13.05.2022].

³¹Quoted by R. Gleave, *Prayer and Prostration* . . . , op. cit., p. 241.

³²Cf. the official website of Ayatollah Hossein Ansarian: *Khak-e Shifa*, <https://www.erfan.ir/english/26184.html> [13.05.2022]; cf. آثار و برکات تربت پاک سید الشهداء علیه السلام [āsār va barakāt-e torbat-e pāk-e Seyyed al-shahada aleih al-salam, *Works and Blessings of the Pure Earth of Master of the Martyrs, Peace be Upon Him*], <https://portal.anhar.ir/node/947#gsc.tab=0> [13.05.2022]; *Khak E Shifa, The Earth of Karbala*, <http://duas.org/kshifa.htm> [13.05.2022].

³³D. Boero, *Between Gift and Commodity: The Distribution of Tokens and Material Substances at the Pilgrimage Sites of Stylites*, [in:] *Syriac Hagiography: Texts and Beyond*, ed. S. Minov, F. Ruani, Leiden-Boston 2021, pp. 281–339; M. Ritter, *Do ut des: The Function of Eulogiai in the Byzantine Pilgrimage Economy*, [in:] *Pilgrimage and Economy in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. A. Collar, T. M. Kristensen, Leiden 2020, pp. 254–284.

σφραγίδια), because, like the Muslim *turba*, they bore impressed images and inscriptions. The oldest ones show a depiction of a stylite on top of a column accompanied by angels. This is because the tradition of distributing to pilgrims the holy dust in the form of tokens goes back to the time of the famous Syrian mystic, Simeon Stylites the Elder (ca. 390–459) and the site of his activity and cult in Qal'at Sem'an in Syria, where he lived on a pillar.³⁴ However, the period when these tokens were most popular was during the 6th and 7th centuries.³⁵

We may assume that this is where the distant origins of both the Muslim *turba* and the Yezidi *berat* can be found. During Simeon's lifetime, his fame was so widespread that it attracted not only Christians, but also followers of many other religions and cultures, united by the belief that the mere touch of the saint or at least objects associated with him would have miraculous effects. This exceptional popularity of Simeon was noted by his contemporary, Theodoret of Cyrrhus in the *History of the Monks of Syria* (written ca. 440):

As his fame circulated everywhere, everyone hastened to him, not only the people of the neighborhood but also people many days' journey distant (...). So with everyone arriving from every side and every road resembling a river, one can behold a sea of men standing together in that place, receiving rivers from every side. Not only do the inhabitants of our part of the world flock together, but also Ishmaelites,³⁶ Persians, Armenians subject to them, Iberians, Homerites,³⁷ and men even more distant than these; and there came many inhabitants of the extreme west, Spaniards, Britons, and the Gauls who live between them. Of Italy it is superfluous to speak. It is said that the man became so celebrated in the great city of Rome that at the entrance of all the workshops men have set up small representations of him, to provide thereby some protection and safety for themselves. Since the visitors were beyond counting and they all tried to touch him and reap some blessing from his garments of skins, while he at first thought the excess of honor absurd and later could not abide the wearisomeness of it, he devised the standing on a pillar.³⁸

The dust from the base of this very pillar was used as the main ingredient of the tokens. It was part of a mixture, usually composed of olive oil, water and clay, called in Syriac *hnana* (ܚܢܢܐ, 'mercy', 'grace').³⁹ The dust was kept and distributed not only in token-form, but also placed in special containers and flasks given to pilgrims and even added to water and food products. All of these items belonged to a wider group of objects called 'blessings' (Gr. *eulogiai*, Syr. *burkata*, which also included the Eucharistic bread). These carriers of a blessed power were given to pilgrims visiting places sanctified by the presence of saints (sanctified by God as the original source of all blessings).⁴⁰

³⁴Cf. J.-P. Sodini, P.-M. Blanc, D. Pieri, *Nouvelles eulogies de Qal'at Sem'an (fouilles 2007–2010)*, [in:] *Mélanges Cécile Morrisson* ('Travaux et Mémoires' 16), Paris 2010, pp. 793–812; H. Hunter-Crawley, *Divinity Refracted: Extended Agency and the Cult of Symeon Stylites the Elder*, [in:] *Lived Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World*, ed. V. Gasparini et al., Berlin-Boston 2020, pp. 261–286.

³⁵Cf. D. Boero, *Between Gift and Commodity ...*, op. cit., n. 30, p. 289.

³⁶Arab tribesmen of the Syrian desert.

³⁷The Greek name of the Himayrites.

³⁸Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, tr. R. M. Price, Kalamazoo 1985, p. 165 (XXVI 11–12).

³⁹See: R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, vol I, Oxford 1879, p. 656. Cf. Thomas of Marga, *The Book of Governors*, ed. and tr. E. A. Wallis Budge, vol. II, London 1893, pp. 600–601, n. 1; Ch. Jullien, F. Jullien, *Du hnana ou la bénédiction contestée*, [in:] *Sur les pas des Araméens chrétiens: Mélanges offerts à Alain Desreumaux*, ed. F. Briquel Chatonnet, M. Debié, Paris 2010), pp. 333–349.

⁴⁰Cf. G. Galavaris, *Bread and the Liturgy: The Symbolism of Early Christian and Byzantine Bread Stamps*, Madison, 1970, pp. 109–166; D. Caner, *Wealth, Stewardship, and Charitable 'Blessings' in Early Byzantine Monasticism*, [in:] *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. S. R. Holman, Grand Rapids 2008, pp. 221–242.

