

Introduction

Abstract

This introductory chapter provides some stage setting for the analysis to follow. After a short overview of the contents of *Mem û Zîn*, it briefly discusses what little we know about Xanî's life and times, and describes the works usually ascribed to Xanî. It then traces the reception of *Mem û Zîn* among later Kurdish readers, and its consecration as a Kurdish national epic around the turn of the twentieth century. Finally, it presents a short overview of earlier scholarship and its methodological assumptions, before presenting theoretical framework presupposed in the present study.

Keywords: Early modern Kurdish poetry, National epic, Nationalism, Genealogy

Ehmedê Xanî's *Mem û Zîn*, a mystical romance poem, or *mathnawî*, in 2,655 bayts or distichs, is widely hailed by Kurds as their national epic, and as the classical statement of Kurdish national aspirations, but despite the inherent interest of this in the work, academic attention for it in languages other than Kurdish has been sorely lacking.¹ In this introductory chapter, I will provide some stage setting for my own analysis. After a short overview of the contents of *Mem û Zîn* (§ 1), I briefly discuss what little we know about Xanî's life and times (§ 2); after listing and briefly discussing the

¹ References to Xanî's poem will follow the numbering of Kadri Yıldırım (ed.) 2010; for another recent edition, see Jan Dost (ed.) *Mem û Zîn: Şîrove û Kurdiya Îro* (Istanbul: Avesta, 2010); cf. also Tehsîn İbrahîm Doskî (2005), Hersh Kemal Rêkanî (to appear). There are slight discrepancies with other editions, but these never amount to more than two or three bayts' difference. To date, Margaret Rudenko (ed.) *Axmed Xanî, Mam i Zîn. Kriticeskiy Tekst, Perevod, Predislovie i Ukazateli M.B. Rudenko* (Moscow: Nauk, 1962) remains the sole fully critical edition to date; it is based on nine different manuscripts, the oldest of which dates from 1731-32. As various other manuscripts have become available in the meantime, a full overview of extant manuscript copies in libraries in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, let alone a new critical edition, is much to be desired. For an—undoubtedly incomplete—overview, see the bibliographical essay below.

Throughout this book, I have used Bedir Xan's transcription, which comes as close to a "standard" written Kurmancî as one can reasonably expect at present. This alphabet, however, ignores not only the distinction between glottalized and aspirated stops, but also a number of Arabic consonants. For a more elaborate transcription that does better justice to the Arabic loanwords, see Arif Zêrevan (ed.) *Memo Zîn* (Stockholm: Nefel, 2004). There are several English translations around, but none of these is without its problems. My translations are based on Saleh Saadalla (tr.), *Mem and Zîn by Ahmed Khani (1650-1707)* (Istanbul: Avesta, 2008), but I have not hesitated to modify his English renderings where I considered it necessary. For other English versions, see Gardî (2009) and Omar and Cohen (2018).

works usually ascribed to Xanî (§ 3), I discuss the reception of *Mem û Zîn* among later Kurdish readers and its consecration as a Kurdish national epic around the turn of the twentieth century, and I give a brief overview of earlier scholarship on the poem (§ 4); finally, I briefly discuss the methodological assumptions underlying many recent studies before presenting my own theoretical framework (§ 5).

1. Outline

Let us begin with a quick overview. As in most mathnawî poems, the narrative proper is preceded by a lengthy *dibaçe* ('prologue' or 'preamble'), which starts with an invocation of God (ch. 1-2), followed by two chapters in praise of the prophet and a request for his intercession (ch. 3-4). These quite conventional chapters are followed, not by chapters in praise of a local ruler and of poetic discourse (*sukhan*) as was customary in the mathnawî tradition, but by, first, a discussion of the condition of the Kurds, and second, a statement of the poet's reasons for writing this poem in Kurdish (ch. 5-6). After an invocation of the *saqî* or cupbearer (ch. 7), the story proper appears to start in Chapter 8, with the introduction of some of the main protagonists: *mîr* Zeyneddîn, the Prince of Botan, and his two sisters, Sîtî and Zîn. Next, the flow of the narrative is briefly interrupted by a chapter on the mystical notions of beauty (*husn*) and love (*'îşq*). In Chapter 10, Xanî returns to the story and introduces the two male protagonists, Tacdîn and Mem, who are characterized as friends bound by love and loyalty. The narrative then opens with the celebration of Newroz, the spring equinox festivities. At the celebration, Mem and Tacdîn, both dressed up as girls in order to avoid having to make any commitments, meet Zîn and Sîtî, the sisters of the local *mîr* (Prince) Zeyneddîn, who are disguised as boys. On both sides it is love at first sight, seemingly for someone of the same sex, but despite their confusion, the two pairs of lovers do manage to exchange rings.

After this mysterious encounter, the two boys lie lovesick for a full week; only then do they have a closer look at their rings, and see the names of Zîn and Sîtî engraved in them. Meanwhile, the latter two are scolded for falling in love with girls, by their wetnurse, Heyzebûn, who then takes the rings which they had received to a fortune teller, pretending to be inquiring on behalf of her two sons. The fortune teller, immediately seeing through her lie, informs her that the two apparent girls are in fact boys of noble stock; Heyzebûn then visits Mem and Tacdîn, disguised as a physician, and tells them of the good news.

