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afriche e orienti

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"Gli arbitri dell'Asia." The perception of the Kurds in missionary sources from the Propaganda Fide archives (Eighteenth Century)

Abstract

Catholic missionary activities in the broader Kurdish area have been a constant for the last four centuries at least. Using previously neglected archival sources, this paper aims at shedding light on the Western perception of Kurdish people in the seventieth and eighteenth centuries. Religious networks in Mesopotamia served several purposes, the first being to exert control over "old Christian" and Oriental confessions, primarily to push for Armenian's ecclesiastical communion with Rome. But those networks were also used as intelligence structures for the assistance of European merchants and diplomats that moved along trading routes. Among the sources presented in this paper, several letters by Maurizio Garzoni, author of the first Kurdish grammar in Italian, whose staying in Diyarbekir and Zakho gave him a privileged spot to observe Kurdish culture during the final quarter of the eighteenth century. His and other missionaries' reports are a unique source of information on Kurdish culture, religion and politics in that period and on their relationship with the Ottoman and Persian Empires, also showing an outsider perspective that depicted Kurds as a somewhat homogenous entity.

Keywords

Kurdish History, Catholic Missionary Networks, History of the Ottoman Empire, Nation Building, History of Diplomacy.

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Introduction

During the seventieth and eighteenth centuries, the interest of European entities in the region at the border between Persia and the Ottoman Empire grew significantly, primarily for two reasons. On one hand, commercial interests were tied to the lucrative trade of silk and spices, which were highly sought after in European markets. On the other hand, the Catholic Church was motivated by the need to reconnect Eastern Churches with the Roman Church, an endeavour reflective of the Catholic Reformation's broader objectives. This dual interest—economic and religious—resulted in the dispatch of numerous missionaries who established various missions, churches, and hospices in a vast "zone of contact" extending from Eastern Anatolia to the Caspian Sea, and from the Caucasus in the north to the Persian Gulf in the south. The Discalced Carmelites distinguished themselves by maintaining the longest and most rooted presence in Persia among these religious orders (*A Chronicle of the Carmelites in Persia* 1939, 124). They provided the Bishops of Isfahan for nearly two centuries, from 1623 until the end of the eighteenth century. The missionary efforts of the Carmelites were occasionally supported by Persian rulers and local leaders, although this support was precarious and could be swiftly withdrawn in times of political upheaval or when alliances shifted.

Beyond the Carmelites, several other religious orders were active in the region, which was at times under Persian control and, at other times, under Ottoman dominion. These orders included the Theatine Fathers, Dominicans, Capuchins, and Jesuits. They established themselves in areas such as Shamaki, Gori, Mosul, Basra, Amedi, Shiraz, and Diyarbakir. In these locations, a missionary presence was maintained for varying durations, depending on local conditions and political climates. After the Carmelites in 1622, the Capuchins set foot in Mosul in 1638 while the Dominicans started their mission in 1748 (Goormachtigh 1898, 271). In 1721, Propaganda Fide had first established an Apostolic Vicar for Mesopotamia, to be based in Baghdad. In this moment, logistical problems connected to the Arab control of roads effectively cut communication between Isfahan and Baghdad, and from Baghdad to Constantinople (Filoni 2009, 42). In 1731 Emmanuel Baillet arrived in the Mesopotamia mission; he will be appointed as Latin bishop of Baghdad and will eventually stay in this role until his death in 1773, with a brief stint in Rome (Filoni 2009, 40). During this period, many of the Catholic missionaries who had set in Persia during the previous century relocated to Baghdad and the Mosul area. Their arrival in this region prompted their curiosity about local customs and

they started investigating and reporting to Rome on this exceptionally multicultural border zone. Many of the Nestorian/Assyrian (Atiya 1968) shrines and churches were built on old Zoroastrian/Sun cult temples (Turgut 2013). The city of Mosul, one of the main places for Christian presence in the region, had a flourishing Arabic culture that produced several texts on the history and dynastic succession that had happened since Ottoman Conquest (Kemp 1981). The Jazidi sparked great curiosity and were carefully described by the missionaries in their reports, and attempts at their conversions were made, as it was the case with the Mandaeans in the South.[1] Jewish presence in the area was also well documented, and the role of Jewish Aghas has been highlighted for the late eighteenth and nineteenth century (Zaken 2007). Jewish strategies of survival in the area have been praised by Abdullah Öcalan as a good example of tribal independence through economic and cultural emancipation (Öcalan 2023, 45). A traditional disdain for and attempt at enfranchisement from *ukumeh* (Lewis 1982), from the control of imperial governments, is more visible through the struggle of the minorities that thrived in the area.