Although the custom of making and distributing tokens that contained *hnana* presumably emerged only after the death of Simeon, he himself, as can be read in the Syriac *Life of Simeon the Elder* (composed in 473), recommended the use of *hnana* from the place where he lived as a panacea for diseases and afflictions.⁴¹ The second most famous Syrian stylite, Simeon the Younger (d. 596), was said to have already bestowed ailing pilgrims with *hnana* in the form of tokens. In the Greek *Life of Simeon the Younger* (written ca. 605) he is credited with the following statement addressed to a father who asked Simeon for his son's healing:

Take this blessing (*eulogia*) [made] of my dust. Depart, and when you look at the seal of our imprint-image, it is us that you will see.⁴²

It was believed that *hnana*, which came from the place where the saint lived or where his body was buried, was somehow an extension of his physical presence and had a miraculous power to save people from misfortune and illness. It was recommended to scatter it in particular areas, to place it on buildings, to drink it mixed with water and even to eat it in the form of a cake.⁴³ These customs have been practiced in Eastern Christianity for centuries, as evidenced by hagiographical literature containing a large number of narratives about pilgrims asking holy monks for *hnana* to solve their problems.

However, it should be noted that this popular practice also met with criticism from representatives of the Church of the East (undoubtedly also motivated by aversion to the growing influence of charismatic monks). The accusation was that instead of believing in the saving power of prayer to God, magical practices and amulets would be introduced. For instance, according to an 8th–9th-century Nestorian teacher, Theodore bar Konay,

the doctrine of *qami'e*,⁴⁴ *hanane* and *šyagta*⁴⁵ which the simpletons transmit is (that of) Satan who, even though he is ashamed of his idols, nevertheless seduces by amulets.⁴⁶

The tradition of attaching special significance to the dust of the tomb of a saint is still present in Eastern Christianity. Drower writes, for example, about the custom observed 'at the Nestorian wedding, when the cup, ring and *hnana* (...) are set in order, the priest pours water into the wine, drops *hnana* into the cup, dips the ring into the mixture and then gives the cup to the bridegroom, bride, best man and bridesmaid, who drink from it in turn'.⁴⁷

Many places, where the use of *hnana* was popular, overlap with later Yezidi settlement. This applies to the area of Tur Abdin and the vicinity of Mosul, but especially to Lalish, which is situated in the Marga (or Mergehe) region belonging to an old diocese of the Church of the East, until the 7th or 8th c. administered by a Nestorian bishop.⁴⁸ Both these names are explained by the Yezidis as referring to

⁴¹The *Lives of Simeon Stylites*, tr. R. Doran, Kalamazoo 1992, chapters 33–39, 61–64, 71–72.

⁴²'Λαβὼν οὖν τῆς κόνεως μου τὴν εὐλογίαν, ἀπότρεχε καὶ ἐν τῇ σφραγίδι τοῦ τύπου ἡμῶν βλέπων ἐκεῖνο βλέπεις ἡμᾶς', in: *La vie ancienne de S. Syméon Stylite le Jeune (521–592)*, ed. P. Van de Ven, vol. I, Bruxelles 1962, p. 206 (231, 39–41); tr. A. R.

⁴³Cf. Thomas of Marga, *The Book of Governors*, vol. II, op. cit., p. 611 (VI 6); see also B. Leyerle, *Pilgrim Eulogiae and Domestic Rituals*, 'Archiv für Religionsgeschichte' 10, 1 (2008), pp. 223–238.

⁴⁴Amulet.

⁴⁵The water in which the relics were washed.

⁴⁶*Livre des scolies (recension d'Urmiah): Les collections annexées par Sylvain de Qardu*, ed. and tr. R. Hespel, Lovanii 1984, p. 21.

⁴⁷E. S. Drower, *Water into Wine: A Study of Ritual Idiom in the Middle East*, London 1956, p. 62.

⁴⁸See: Thomas of Marga, *The Book of Governors*, vol. II, op. cit., n. 2, pp. 43–44; G. Hoffmann, *Auszüge aus syrischen Akten persischer Märtyrer ...*, Leipzig 1880, pp. 222–227.

the places where the tombs of their saints are located. They say that the name Lalish comes from *la-lesh*, the 'place of the corpse/body',⁴⁹ and Marga from the Kurmanji *merg* and the Persian *marg* ('death').⁵⁰

Reading about the lives of monks from the Marga region, one can notice the vast popularity of holy dust. The lives of Rabban Bar 'Idta (ca. 509–612) and Rabban Hormuzd (7th c.) may serve as examples. The former recommended *hnana* to pilgrims as a remedy for various ailments:

And Rabban gave Malbed some martyr's dust, commanding him to give it to her to drink in water.
(..)

He saith unto her, "My daughter, take these three little cakes of martyrs' dust,

And go to thy house in faith, and each day take one little cake.
(..)