Subsequently, Prince Zeyneddîn grants Tacdîn and Sîtî permission to marry. Several chapters describe the wedding festivities and the ensuing bridal night (ch. 22-25). Due to the scheming of his evil counselor Bekir, however, the prince (against his own earlier inclination) next refuses the betrothal of Mem and Zîn, causing both

lovers to slowly waste away with lovesickness for a full nine chapters (ch. 26-35). Then, when one day the prince goes out hunting, the two lovers have a chance for a secret encounter in his enclosed garden. When the hunting party unexpectedly returns, they are almost caught, but Tacdîn sets fire to his house in order to distract the group's attention and thus save his friend (ch. 36-41).

Bekir now develops a new plan to counter Mem, and invites him to a game of chess with Zeyneddîn; there, he first distracts him by placing Zîn opposite him, causing him to lose the game; next, he provokes him into openly declaring his love for Zîn, at which the prince bursts out in anger and has Mem imprisoned (ch. 42-44). Eventually, faced with the threat of open revolt by Tacdîn and his brothers, the prince announces that Mem will be released, but by then, the latter is already on the verge of dying. After a final meeting, the two lovers die soon after each other. They are buried together, but Bekir, killed by Tacdîn, now takes the shape of a thorny juniper, preventing the two from uniting even in death (ch. 57).

The four concluding chapters reaffirm the work's mystical character. Chapter 58 describes a mystical vision of Bekir, who—surprisingly—turns out to be Mem and Zîn's door guard (*qapûcî*) or companion (*muşterik*) in heaven. In the very last chapter, the poet gets into an argument with his reed pen, complaining that the latter has only been writing bad verse, but his pen retorts that he has only written what his author made him write. This makes Xanî realize that he himself is merely like a pen in God's hand.

2. Xanî's Life and Times

Below, we will explore some of the literary, political, and mystical dimensions of this romance, but first, let us have a brief look at its author, its historical setting, and its subsequent reception. Until quite recently, little was known about Ehmedê Xanî's life and background, and less was known with any degree of certainty. Early in the twenty-first century, however, our knowledge took substantial steps forward thanks to Abdullah Varlî's (1939-2012) research in Ottoman and other archives.² Using these hitherto untapped archival sources, Varlî has considerably enriched our knowledge of Xanî's life and family background.

Some earlier authors had suggested that Xanî was born in Hakkari, but by now, it seems conclusively established that his place of birth was Bayazîd (cf. Varlî

² See especially Varlî (2004a, 2004b); for a brief statement, see Varlî (2008). For more detailed summaries, see Ciwan (2019: 65-95), Yaşın (2012: 13-20; 31-67). Varlî has been criticized for his use of sources that, he claims, are in private possession and hence cannot be consulted or verified by others, but the importance of his work is beyond dispute.

2004a). Xanî's family name suggests an origin in the village of Xanî in Hakkari and/or a link with the Xanî tribe dwelling there mentioned by Bayazîdî (Jaba 1860: 7K/5Fa), and described by Sykes (1908: 461) as a 'sedentary tribe near Khoshab' (present-day Hoşap/Güzelsu); the archival materials presented by Varlî, however, indicate that Xanî's ancestors had already moved from there, ultimately settling in the border town of Bayazîd, long before the poet was born. From archival sources, Varlî further concludes that Xanî's grandfather 'Iyaz was the first Mullah in the family, and that his father, one shaykh Ilyas, was married to a woman named Gulnigar, the daughter of mîr Qerexan of Bayazîd; this marriage suggests that the family had close links with the town's rulers. Ilyas Xanî is reported to have become a teacher in the local Sînaniye medrese in 1026 or 1036 (1616 or 1626 CE), and in 1053/1644, he became a scribe (*kâtib* or *munşî*) in the dîwan of Qerexan's son 'Ebdî. This recalls the comment in *Mem û Zîn* that Mem was "from the stock of the court clerk" (*ji xelefê debîrê dîwan*, b. 464), but it would probably be an overstatement to see Mem's character as autobiographical.

Varlî has also recovered a short Arabic-language text, *Qissa Sem'ûn*, written in 1063 AH/1652 CE by Xanî's father, 'Ilyas. Other documents state that Xanî had one older brother named Qasim and three sisters (Perî, Gulîzer, and Kita), and that his father died in 1066/1656, when he was five years old. Like his father, Qasim was a scribe in the Bayazîdî dîwan, until he fell out with the emir and resettled in nearby Dizesor, where he would remain until his death in 1093/1682.

About Xanî himself, we know little more than the barest biographical basics. In the final verses of *Mem û Zîn*, he himself informs us that he was born in 1061 AH (i.e., 1650 or 1651 CE), and that he finished his poem aged 44, i.e., in 1694 or 1695. There is no good reason to doubt these claims. He adds that he has been writing 'for thirty years' (b. 2652); some readers have inferred from this that he worked on *Mem û Zîn* for three decades, but that conclusion is not warranted by these words.³ The other seemingly autobiographical statements in *Mem û Zîn*, sparse and brief as they are, should likewise be treated with caution.