In this mosaic of cultures, the interaction between Rome's emissaries and local Arab and Kurdish cultures took place against a backdrop of broader geopolitical dynamics. During this period, the Safavid Empire in Persia and the Ottoman Empire were striving for dominance. European powers, particularly interested in maintaining and expanding their access to trade routes and goods, engaged in delicate diplomatic negotiations with both empires: during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, British,[2] French, Dutch, and Portuguese had diplomatic and trading presence in Persia. Italian States had a presence too, with contacts dating back to the thirteenth century (Piemontese 1982). The missionaries, therefore, operated within a politically charged environment where alliances were strategic and often fragile.

The missionaries played multifaceted roles. While their primary mission was religious—to spread the Catholic doctrine and re-establish the dominance of the Roman Church among Eastern Christians—they also became inadvertent cultural mediators. Their writings often include observations on local customs, social structures, and even political developments. Such accounts are invaluable to historians seeking to understand the intercultural exchanges that took place in this period.

Moreover, Propaganda Fide's efforts must be seen in the context of the Catholic Church's larger strategic efforts during the Counter-Reformation (Pizzorusso 2022). Following the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church sought to

reclaim its influence globally, and the reconversion or reintegration of Eastern Christians into the Catholic fold was part of this wider mission. Thus, the work of the missionaries served not only the spiritual objectives of conversion but also the geopolitical aims of the Church as it sought to assert its authority and counteract Protestant expansion. It must be noted that among the ranks of the bishops of Baghdad, who used to oversee the Kurdish area, Baillet's predecessor was Varlet, a Jansenist, and further evolutions of Oriental Christianity in the area would, perhaps surprisingly, show more influences from Jansenist and Gallican thought, an example being the Melkite bishop of Aleppo, Germanos Adam, who convoked the Synod of Qarqafeh in 1806 (Charon 1998). This is just one of the examples of how the cultural and religious debate in Europe was trickling down on Middle Eastern affairs regarding cult and hierarchy.

The precarious position of the missionaries, reliant on the protection of local rulers, highlights the complexities of their task. They had to navigate a labyrinth of local politics, inter-sectarian dynamics, and the overarching imperial rivalries between the Safavid and Ottoman empires. In times of political stability, they might enjoy the favour and protection of the ruling authorities; however, during periods of conflict or shifts in power, they faced risks of expulsion, persecution, or violence.

A tradition in the history of Middle Eastern Politics proposes that the Iranian-Ottoman border is one of the oldest in the world, being already established in 1639. But, as noted by Sabri Ateş (2013, 3), "there was no exact line of demarcation, and the entire region was characterized by multiple social, linguistic, religious and political identities"; thus, the period we observe in this article fell before the moment when a permeable borderlands slowly transformed into a legally defined boundary.

Within this milieu, influential Kurdish leaders started to articulate a sense of identity that extended beyond tribal loyalties, motivated by a need for greater autonomy in response to imperial encroachments; yet the fragmented nature of Kurdish political entities held back any collective national movement outside of cultural identity and common customs and language.

Kurdish native priests were trying to use Rome as a source of legitimacy in front of several actors: in front of the missionaries; in front of the Orthodox/Armenians; in front of their own people and families, often trading traditional values for access to the clergy's privileges. These theological discussions verted very often on mundane arguments such as the permission to eat fish on Friday, or to marry a woman from a different Christian denomination. Chal-

dean hierarchies' push for independence even through unlawful means must be considered consistent with local leaders' politics of alliances with other power structures in the same period.

The Kurdish leaders were adept at navigating between the shifting allegiances required by Ottoman and Persian pressures and finding opportunities to assert their own power. The city of Sulaymanyah was founded in this period, reflecting a period of vivacity in Kurdish culture. The Tigris basin was used to trade wood through the Qara Cholan valley to Baghdad, and the Kirkuk-Sulaymanyah road became a new artery in the communication network of the Eastern Ottoman borderland.[3]

The late eighteenth century also witnessed a subtle but significant shift in loyalties as some Kurdish leaders sought to leverage the rivalries between the Ottoman and Persian empires. This opportunistic diplomacy involved negotiating support in exchange for military or political backing, with some pashas succeeding in becoming influential regional power brokers. Moreover, these shifting loyalties were not only an outcome of tactical considerations but also a reflection of ethno-tribal affiliations being entangled with imperial and religious allegiances. Some of these shifts are reported in the missionaries' letters.

The European interest in the border areas between Persia and the Ottoman Empire during the seventieth and eighteenth centuries was driven by both commercial and religious motivations. The efforts of the Catholic Church, particularly through its missionary orders, aimed to spread Catholic doctrine and political influence, left a lasting documentary legacy that continues to inform our understanding of this historical period. The missionaries stood at the intersection of these forces, serving as both agents of religious change and as chroniclers of the rich cultural milieu of the region.

Archival Sources

The enduring presence of the Catholic clergy in these areas produced a substantial body of correspondence and documents that are now housed in various Italian archives. In Rome, the Archive of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (commonly known as Propaganda Fide) and the Archive of the Discalced Carmelites preserve materials that allow us to reconstruct the lived experiences and challenges faced by these missionaries. Moreover, these documents provide insights into the lives and cultures of the local populations and their interactions with the missionaries.