And Rabban gave him water in which he placed oil and the dust of martyrs.⁵¹

In turn, in the account on the life of Rabban Hormuzd, we read, among other things, about the revival of a certain young man and his reaction to this miracle:

Then Rabban made a washing of water [from his cross] mixed with some holy dust, and gave it unto him to drink. (...) And those multitudes fell upon the holy old man and kissed his hands and his feet, and they rubbed the dust which was under his feet upon their faces, and they also carried it away as a *henana* and as a heavenly gift.⁵²

This custom lasted for centuries and has also gained popularity among the Yezidis, which is well illustrated by the following remark by Rev. Henry Lobdell, who visited Rabban Hormuzd Monastery in 1852 accompanied by the Yezidi leader Hussein Bey:

From one of the tombs, Hussein Bey desired to take a little of the sacred dust celebrated for its febrifuge properties. A tall, gaunt monk handed him some with all the gravity imaginable. Every sect in those regions venerates the saints of every other sect.⁵³

Another place where the common elements of various religions are intertwined is, for example, the mausoleum of the fourth century Christian saint Mar Behnam (venerated also by Muslims as well as Yezidis, by whom he is identified with Khidr Ilyas) located south of Mosul.⁵⁴ In front of the tomb there is a special hole with sacred dust that pilgrims can take with them. Similar sites can also be found, for example, at Mor Gabriel Monastery located near the Yezidi villages of Bacin (Tur. Güven) and Kiwex (Tur. Mağara) in the Tur Abdin region.⁵⁵

⁴⁹Pir Kh. S. Khadir, *An Introduction on Izidians And Lalish*, Duhok 2009, p. 19; Kh. J. Rashow, *Lâliš aus mythologischer, sprachlicher, sakraler und historischer Perspektive*, [in:] *From Daēnā to Dīn. Religion, Kultur und Sprache in der iranischen Welt*, ed. Ch. Allison, A. Joisten-Pruschke, A. Wendtland, Wiesbaden 2009, pp. 367–369.

⁵⁰In Persian a similar word (but with different orthography): *marqad* denotes 'tomb', 'mausoleum' and 'shrine'. However, it appears that the word Marga comes from 'meadow' (Ar. *marj*, Kurm. *mêrg*). As Fiey noted, Marga is 'a Chaldean name which means "meadow", grassy and fertile land, naturally well irrigated' (J. M. Fiey, *Assyrie Chrétienne*, vol. I, Beyrouth 1965, p. 225).

⁵¹*The History of Rabban Bar-'Idtâ*, verses 1378, 1412–1413, 1584: *The Histories of Rabban Hôrmizd the Persian and Rabban Bar-'Idtâ*, II, part 1, ed. and tr. E. A. Wallis Budge, London 1902, pp. 260, 262, 274.

⁵²*The History of Rabban Hormuzd*, fol. 44b: [in:] *The Histories of Rabban . . .*, op. cit., pp. 82–83.

⁵³W. S. Tyler, *Memoir of Rev. Henry Lobdell, M.D., late Missionary of the American Board at Mosul*, Boston 1859, pp. 215–216; cf. Th. Bois, *The Kurds*, Beirut 1966, pp. 77–78.

⁵⁴Cf. J. M. Fiey, *Assyrie Chrétienne*, vol. II, Beyrouth 1968, pp. 565–609. The Yezidis even lived there for a short period (1782–1784) when the monastery was abandoned (ibidem, pp. 587–588).

⁵⁵Cf. Th. Bois, *Monastères chrétiens et temples yézidis dans le Kurdistan irakien*, 'al-Machriq' 61 (1967), pp. 75–103.



Special holes next to the monks' tombs where pilgrims can take holy dust. On the left: Mar Behnam in Iraq and on the right: Mor Gabriel in Turkey, photos by Artur Rodziewicz.

Malka

One cannot ignore yet another imposing analogy with Christianity, which links the *berat*, described by the Yezidis as the 'Blessing of Sheikh Adi', with the Christian Eucharistic Holy Bread (together with *hnana*-tokens, belonging to the category of *eulogiai*, 'blessings'). The similarity concerns both the ingredients of the *berat* ('flour', water, salt, and leaven) and its function related to the status of Sheikh Adi, considered by the Yezidis to be God in human flesh.

The round Eucharistic loaf resembles in shape both the Muslim *turba* and the Christian tokens containing *hnana*, but is made of leavened dough, which, after being stamped with the sign of the cross and baked, is distributed among the participants in the mass as a visible sign of the communion and union of the faithful with God and His body.

Of particular importance to note is the sacrament of Holy Leaven, also known as *Malka* ('the King'),⁵⁶ which played an important role in the ceremony of the preparation of the Eucharistic bread in the Nestorian Church (The Church of the East and its later branches), the Christian community closest territorially to the Yezidis. *Malka* appears in the list of the seven sacraments enumerated by the Nestorian bishop of Sinjar and metropolitan of Nisibis, Abdisho bar Berika (d. 1318), in his *Book of the Pearl (Marganitha)*:

⁵⁶On *Malka*, see: Mar O'Dishoo, *The Book of Marganitha (The Pearl): On the Truth of Christianity*, tr. Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII, Chicago 1988 (repr. of 1965 edition), pp. 58–59; G. P. Badger, *The Nestorians and their Rituals*, vol. II, op. cit., pp. 161–162; R. M. Woolley, *The Bread of the Eucharist*, London 1913, pp. 58–78; Mar Awa Royel [Bishop of the Assyrian Church of the East], *The Sacrament of the Holy Leaven (Malka) in the Assyrian Church of the East*, [in:] *The Anaphoral Genesis of the Institution Narrative in Light of the Anaphora of Addai and Mari*, ed. C. Giraud, Rome 2013. pp. 363–386.

The Sacraments of the Church, according to the Divine Scriptures, are seven in number: 1. The Priesthood, which is the ministry of all the other Sacraments. 2. Holy Baptism. 3. The Oil of Unction. 4. The Oblation of the Body and Blood of Christ. 5. Absolution. 6. The Holy Leaven, namely, the King [*Malka*]. 7. The sign of the life giving Cross. (. . .) The Holy Leaven is used in the spiritual food of the Body of Christ.⁵⁷

Holy Leaven is a dough powder that is prepared ceremonially once a year, and a pinch of which is then added in the process of making the Eucharistic bread. It provides the physical link between the Eucharist and the body of God—Jesus Christ—in human flesh. The tradition of this sacrament is said to date back to the Last Supper, at which Christ established the institution of the Eucharist by breaking the bread which he called his body and handing it to his disciples. Then, according to Nestorian legends, Christ gave an extra piece of bread to John (the Evangelist), who later soaked it in Christ's blood making it a special leaven (*khmira*). Although this piece did not contain leaven,⁵⁸ it served as leaven, creating an unbroken chain of participation in the body of God through successive generations of the faithful of the Church of the East, to whom it reached through the 'blessed Apostles, Thomas and Bartholomew of the Twelve, and Adai and Mari of the Seventy'.⁵⁹ This legend was mentioned, among others, by the Nestorian bishop of Basra, Solomon of Akhlat (first half of the 13th c.) in his *Book of the Bee*:

Some men have a tradition that when our Lord broke His body for His disciples (. . .), John the son of Zebedee hid a part of his portion until our Lord rose from the dead. And when our Lord appeared to His disciples and to Thomas with them, (. . .) Thomas put his finger near to our Lord's side, and it rested upon the mark of the spear, and the disciples saw the blood from the marks of the spear and nails. And John took that piece of consecrated bread, and wiped up that blood with it; and the Easterns, Mar Addai and Mar Mari, took that piece, and with it they sanctified this unleavened bread which has been handed down among us.⁶⁰

The other version of the legend, recorded by the Nestorian monk and theologian Yohannan bar Zo'bi (d. 1241), held that when John was the only one of the disciples who was with Christ during his death on the cross and saw blood and water flowing out of his side, he

took the [drops of] blood by the particle, which was kept from the Passover. (. . .) The blood of His body was mixed, with that bread which He called His Body (. . .). After he rose from the grave, he ascended in glory to His Father, and sent the grace of the Spirit upon His disciples and made them wise. And he commanded His apostles to place in the Churches the leaven which they took from His Body that it may be for the [Eucharistic] mysteries and for baptism. (. . .) They took this leaven and divided it in portions amongst them. (. . .) They ground the particle which was soaked with the blood from the side of our Lord, and they mixed it with flour and salt, and they divided it in vessels amongst them; that it might be in the Church for a leaven of the Body and Blood of Christ.⁶¹

It is during the Rite of the Renewal of the *Malka* that the dough for the Holy Leaven is prepared by the priest from white wheat flour, white salt, water from a spring, olive oil, and a small amount of powdered fermented dough (*khmira*) left over from the previous ceremony. Preparing the flour and bringing it to church, as observed by Drower in 1944, is

⁵⁷Mar O'Dishoo, *The Book of Marganitha*, op. cit., pp. 45–46.

⁵⁸B. D. Spinks, *The Mystery of the Holy Leaven (Malka) in the East Syrian Tradition*, [in:] *Issues in Eucharistic Praying in East and West: Essays in Liturgical and Theological Analysis*, ed. M. E. Johnson, Collegeville 2010, p. 63.

⁵⁹Mar O'Dishoo, *The Book of Marganitha*, op. cit., p. 58.

⁶⁰*The Book of the Bee*, tr. E. A. Wallis Budge, Oxford 1886, pp. 102–103.

⁶¹Tr. by Mar Awa Royel, *The Sacrament of the Holy Leaven (Malkā)* . . . , op. cit., p. 396.

the duty of a virgin girl.⁶² During this ceremony, just before adding the old *Malka* to the new one, the priest recites the first lines of the Prologue of the *Gospel of John* (1, 1–5) about the cosmogonic *Logos* who in the beginning was with God and was God in fact, and in whom there was Life which was the Light of men, that shines in the darkness. The dough prepared this way is then baked.

The *Logos* theme, by the way, is also invoked during the ceremony of preparing the Eucharistic bread in the Jacobite Church, when the priest over the dough says the following words:

I am the Bread of Life, said Our Lord, which from the height came down to the depth, Food Eternal. The Father sent me, the Word [*Logos*] that was not flesh, and as an husbandman Gabriel sowed me, and the womb of Mary received me as good ground. And lo! through them priest carry me upon the altar after the type of the Angels.⁶³

Holy Leaven is used throughout the year for each consecration of Eucharistic bread when the same ingredients are used. The obligation to add Holy Leaven (in addition to simple leaven) is attested for the first time in the liturgical canons by the Nestorian Patriarch Yohannan bar Abgare (d. 905):

For it pleased the Holy Spirit, and he commanded: that those who make the dough of the *q̄sāthā* [i.e. hosts to be baked] preserve **two leavenings, the one consecrated** and the other ordinary. But **the consecrated one** is the one that is necessary for the hosts, and these things are so by the word of our Lord.⁶⁴

According to the Nestorian liturgy, the priest taking the *Malka* with two fingers says:

This dough is signed and hallowed with the old and holy leaven of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given and handed down to us by our holy fathers mar Addai and mar Mari and mar Tuma the apostles, who made disciples of this eastern region: in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. (...) Our King is with us and our God is with us (...).⁶⁵