The documentary heritage left by these missionaries offers a window into a

transformative period in global history, in a region that served as a crossroads between East and West. The records preserved in the archives not only tell the story of the missionaries themselves but also reflect the broader historical currents of the seventieth and eighteenth centuries, illustrating how European religious ambitions intersected with the complex political realities of the Persian-Ottoman frontier.

The documents used in this paper are mostly taken from the *Scritture Riferite* (Letters sent to Rome from the Missions), in the collection "Mesopotamia" and in the volumes 7, 8, and 9. The letters have been sent mainly by two major members of the northern Mesopotamia missions: Leopoldo Soldini e Giovanni Garzoni. Other minor contributors are Giovanni Battista Boetti and Emanuele Cavo. All those missionaries were Dominicans, and a thorough examination of Dominicans archival records would possibly bear more insights regarding the lives of those missionaries and their work in the Kurdistan/Mesopotamia region.

The letters range from 1772 to the mid-1780s and were sent mainly from Mosul, Amedi, and Diyarbekir but also from other places, giving us a good picture of the mobility of Catholic missionaries in the Kurdistan area.

Vatican and missionaries' sources have been used by Kurdologists. Most notably, Mirella Galletti was acclaimed for her contribution to the history of Kurdistan and Iraq (Galletti 2001; 2006; 2010). More recently, younger scholars have been following Galletti's footsteps and began working on Dominican missionary accounts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Bernardini and Bianco 2018). A first edition of long-lost book by Dominican priest Domenico Lanza about the history of the area is long awaited. In this article I want to stress the importance of missionary sources for the history of Kurdistan. The archives of Propaganda Fide, of the Dominican and Discalced Carmelite orders and, for later periods, British diplomatic records, have been used by many distinguished scholars but still yield a conspicuous amount of valuable historical information that needs to be more thoroughly examined.

Life in the Kurdistan Catholic Missions in the Late Eighteenth Century

Charlatans and Impostors

Charlatans were a constant presence, especially in border areas where identity could be reinvented once passed a frontier. Dominican missionaries had

to deal with at least one of them, Venetian "doctor" Bimbini, whose main objective was to obtain the trust of the locals to gain some status of authority over them.

Presenting himself as a medical professional eager to assist with the community's humanitarian endeavours, he initially obtained the trust of both the missionaries and the local populace. His purported medical expertise was initially welcomed as an invaluable asset to the mission's efforts, particularly in a region where access to healthcare was limited (Hussain Amd and Fatah Muhammad 2024).

However, his ulterior motives soon surfaced. The impostor manipulated his assumed identity to purportedly tell the local Kurdish population that priests were exempted to practice medical work in his presence.[4]

This behaviour caused interpersonal disruptions, as disagreements and litigations erupted between him and several priests. Bimbini was accused of stealing sacred objects and eventually of attacking the "American" missionary Emmanuele Cavo, one of the most active yet less recognized missionary in the area.[5] These conflicts often centred around discrepancies in financial accounts and accusations of deceitful behaviour, straining the relationships within the missionary force and undermining their mission's objectives.

The presence of the fake doctor not only resulted in financial losses but also challenged the community's internal trust dynamics. The priests found themselves embroiled in legal disputes that detracted from their primary religious duties. Apparently, it was something common, with Garzoni dismissing some accusations against a local priest by writing that "this kind of false letters are the norm here."[6] Furthermore, the public nature of these quarrels risked damaging the mission's reputation among both the local Christian communities and the wider population they aimed to serve. Retaliations against Catholics were common, and undisciplined conducts were considered dangerous. But ultimately, if the Christian missions were able to persist for decades overcoming even changes in the power structure of the local governors, it means that they had earned a good reputation, made stronger by their conditions of poverty and solidarity. There were many occasions in which the missionaries were tempted by the offers of the local leaders to convert to Islam. Father Emanuele Cavo reports this, saying that "the Persians are surprised that I have not yet become a Mohammedan, given the honors they reserve for me";[7] and this is also confirmed by the legend that Giovanni Battista Boetti converted to Islam and, having changed his name to Shayk Mansur, became the leader of the jihad

against the Russians. The same Boetti had to endure harsh accusations during his stay in Kurdistan, creating a profound divide among Catholic missionaries in the area and prompting a series of diatribes that eventually reached Rome.

The Boetti Affair

Simultaneously, the mission faced another severe internal scandal involving one of its own priests accused of sexual violence against a young woman from a prominent Christian family in Mosul. Padre Giovanni Battista Boetti was another Dominican missionary whose eagerness and knowledge of the Kurdish area enabled him to move without troubles in the area between Mosul and the mountains. He spent 16 months in Amedi *in total tranquillity* after being accused of raping the youngest daughter of a Christian family from Mosul.