And after taking out the *Malka* out of the oven, the priest says:

The King of kings [*Malka d'Malke*] came down to be baptized (...).⁶⁶

The origin of the tradition of Holy Leaven and the name of *Malka*, which was perhaps associated with the Last Supper around the 13th-14th century, is not entirely clear. Attempts have been made, among other things, to point to its connection with the descriptions of the Kingdom of Heaven just as Leaven in the Gospels.⁶⁷ I think, however, that it is also worth noting the cosmogonic aspect which seems to be inherent in this sacrament, and which is suggested by the invocation of the Prologue of the *Gospel of St John* during the Holy Leaven preparation ritual. For later on in the Prologue (1, 14), we are told, that the luminous *Logos* who created the world 'became flesh and lived in us'.⁶⁸

⁶²E. S. Drower, *Water into Wine*, op. cit., pp. 57–58.

⁶³Quoted by R. M. Woolley, *The Bread of the Eucharist*, op. cit., pp. 49–50.

⁶⁴Tr. by Mar Awa Royel, *The Sacrament of the Holy Leaven (Malkā)* . . . , op. cit., p. 395.

⁶⁵Tr. by A. J. Maclean, in: *Liturgies Eastern and Western Being the Texts, Original or Translated, of the Principle Liturgies of the Church*, ed. F. E. Brightman, C. E. Hammond, vol. I, *Eastern Liturgies*, Oxford 1896, p. 248.

⁶⁶Ibidem.

⁶⁷*Gospel of Matthew* 13, 33, *Gospel of Luke* 12, 20–21.

⁶⁸Tr. A.R.

A literally expressed association of leaven with the process of the creation of the world is, for example, present in the *Cave of Treasures (Me'arath Gazze)*, an apocryphal Syriac text attributed by the Christian tradition to Saint Ephrem of Nisibis (306–373), which was also well known to the Christians in the Marga region (one of its copies comes from Alqosh near Lalish). In the description of the cosmogony contained therein, the presence of leaven is emphasized twice:

the Holy Spirit (...) was hovering over the waters and through this hovering upon the surface of the waters they were blessed and became fertile. The very essence of the waters was heated and inflamed, and **the leaven of creation** was united within them: Just as a bird is warming its offspring by the overshadowing hovering of its wings, and through the fiery heat therefrom the young are fashioned within the eggs, likewise the Spirit, the Paraclete, too, by hovering over the waters united **the spiritual leaven** within them through the working of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁹

Associations of the Eucharistic loaf and its ingredients with the cosmogony were, by the way, the subject of debate among other Christian denominations that also used leavened bread, as evidenced, for example, by the discussion—recalled by Woolley in his monograph on *The Bread of the Eucharist*—between the Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch, John Bar Susan (d. 1072 or 1073) and the Armenian Patriarch, during which the Jacobite explained 'that, as Adam was formed of water, air, fire, and earth, which, with the spirit, make five ingredients, so there is a special meaning in the five ingredients used in making the Eucharistic Bread. So the water used signifies the water used in the creation of Adam, the flour signifies the earth, the salt the fire, the leaven the air, and the oil signifies the spirit'.⁷⁰

Berat and the cosmogonic Pearl

In the case of the three religious traditions discussed above, Yezidism, Islam, and Christianity, we are dealing with the idea of spreading among pilgrims the objects containing material traces coming from a place sanctified by the presence of a saint (or even God)—first through his pious life and then through his holy body. All three religious traditions attribute to these objects miraculous properties. In addition to the similarities, the differences should also be noted, because what distinguishes the Yezidis from Christians and Muslims is that *berat* is not disc-shaped but spherical and always white in colour.

These latter elements allow us to perceive *berat* as a reminiscent of the original white Pearl, about which the Yezidi cosmogonic myths treat. According to the Yezidi tradition, especially that which is transmitted in the sacred hymns (*qewls*), the process of creation of the world began with the luminous Pearl in which God was present. He caused it to crack so that it broke into four elements, as briefly mentioned in the *Hymn of Sheykh Obekr (Qewlê Şêxubekir)*:

25. . . . <i>ji durrê efrand bû çare</i> <i>axe û ave û baye û nare.</i>	From the Pearl were created Four: Earth and Water and Wind and Fire. ⁷¹
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⁶⁹*The Cave of Treasures* 1, 3–7; tr. A. Toepel, [in:] *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, vol. 1, ed. R. Bauckham et al., Cambridge 2013, p. 540.

⁷⁰R. M. Woolley, *The Bread of the Eucharist*, op. cit., pp. 48–49.

⁷¹X. C. Reşo [Rashow], *Pern ji Edebê Dînê Êzdiyan*, Duhok 2013, p. 212; tr. A. R.

These elements then served as components of the world. Significantly, and at the same time bringing to mind the Orphic cosmogony, the factor that connected them was—depending on the version of the myth—Love or Leaven, which was also present in the Pearl with God,⁷² and which may be interpreted as a symbolic reference to Tawûsî Melek.

These processes are referred to in detail, among others, in the most important Yezidi cosmogonic hymn, the *Hymn of the Weak Broken One* (*Qewlê Zebûnî Meksûr*):

- | | | |
|-----|---|--|
| 6. | <i>Paşê min ji durê bû,</i>
<i>Hisnatek jê çê bû,</i>
<i>Şaxa muhibetê lê bû. (...)</i> | My King was of the Pearl
The Beauty/Goodness comes from him
The branch of Love was there. |
| 26. | <i>... Paşê min havên havête behrê</i>
<i>û behr meynîn,</i>
<i>Duxanek jê duxinî, her heft ezman</i>
<i>pê nijinîn.</i> | My King lowered leaven into the ocean,
and the ocean coagulated
Smoke rose from it and all the seven heavens
were formed. ⁷³ |

This is similarly reported by the *Hymn of the Creation of the World* (*Qewlê Afrîna Dinyayê*):

- | | | |
|-----|---|---|
| 9. | <i>... Em avêtin nav sura mihbetê</i> | We were thrown into the Mystery of Love |
| 10. | <i>Havên avête behrê</i>
<i>Behr pê meyanî</i>
<i>Dexanek jê dexinî</i>
<i>Çarde flebeq 'erd û ezman nijinî</i>
<i>Êzdanê me dur deranî</i> | He threw leaven into the ocean
The ocean coagulated because of it
Smoke appeared from it
He built heaven and earth, fourteen spheres
Our God brought the Pearl out. |
| 11. | <i>Mihbet avête navê</i> | He threw Love into it ... ⁷⁴ |

In their modern publications, the Yezidis summarize this part of the myth as follows:

God ordered to angels to go down to the sea and create the earth. The angels came down and sank leaven into the sea and it thickened. (...) The place where the leaven had been sunk is situated in Lalish. The spring in Lalish named Kania Spi (White Spring, Holy Spring) is considered to be a vestige of the leaven.⁷⁵

Thus, Yezidi *berat* can be regarded as an object embodying the myth about the primordial white Pearl containing God. However, the connection between *berat* and the cosmogonic myth shows much more dimensions, since it is made from the earth of Lalish, and this earth is sacred to the Yezidis for three reasons. Not only because it is the location of the mausoleum of Sheikh Adi and the tombs of the most important

⁷²Cf. a formula '*Hey hêvêno ji mihbetê*' ('Oh Leaven from Love') in the *Qewlê Êzdîne Mir*, st. 6 and 15: (Ph. Kreyenbroek, Kh. J. Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi are Perfect*, Wiesbaden 2005, pp. 185–186).

⁷³A. Rodziejewicz, *Jezydzkie hymny kosmogoniczne: Hymn o Nieszczęsnym Rozbitku (Qewlê Zebûnî Meksûr) and Hymn o Beji A (Qewlê Bê û Elif)*, 'Przegląd Orientalistyczny', pp. 209 and 213–214.

⁷⁴Ph. Kreyenbroek, Kh. J. Rashow, *God and Sheikh Adi are Perfect*, op. cit., p. 67.

⁷⁵S. A. Grigoriev, V. Ivasko, D. Pirbari, *Lalişa Nûranî*, op. cit., p. 21.

saints of Yezidism, but also because, according to the cosmogonic myth, the first place created out of the four elements was Lalish, which was first created as an incorporeal pattern and then lowered from the heavens to embody it. Thus, Lalish can be seen as a proto-Earth composed of the four elements. And thirdly, this place is associated with yet another cosmogonic myth, concerning the micro-cosmogony, i.e. the anthropogenesis. For it is here that Adam's body—similarly to the macrocosm composed of the four elements—was created, and here that it was brought to life. As we hear in the *Hymn of the Weak Broken One* (*Qewlê Zebûnî Meksûr*):

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| 32. | <i>Laliş ku nizilî,</i>
<i>Şaxa muhbetê navda e'dilî,</i>
<i>Erd şa bû û bi renga xemilî.</i> | As soon as Lalish came down
A branch of Love grew inside
The earth was joyful and was clad in colours. |
| 33. | <i>Laliş ku dihate,</i>
<i>Li erdê şîn dibû nebate,</i>
<i>Pê zeynîn çiqas kinyate.</i> | When Lalish descended [into the earthly lowlands]
On Earth, plants grew
And the world became adorned in them |
| 34. | <i>Ku kinyat pê zeynand,</i>
<i>Çar qism tê hincinand,</i>
<i>Axe û ave û baye û agire,</i>
<i>Qalibê Adem pêxember jê nijinand</i> | As soon as the world became adorned
Four elements were mixed together,
Earth and water and wind and fire
He ⁷⁶ made out of them the shell of the Prophet Adam. ⁷⁷ |

The Yezidis believe that the material trace of this event is a remnant of the matter that was left unused in the process of making Adam's body. It is located next to the White Spring.



The remains of matter from which Adam's body was formed, Lalish, photo by Artur Rodziewicz.

⁷⁶Perhaps the 'King'.

⁷⁷A. Rodziewicz, *Jezydzkie hymny kosmogoniczne . . .*, op. cit., pp. 214–215.