The allegations against him, brought forth by several witnesses, painted a disturbing picture of betrayal of trust and abuse of power, with Boetti accused of even stealing from the house before running away.[8] This situation was further complicated by the victim's family's prominence, which added a layer of communal pressure and heightened scrutiny on the mission's handling of the matter. Christians in Mosul were among the closest allies and backers of the Dominican missions, so the scandal risked tarnishing hardly established connections.

The accusation sparked a crisis within the mission, as the leadership grappled with preserving their moral standing while ensuring justice and accountability. The initial reaction involved attempts to discreetly address the situation by considering the removal of the priest in question from his duties. However, internal divisions and disagreements on how to handle such a grave accusation led to a protracted mail exchange of mutual accusations among the priests. This correspondence revealed the fractures within the mission, as differing opinions and loyalties surfaced, creating an atmosphere of tension and mistrust.

The contentiousness between different orders or among singles or groups of missionaries exudes from most of the letters sent to Rome from the Levant and the Ottoman Empire, and false accusations or exaggerated claims could lead to long-lasting legal disputes with Rome.

This scandal made clear to the missionaries that stricter protocols for verifying the credentials of those joining their efforts were needed, while establishing clear guidelines for accountability and conflict resolution within their ranks. In the Propaganda Fide archives, several letters sent to Rome focused on the

"good spirit" of the missionary that should be sent to that area.[9]

These events underscore the necessity for vigilance, transparency, and ethical integrity in mission operations, emphasizing that the spiritual mission cannot be divorced from the moral exemplification within the community itself. A moral high ground needed to assert catholic orthodoxy over local Christian traditions regarding marriage, fasting, or the prayers to Nestorius that were strictly censored

Fake Bishops and Double-faced Christians

The relationship between Catholic priests and local Christian leader was extremely complex and caused many controversies, some of which ended in harsh accusations, mischief and eventually murder (Filoni 2009). Simon, archbishop of Mardin, wrote that the Chaldean patriarch mar Elia was repeating the lies of Nestorius, who is "more wicked than Devil himself."[10] Shifting loyalties and not completely sincere conversion to Catholicism were reported in those letters, and a general sense of mistrust towards many of the Chaldean elders is palpable in Garzoni's and Soldini's correspondence. Mar Elia was accused of falsely converting to Catholicism in Tel Kaif.[11]

According to the priests' reports, the main motive behind fake conversions was to gain the right from Rome to appoint bishops; and by retaining their right to marry and have children, the supposed aim was to keep the bishopric powers in the hands of the clan. This topic was extremely sensitive for the Italian missionaries, because obedience to Rome and reversion to Catholic orthodoxy was basically their main task, but it was not always easy to distinguish between heartfelt, genuine conversions and opportunism. As I said, shifting loyalties and the use of different law structures were the norm in this context of fragile political stability. Trust was hard earned, and relationships with the Chaldeans could be regulated by external actors such as Aleppine priests or French consuls, showing the intercultural network that helped in the management of daily affairs, and the important of French consular authorities, especially in the relations with Armenians.[12]

Another factor of instability was the relationship with the "heretic" Armenians and with Greek Orthodox in general. Several time it was reported that "Armenians are worse than Turks,"[13] and their supposed attempts to steal Catholic privileges are noted. A pattern similar to what was reported about Palestine or the Aegean, Armenian Orthodox leaders were accused of bribing Ottoman officers to rule against Catholics in the context of disputes related to

cult and real estate, two topics often related.

In one letter sent by Garzoni in 1773 we can understand how complex was the management of his tasks. The Nestorian Patriarch of Baghdad is "Catholic among Catholics and heretic among heretics."[14] For this reason, Garzoni went visiting him together with "Ghorghis from Baghdad,"[15] a penitent of Emmanuel archbishop of Baghdad. He also stated that he was able to bring back Mosul Christians to Catholicism, but "In the Kurdish mountains they do it the old way and they still mention Nestorius among the Saints."[16]

In another letter from the following year, it is possible to find similar information on the state of the mission and specifically regarding the situation of the conversions to Catholicism. In Baghdad, destroyed by the plague of 1773, with "extreme difficulty"[17] he was able to put local believers to observe Catholic precepts but one of the eight priests there was "weak in his mind"[18] and still could not be substituted because he had the protection of the Mufti. Garzoni supposedly managed to get "the whole village of Carameli"[19] back to the Catholic obedience. Two other villages close to Amedi are "almost entirely catholic,"[20] while in Alqosh (where both Assyrian and Aramean Christians were present) the population "changed their mind" after having initially accepted to be reunited under Mar Elia, one of the patriarch that were in talks to revert to Roman obedience.[21] In this letter there is a reference to the village of Salamast (Salmas), and this kind of information is useful to better understand the scope and the reach of the missionaries' activity: they did not hesitate to travel often to reach the worshippers and to assist them spiritually.