The mystery of berat

But the shell of Adam was not yet animated, for it lacked the spiritual factor. Therefore, God commanded the Spirit to enter Adam's body, but the Spirit refused. Finally, however, he consented, on condition that this be accompanied by music. So, as we hear in the *Hymn of the Weak Broken One*:

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|--|---|
| 38. <i>Saz û qidûm hatin û hadirî,</i> | The Flute with tambourine came down,
[and] it is ready now! |
| <i>Nûra muhibetê hingivte serî</i> | The Light of Love flashed upon [his] head, |
| <i>Ruh hat û li qalibê Adem</i>
<i>pêxember êwirî.</i> | The Spirit came and inhabited Prophet
Adam's shell. |
| 39. <i>Adem pêxember ji vê kasê</i>
<i>vedixwar û vejîya,</i> | Prophet Adam drank from the Cup and
came to life |
| <i>Mest bû û hejya,</i> | He staggered, he was inebriated |
| <i>Goşt lê ruhya, xûn tê gerîya.</i> | His body was covered in flesh, his blood
began to circulate. ⁷⁸ |

What is described in the hymn as the light of Love is also sometimes referred to by the Yezidis as *nur* ('light') or, using one of the most important concepts of their metaphysics, as *sur* ('mystery', 'essence').⁷⁹ According to Yezidis, these descriptions refer to the moment of anthropogony when, through the agency of either Angel Gabriel or the Peacock Angel, the *sur* of Angel Sheikh Sin (Melek Şêxisn), touched Adam's forehead.

It should also be noted that Angel Sheikh Sin is one of the Seven Mysteries (*Heft Sur*), the seven holy angels of Yezidism. He is believed to have his physical incarnation in the Yezidi leader Shiekh Hasan (d. ca. 1250), whose position and characteristics closely resemble those of Muhammad in Islam. Sheikh Hasan is credited with formulating the most important principles of the Yezidi religion, especially the deification of Sheikh Adi. Both his and Adi's tombs are located in adjacent rooms in the same main mausoleum in Lalish.

As explained by one of the greatest experts on the Yezidi religion, the late Feqir Haji (d. 2019):

this *sur*, the *sur* of Angel Sheikh Sin, came from the sky into the forehead of Adam.⁸⁰

It was the *sur* of Angel Sheikh Sin (. . .). The spirit [*ruh*] of an angel had to go into the body.⁸¹

But when Adam left the Paradise, the Peacock Angel took this *sur* (sometimes also called *durr*, 'pearl') off his forehead.⁸² The *Sur*, however, was passed on to his son, Prophet Shehid ben Jarr, who is considered by the Yezidis as their forefather:

⁷⁸A. Rodziewicz, *Jezydzkie hymny kosmogoniczne . . .*, op. cit., pp. 215–216.

⁷⁹Cf. A. Rodziewicz, *The Nation of the Sur. The Yezidi Identity between Modern and Ancient Myth* [in:] *Rediscovering Kurdistan's Cultures and Identities: The Call of The Cricket*, ed. J. Bocheńska, Cham 2018, pp. 274–276.

⁸⁰E. Spät, *Late Antique Motifs in Yezidi Oral Tradition*, Piscataway 2010, pp. 422–423.

⁸¹*Ibidem*, p. 438; I have corrected 'soul' to 'spirit'.

⁸²*Ibidem*, p. 425.

It wasn't Adam who put it in a jar. Jibrail brought the *sur* from his forehead, put it in a jar, not Adam. Tawusi Melek brought it out from his forehead, put it in jar, and threw Adam out of Paradise.⁸³

And this *sur* of his, this has even reached us. He put the *sur* in a jar and from it Shehid was created. Prophet Shehid. Now we are his nation. His nation has no prophet other than Shehid. [. . .] We have always been the nation of Tawusi Melek and the nation of the *sur*.⁸⁴

The Yezidi myth shows many features in common with the myths of other religions. At first glance one can see an analogy with the stories concerning Seth, the son of Adam,⁸⁵ but in the context of *berat* another story is more important. That is, an early Muslim legend that links the first of the prophets, Adam, with the 'seal of the prophets', Muhammad. It concerns the pre-existence of the Light of Muhammad, which precedes the physical birth of Muhammad and plays a role similar to the demiurgic *Logos* in Christianity.

The legend about Muhammadan Light was popularized among storytellers and developed in various ways by Sufis,⁸⁶ but never gained official acceptance by Muslim theologians. Its transmission is most often attributed to Ka'b al-Ahbar (d. ca. 652) and Jabir ibn 'Abd Allah al-Ansari (d. 697), two companions of Muhammad. The myth is preserved in quite similar versions, from which the following story emerges. God commanded Gabriel, referred to as the Peacock of the Angels (*Tawus al-malaika*), to bring from the place of the Prophet's grave a handful of white dust resembling a pearl, which was then mixed with water from Paradise and fermented. This white handful then appeared as a light on Adam's forehead and was later passed down through successive generations from Prophet Seth to Prophet Muhammad.

This legend is attested for the first time in *Kitab bad'al-khalq wa-qisas al-anbiya'* by 'Umara ibn Wathima al-Farisi al-Fasawi (d. 902). In the course of the narrative, God announces to the angels that He is going to create a being who will be 'the master of the first and the last',

Then God commanded the peacock of the angels, Gabriel, to bring him the pure and purifying **white handful which is the splendor and the light of the world**. Gabriel descended among the angels of paradise, the angels of the highest rank who stand in ranks and glorify God, and the cherubim – who are the heads of the angels – and **took the handful of the Messenger of God from the site of his grave**. At that time it was white and pure; it was the cleanest, purest, most radiant, and most immaculate spot on the face of the earth. It was **kneaded with the waters** of Tasnim and Salsabil and swelled until **it became like a white pearl**; then it was immersed in all of the rivers of heaven, and taken around all of the heavens, the earths, and the seas. (. . .) When God created Adam, he heard a swishing like the sound of dust motes from the lines of the wrinkles in his forehead. He said, "Glory be to You, what is that?" [A voice] called to him, "O Adam, that is the glorification of the Seal of the Prophets and the master of the messengers among your descendants, Muhammad, My servant, messenger, beloved (. . .)."⁸⁷

⁸³Ibidem, p. 432.