The lack of trust and understanding between the reunited Chaldeans and the local Jacobite and Nestorian communities emerged also in other letters, where the attitude towards the Italian priests seems to be not fully genuine, and animosity between different branches of Oriental Christianity emerged clearly. In 1776 the Chaldean patriarch Mar Simon wrote that the Patriarch of Mardin was accusing him of "eating up" the money coming from Rome.[22] These slanders could case frictions and divisions and bad reputation that could led, like in this case, to switch loyalty, as the Patriarch of Salamast decided to join local Armenians over the Catholics.

Conversions were among the main topics of missionaries' letters to Rome. Even though different catholic orders were competing for the management of churches and missions abroad, they still tried to act as one entity in front of the Porte; for this reason in 1776 a Carmelite friar from Baghdad suggested to lobby at the Court in Constantinople for a *firman* explicitly stating that people

who converted to Catholicism should not be molested by other communities, something that was already enacted in Persia. The aim was mainly to defend the Kurdish Catholics from harassment coming from Armenian Orthodox elites; but it also shows a strategy to bring under Rome's protective umbrella the Kurdish population who "would not be scared to convert" to Catholicism if provided with an official ruling from Constantinople granting their freedoms.[23]

Geographical Mobility of the Priests and Their Role in Kurdish Identity

Garzoni was based in Amedi but spent a lot of time in Mosul, the city with the biggest Christian population in the area. What is striking about his and the other missionaries' letters is its mobility in remote and dangerous areas (Sestini 1786, 113) and the vast reach of their networks that enabled they to report on happenings in places like Basra, more than 1000 kilometres away from the mountains where they lived.

Their movement reflects also the geography of remaining ancient Oriental Christians in the Kurdistan area. In December 1772 Soldini was writing from Giulamerk (in the Hakkari emirate), saying he just had to travel to Mosul to hand a letter to Chaldean patriarch Mar Simon.[24] Home of one of the castles along the Persian border, Çolemerik/Giulamerk was the city were the Nestorian patriarchate was moved to from Mosul because of security concerns. In the late eighteenth century, when Soldini wrote his letter, the peripheral, borderland Emirate of Hakkari was still relevant before losing its importance in the early nineteenth century, when its power was eroded by the Russo-Turkish wars and by the pressure of Qajar Persia (Eppel 2008).

While dealing with the Boetti scandal, Garzoni moved from Mosul to Tel Kief. He said he moved there not only to calm down the tension caused by the abhorrent acts of his co-religionary, but also because of the plague, being Tel Kief considered safer than the most crowded cities where contagion was more frequent. Tel Kief was governed by Rabban Hormuszd, a Nestorian Chaldean, before its inhabitants eventually converted to Catholicism, the same process that happened in other villages like Alqosh (Layard 1849).

Soldini also reported on the wars between "Kurdish princes"[25]: in 1775 he says that "war in Acasia stopped my mobility,"[26] but he was allowed to travel only once "the prince of Gesira, allied with the one in Amedi against the prince of Giulamerch" had called him to perform medical practice, showing

once again how deep was the access granted to skilled foreign physicians among Muslim ruling elites.[27] The Persian prince Amet Kan in 1774 invited Soldini "together with all my books and medicines" to move from Amedi to Koe in order to become his personal doctor, but he refused with the motivation that he had other Christians to serve.[28] Among his tasks, he needed to visit two villages where the "Tocoibi Gezei and Bingi" were still subjected to Chaldean patriarch Simon, in order to make them join the Catholic rule.[29]

The socio-political atmosphere of the mountainous Kurdish regions remained volatile. With the turn of the nineteenth century, increased imperial pressure prompted many Kurdish leaders to push for more self-determined governance.

As modernity began to permeate through the edges of these empires, new ideas of nationhood and identity began to seep into Kurdish thought, simmering beneath the tribal structure. The external political environment, characterized by Ottoman administrative reforms and Persian attempts to consolidate power, further pressed considerations of autonomy and resistance into sharper relief.

During the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, the sociopolitical landscape of the Kurdish regions was intertwined in a complex web of tribal affiliations, religious diversity, and fluctuating political allegiances. The intersection of Catholic missionary efforts further complicated this intricate tapestry, contributing to the multifaceted evolution of Kurdish socio-political identity. In 1772, the Carmelitan priest Eugenio di San Macario, while in Mardin, commented that "the Kurds are now convinced that we (the Christians) are going to conquest their lands and thus they give signs of wanting to conform with our customs."[30] This document shows how Italian missionaries would paint a picture of Kurds as a somehow homogenous entity, that, according to their intelligence, would even welcome a Christian conquest to overturn Ottoman rule.