⁸⁴Ibidem, p. 426.

⁸⁵See: E. Spät, *Shahid bin Jarr, Forefather of the Yezidis and the Gnostic seed of Seth*, 'Iran and the Caucasus' 6 (2002), pp. 27–56.

⁸⁶Cf. A. Rodziewicz, *The Mystery of Essence and the Essence of Mystery: Yezidi and Yaresan Cosmogonies in the Light of the Kitab al-Tawasin*, [in:] *Yari Religion of Iran*, ed. B. Hosseini, Singapore 2022, pp. 163–166.

⁸⁷M. H. Katz, *The Birth of The Prophet Muhammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam*, London-New York 2007, p. 16.

After the above passage, light is said to radiate from Adam's forehead. This light was then passed on to Seth, who made a pact with God. The light was then transmitted through successive generations up to Muhammad. This story, in an almost identical version, was transmitted by other authors, e.g. by Abu'l-Faraj 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn al-Jawzi (c. 1115–1200), in his *Al-Wafa' bi-ahwal al-Mustafa*:

When God willed to create Muhammad, He commanded Gabriel to come to Him. He brought Him **the white handful that is the place of the Prophet's grave**. It was **kneaded with the water** of Tasnim (...). Then the light of Muhammad was visible in the blaze of Adam's forehead. (...) When Eve conceived Seth, [the light] was transferred from Adam to Eve; she used to give birth to two children at a time except for Seth, whom she bore singly in honor of Muhammad. Then [the light] continued to be transferred from one pure person to another until [the Prophet Muhammad] was born.⁸⁸

The process of preparing the handful of white dust from the tomb of the Prophet resembles the preparation of *berat* by the Yezidis. It is difficult to assume that the Muslim legend was not known to the Yezidis. It circulated among local storytellers and was repeated in the very popular accounts of lives of Muslim saints, e.g. in the *Lives of the Prophets* by Abu Ishaq al-Tha'labi (d. 1035):

[God] commanded Gabriel to bring him a **handful of the white (soil) which is the heart of the Earth**, its splendor and its light, to create Muhammad from it. So Gabriel descended (...) and took a handful (of soil) **from the place of the Prophet's tomb**, which, at that time, was white and pure. It was **kneaded in the Blessed Water of Paradise**, and was so fresh that **it became like a white pearl**. (...) God looked at this **pure pearl** and it trembled for fear of God (...).⁸⁹

Similarly, also the pearl-like white *berat* is made of light dust from the most important tomb located in the heart of Earth (and previously in the heavens). It is mixed with water from the holy Kaniya Sipî spring. The analogy with Muslim legend is all the greater because Lalish plays an identical role in Yezidism as Mecca in Islam (and Jerusalem in Jewish legends)⁹⁰ it is the centre of the universe, the navel of the earth, or even the heavenly paradise that descended to this location. Moreover, both Lalish and Mecca even have identically named places and are, according to Yezidi beliefs, connected to each other under the ground.

The message of *berat*

Analogies to *berat* that can be found in other Middle Eastern religious traditions may attest to the genesis of this holy object of the Yezidis. However, *Berat* and the religious practices related to it are not a simple copy of the beliefs of Christians and Muslims. For the metaphysical background that accompanies it, is closely related to the Yezidi vision of cosmogony, which, although containing many elements in common with the cosmogonies of other cultures, has its own distinctive specificity.

⁸⁸Ibidem, p. 20.

⁸⁹[Al-Tha'labi], *'Ara'is al-majalis fi qisas al-anbiya'* or *'Lives of the Prophets'*, tr. W. M. Brinner, Leiden 2002, p. 44.

⁹⁰As reported by Abu Ishaq al-Tha'labi (d. 1035), 'the narrators have told (...) that (...) the first part of the Earth to appear on the face of the water was Mecca, and God spread out the Earth below it' ([Al-Tha'labi], *'Ara'is al-majalis fi qisas al-anbiya'* or *'Lives of the Prophets'*, tr. W. M. Brinner, Leiden 2002, p. 6); see: A. J. Wensinck, *The Ideas of the Western Semites Concerning the Navel of the Earth*, Amsterdam 1916.:

When analysing both the visual characteristics of *berat* as well as the process of its manufacture and the practice of its application, it can be said that the main meaning or message carried by *berat* is the unification and communion of:

- the Yezidis with Sheikh Adi (both as a person and as a religious homeland),
- the Yezidis with each other (both those who were in conflict previously and those wishing to strengthen their ties by becoming brother or sister in the hereafter),
- the beginning (of the world as a macrocosm) with the end (of every human as a microcosm),
- the body with the earth from which it originates,
- the Yezidis with their ancestor Shehid and through him with the divine Light,
- the four elements of the world with each other.

For *berat* itself, similar to the mythical Pearl, as a physical object is a real and symbolic unity of four elements: earth, water, and salt united by leaven. It carries—if I may return to the supposed etymology—a kind of blessing or a message, a signal passed on through successive generations of Yezidis within the framework of the Tradition that unites them into one community. Its distribution to pilgrims recalls the myth, fundamental to the Yezidis, of the transmission of divine Light (*nur*) containing the divine Mystery (*sur*) that shone from the primordial Pearl (*dur*). In other words, receiving and keeping *berat* with them until the death of the body emphasizes the unity of all Yezidis with the mythical beginning when the all was One.

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