The Kurdish territories during this time were primarily located in the borderlands bridging the Ottoman and Persian empires. These lands were populated by a mosaic of tribes and clans, each with its own leadership and sense of identity (Hourani 1990; Özoglu 1996). Loyalties were largely tribal and based on kinship networks rather than a unified ethnic consciousness. The tribal leaders, known as aghas or pachas, held sway over their kin groups, mediating between the needs of their people and the demands of larger imperial forces. Sometimes, contrary to what was written by Eugenio di San Macario, Kurdish rulers were not accepting Catholic intervention and were, instead, actively

rejecting it. This was the case of a "evil Kurd Pacha" who prohibited priests to attend the interment of young kids, fearing a forced baptism *in articulo mortis*, a well-known practice among Catholic missionaries in Muslim lands.[31]

The requests of discipline from Rome's missionaries were done on the top of an encroachment of Ottoman and Persian authority over Kurdish lands; this was met with both cooperation and resistance, depending on each tribe's goals and geographic situation. The empires sought to stabilize these frontier zones through the institution of regional governance, military outposts, and alliances with local leaders. This often entailed a delicate balancing act among tribal demands, autonomy, and imperial interests. Catholic missionaries like Garzoni and Soldini showed a remarkable ability to navigate among the subtleness of Kurdish politics of the time. Garzoni's deep knowledge of the area and of the perils associated with traveling didn't prevent him to be completely exempted of the risk: Italian traveller Sestini wrote that he was robbed of all his belongings while travelling from Mosul to the Kurdish mountains.

Catholic missionary efforts in the region added a nuanced dimension to these dynamics. While aiming to foster Christian orthodoxy, missionaries were also inadvertent chroniclers of a shifting Kurdish identity landscape. By documenting various cultural and linguistic characteristics, they provided a valuable outsider's perspective on the burgeoning sense of Kurdish ethno-nationalism. Their writings often detailed the barriers posed by tribal and religious differences to a unified Kurdish identity, while perhaps unintentionally they also nurtured an awareness of a shared cultural heritage through linguistic and educational contributions.

Kurdish national identity at this stage was more strongly perceived abroad, in Rome, than it is in Kurdistan. In this sense, the prodromal phases in the process of nationbuilding took place outside the territorial boundaries, in a scenario where the linguistic and cultural unity of the various Kurdish populations was identified with a specific mode of political behaviour and with specific forms of engagement with the Empire and with the different components of the multicultural mosaic. Özoglu (2004) locates the end of the eighteenth century as the period in which notable families, the most prominent local elites, acquired influence within the Sublime Porte and began to consolidate that influence, participating in the succession struggles in the principal cities. This OttomanKurdish notability is described by missionaries and may have contributed to laying the foundations for the perception of a Kurdish national identity in Rome and in Europe. From the outside, the Kurds were seen as a somehow homogeneous entity whose

leaders, the emerging notables, negotiated privileges and power with the Ottoman government and with the missionaries themselves. When writers in Rome asserted that the Kurds were "the arbitrators of Asia,"[32] they were recognising their role as intermediaries in trade and logistics across a strategic zone between Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and Persia. Their language, distinct from Arabic and Turkish and therefore already an object of scholarly interest, was taught to Western pupils by Garzoni, who on his return to Italy published the first grammar of the Kurdish language, thereby institutionalising it as the language of the Kurdish people. This process of external identification of an incipient national identity appears to corroborate Özoglu's (2004) argument that Kurdish nationalism did not follow the model outlined by Anderson (2020), namely, a people that imagines itself as a nation and thereby gives rise to a nationalist movement. In the Kurdish case, as with some other nations, it seems instead that the national idea was instilled upon a cultural apparatus constructed by external observers, be it Ottoman, Persian, or Western.

Therefore, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, while not quite witnessing a consolidated Kurdish national movement, set the crucial groundwork for more pronounced ethno-nationalistic aspirations. Various internal and external forces converged to foster a growing consciousness of a shared Kurdish identity that transcended tribal and religious divides. As argued by Eppel (2008), the Kurds developed a modern national identity during the international rearrangement following World War I, when there was no major political player either willing or able to promote the Kurdish language or to establish one of its dialects as the standard Kurdish language. Earlier Catholic missionary presence, while tangential, contributed to the milieu by preserving and emphasizing facets of Kurdish culture, albeit through the lens of religious engagement. This period served as a prelude to the later more organized nationalist movements, marked by negotiation and assertion in the complex hierarchy of empires and regional tribes.

Kurdish ethno-nationalism's embryonic stage in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was a multifaceted evolution influenced by tribal loyalties, religious diversity, and political pressures from dominant empires. The period was marked by a slow, intricate weaving of a Kurdish identity that may have transcended individual tribes and religious sects. This groundwork, subtly aided by external influences like Catholic missionary activities, laid the path towards a more unified Kurdish identity and set the stage for future nationalist endeavours in an ever-evolving landscape.

Conclusions

When discussing the missionary presence in Kurdistan, and the work of the most renowned missionaries like Lanza and Garzoni, it is usually highlighted their deep knowledge of that area and their linguistic prowess (Filoni 2009). With this article and with the primary sources I presented here, my aim was to show how their presence had a more important role and a deeper impact on the micro-politics of the Kurdish region. Multiple, shifting loyalties and conflicting legal systems had to be considered and used by local actors to survive in a competitive environment. Using medicine and multilingualism as a key to enter this complex ethnic and political system, the Italian catholic priests were able to create a stable presence for more than a century and to achieve the goals set by the Vatican regarding the reconciliation and ultimately the reunion of the old Oriental Christian confessions to Rome.

Scandals, scams, and charlatans were the kind of hurdles the missionaries had to deal with daily. Their charisma and their knowledge of local culture made them able to be respected even in those troublesome situations. This apparently menial work was what made their presence respected by the locals. No other European subject could speak the Kurdish language, and this is something that ultimately helped their presence. Garzoni's grammar was a stepping stone in the study of Kurdish language and culture in the West. In this sense, Garzoni's efforts are comparable to those of other Catholic missionaries that became the first translators of certain languages for evangelization reasons. This was a much-needed skill to reconcile with the Chaldeans, their main task, and they used local "cultural mediators" to better express their doctrine in the "Chaldean" language.

Eating fish on Wednesday; building a church; marrying a catholic to a Jacobite; nominating a bishop. All those moments had to be mediated among several layers of laws and traditions, and this is why Garzoni pushed for including local believers in the management of the community.

Borders made people aware of different law hierarchies, forcing travellers and officers to operate along different legal systems and different authorities (Zaken 2007). The missionaries showed they could move along those fractures and interstitial spaces of law and power. Cadi's *firman*, Propaganda Fide orders, papal rulings, laws and commandments from the Sublime Porte, Chaldean patriarch's decisions and nominations, various tribal and religious oral and written legal traditions, Western European ambassadors and consuls. As Abdullah Öcalan (2023, 148) has recently stated, the Kurdistan and Mesopo-

tamia area "since the times of Gilgamesh" has showed the epistemic violence of the city towards the unruly and "savage" villagers dispersed through the countryside. And, in this sense, it is possible to say that Catholic missionaries, dwelling around mountain villages and small towns, tended to that particular aspect of Kurdish identity that highly valued distancing itself from the *ukumeh* and that, still today, seem to be struggling for a societal organization that places communities above state power.

This description of the past encroachment of law systems reflects what the Kurdish culture has to deal with even today. In this sense, it is possible to see a long-term pattern of multi-layered political, religious and statual heritages that have been intersecting and competing, reflecting on a local scale the changes of international politics but still retaining a culture of coexistence among overlaying of identities. Missionary activities, though not necessarily aimed at inciting ethnonational identity, contributed to the broader cultural consciousness of the Kurds, especially abroad. The process of learning local languages, for instance, or the missionaries' encounters with various tribes, highlighted both the diversity and the potential for a communal Kurdish identity. As missionaries often interacted with different tribes, they witnessed the potential for unity in diversity—a glimpse at what could be harnessed by a more cohesive nationalistic movement.

Finally, the Propaganda Fide archives hold a vast amount of information regarding the history of Kurdistan and the Chaldean churches and, ultimately, on the coexistence between different identities and political interests in the area. This article lists some of the most fruitful archival units in the hopes of helping future researchers in this field.

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APPENDIX 1

Letter of Maurizio Garzoni to Propaganda Fide, 1 April 1773; in APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8.

"Dopo il mio ritorno da Bagdad ho scritta all'Eminenza Vostra riguardo al Patriarca Nestoriano per la conversione alla Santa Fede Cattolica; ora devo aggiungere che il suddetto Patriarca con i Cattolici e' cattolico, con li eretici e' eretico. Bensi il di lui Nepote monsignor Isaia mi ha scritto una lettera protestandosi di mantenere la fede in cuore come prima e mi ha invitato a portarmi al suo villaggio per abboccarmi ed interpretarli la lettera ultimamente scritta dalla SCPF per mezzo di monsignor Emanuele. Io li ho risposto che dopo Pasqua a Dio piacendo mi portero' cola', avendo ora da attendere a questo popolo, dovendo anche conferire la cresima ai Nestoriani ultimamente convertiti; e spero che nella mia andata si potra' ridurre il Patriarca a buon sentiero, venendo meco un tale Ghorghis di Bagdad penitente di Monsignor Emanuele, e uomo assai perito nei riti e lingua caldea, ora rifugito in questo paese per la gran peste che regna in Bagdad. In questa citta la nazione Caldea si e' unita alla romana chiesa; ma nei villaggi e nel Curdistan, si seguita a puntino all'antico, nominandosi tra i santi anche Nestorio.

Nei giorni passati ho ricevuto una insolente lettera a sigillo volante del P Gio Batta Boetti in data di Diarbekir con cui mi intima di false minaccie con accusarmi con imposture, e calunnie in Roma; ed avendo io molte prove delle false scritture, sigilli falsi, imposture e tradimenti fatti a piu' persone, sono in obbligo di mandare li qui acclusi attestati per mettere in sicuro il mio onore ed innocenza; e sebbene de jure naturaæ basta per mia giustificazione il provare che da cinque mesi io mi trovavo in Amedia, quando il padre Boetti commise il sacrilego misfatto, ho voluto farmi mettere in carta testimonianze autentiche tanto delli Europei, come Levantini trattandosi anco in detto caso materia di Santo Offizio, essendo stato commesso il delitto in loco et pratica confessionis. Dalle due copie delle lettere a me scritte in amedia, vole EV le bugie e raggiri, che mi scrive per indurmi a partire per Europa acciocche' non venissi in Mosul, e non venissi in chiaro del fatto che per rivoltarla a modo suo dopra chi piu le piaceva. Il Padre Norberto e' informato del fatto, potra a voce lEV informarsi. Il p Boetti dopo il detto delitto ha commesso una catena di iniquita che in una lettera non si puo esprimere bensi mi convien soggiungere che in Aleppo nella Cancellaria pubblica del signor Console di Francia non si e' vergognato di fare una scrittura pubblica piena di imposture e bugie, con

le quali ha indotto il signor Antonio Bimbini dottore veneziano a lasciare la famiglia e a portarsi in Mosul ed il suddetto signor Dottore pretende che per strada li abbia fatti dei favori grandi; quando il P Boetti fece questi inganni, non si trovava piu appartenente a questa casa, essendo stato bandito come costa dalle proprie lettere e da tutta la citta', di piu' io avevo gia ricevuto la patente di superiore essende queste in data di Luglio 1771. Percio su questo prego darmi istruzione in caso che il suddetto signor Dottore facesse qualche istanza qui, nell'altra mia scritta nel mese di dicembre a VE ed al P Domenico Lanza avra inteso il rimanente. Con tutto l'ossequio mi umilio baciando la sacra porpora.

Mosul il primo aprile 1773. Maurizio Garzoni dei predicatori.

Transcription by the author, The original accents and formatting have been retained.

Notes

1 Archivio Storico di Propaganda Fide, Rome (hereafter APF), *Scritture Riferite*, "Siri-Soriani", volume 1, French Consul in Aleppo to Propaganda Fide, 26 April 1671.

2 British Library, London, India Office Records and Private Papers (hereafter IOR), G/29/12, Douglas A. (1760), *Diary and Consultations of Mr Alexander Douglas, Agent of the East India Company at Gombroon [Bandar e ʿAbbās] in the Persian Gulf, commencing 16 January and ending 31 July 1760*, Qatar Digital Library, https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100000001251.0x000368 (accessed 18 Jul. 2026).

3 IOR L/MIL/17/15/41/4, *Handbook of Mesopotamia. Vol. III* (1917), Qatar Digital Library, https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100023045519.0x000001 (accessed 18 Jul. 2026).

4 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Soldini to Propaganda Fide, 16 April 1773.

5 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Cavo to Rome, 1 November 1776.

6 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Garzoni to Propaganda Fide, 29 November 1774.

7 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Cavo to Propaganda Fide, February 1776.

8 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Boetti to Propaganda Fide, 3 June 1772.

9 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Cornelio di San Giuseppe to Propaganda Fide, December 1772.

10 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Garzoni to Propaganda Fide, 16 June 1773.

11 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Garzoni to Propaganda Fide, 29 November 1774.

12 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Damiano di san Teodoro to Propaganda Fide, 22 July 1776.

13 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Garzoni to Propaganda Fide, 29 November 1774.

14 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Garzoni to Propaganda Fide, 1 April 1773; see Appendix I.

15 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Garzoni to Propaganda Fide, 1 April 1773; see Appendix I.

16 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Garzoni to Propaganda Fide, 1 April 1773; see Appendix I.

17 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Cornelio di San Giuseppe to Propaganda Fide, December 1772.

18 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Cornelio di San Giuseppe to Propaganda Fide, December 1772.

19 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Cornelio di San Giuseppe to Propaganda Fide, December 1772.

20 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Cornelio di San Giuseppe to Propaganda Fide, December 1772.

21 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Cornelio di San Giuseppe to Propaganda Fide, December 1772.

22 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Patriarch Joseph to Propaganda Fide, 14 December 1776.

23 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Damiano di san Teodoro to Propaganda Fide, 22 July 1776.

24 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Soldini to Propaganda Fide, 18 December 1772.

25 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Soldini to Propaganda Fide, 7 September 1775.

26 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Soldini to Propaganda Fide, 7 September 1775.

27 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Soldini to Propaganda Fide, 7 September 1775.

28 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Soldini to Propaganda Fide, 14 September 1774.

29 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Soldini to Propaganda Fide, 14 September 1774.

30 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 8, Eugenio di san Macario to Propaganda Fide, 10 March 1772.

31 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 9, Melchiorre Cappuccino to Propaganda Fide, 9 April 1783. See also APF, Scritture Riferite, "Mesopotamia", volume 1, Carmelites to Propaganda Fide, unknow date.

32 APF, *Scritture Riferite*, "Mesopotamia", volume 1, author unknown.

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