Many earlier biographical sketches mention extensive travels. Thus, Seccadi (1952: 194) states that after his studies at the local Muradiyya medrese, Xanî pursued further religious learning in Urfa, Akhlât, and Bidlîs, and even traveled to Egypt and, "on Ottoman orders," to Istanbul, but the archival materials uncovered by Varlî give no indication that he ever left his native Bayazîd, and do not even mention any visits to his brother after the latter had left for Dizesor. There is no evidence, either, that Xanî ever visited Jezîra Botan, the location of Mem and Zîn's story, and the text of his poem gives little if any concrete information about the actual town, *pace* Resûl's

³ Some read the manuscripts as *sê* 'three' instead of *sî*, 'thirty,' which may make for a more plausible reading.

confident claim that Xanî had in fact visited Cizre, arguing that “it is impossible to give such an adequate description unless one has seen, and lived in, there in person” (2007: 43; Ar. 30). Finally, Xanî is likely to have been affiliated with the Naqshbandi Sufî order, but here, too, the evidence is circumstantial rather than conclusive.⁴

After receiving his license or *icaze* (we do not know where and from whom), Xanî became a mullah himself; in 1081/1671, he also became a scribe at the dîwan of his cousin (*kurxal*), Mir Mohammad of Bayazîd, after Qasim’s successor, his cousin Mela Yûsufê Xanî, had been found wanting in his command of Persian and Ottoman Turkish. This suggests that Xanî himself would have been expected to be conversant in both languages as well as Arabic, and indeed, Xanî shows, or shows off, his quadrilingual competence in one poem from the *Dîwan*, ‘Fate umrî fî hewake ya hebîbî kulle hal’; this is an example of so-called *mulamma’* (Kurdish: *mulemme’*) poetry, which also existed in other Islamicate languages.⁵

After Mîr Mihemmed’s death, Xanî remained active as a scribe in the service of the prince’s son ‘Ebdî, and it is the latter’s son Mîrza (literally, ‘prince’) who is addressed in Chapter 6 of *Mem û Zîn* (b. 274-85).⁶ There is some uncertainty about the date of the poet’s death. Bayazîdî gives 1063/1652 as the poet’s year of death, but this contradicts bayt 2654 of *Mem û Zîn*, where Xanî himself states 1061/1650 as the year of his *birth*. Bayazîdî’s error is so obvious that it leaves one wondering whether he had access to a manuscript containing this verse at all, or perhaps whether he confused the year of his birth and death in his eagerness to focus on the year 1000 AH as a turning point in Kurdish history (cf. Leezenberg 2020b: 465-67). In his 1952 history of Kurdish literature, Alaeddîn Seccadî claims to have heard an *ebced* from Northern Kurdistan that yields 1117/1706-1707 as the year of Xanî’s death, and Varlı claims to have seen Xanî’s tombstone in the 1950s, which contains an *ebced* yielding 1220/1709-1710. The latter date is confirmed by other reports; most importantly, the oldest known manuscript of *Mem û Zîn*, a copy written at Xamûr Castle in Eleşgird in 1144/1731 CE, states that it was finished “22 years after Xanî’s death,” which places the latter event securely in or around 1709 CE (cf. Doski 2022: 15).⁷

⁴ Most importantly, the poem ‘Mî dî...,’ in the *Dîwan*; cf. Ciwan (2019: 245), Doski (2022: 191-97); Yıldırım (2014: 118-19); cf. ch. 5 below).

⁵ For the text of this poem, see Yıldırım (2014: 236) and Doski (2022: 175-79); on this poem as a sample of *mulemme’*, see Xexnedar (2010: 389-92; 2024: 262-64); on the *mulamma’* genre, see Virani (2008).

⁶ Shakely (1991: 26-28) argues that Prince Mîrza mentioned in b. 275ff. was in fact the mîr of Botan, but that seems rather unlikely.

⁷ Hersh Kemal Rekani (p.c., June 2025) has informed me that he is about to publish a critical edition of this manuscript, but as this book went to press, it had not yet appeared. To date, the sole full critical edition remains Rudenko (1962), despite the limited number of manuscripts on which it is based. See also the bibliographical essay below.

After his death, Xanî—like various other poets in the Muslim world—came to be credited with spiritual powers: even today, he is worshiped as *Xanî Baba* at his tomb in old Bayazîd, where visitors come to pray for his blessing (*barakat*) or intercession.⁸ According to his authorized—and Turkified—biography, the Kurdish Mujaddidî Naqshbandî reformer Said Nursi writes how he studied in a medrese in Bayazîd for three months; later in life, he describes this sojourn as the most important phase of his education. During this period, he stayed at Xanî's tomb day and night; as a result, local commoners believed that Xanî's spirit had manifested itself in Nursi. But did Nursi see Xanî as a Kurdish national hero, as a Muslim saint, or as a Naqshbandî shaykh? From his own words, and from his official biography, the answer does not become clear.⁹

In the Kurdish-language literature, there has been a lot of discussion about the precise years of Xanî's birth and death, but there seems little room for major disagreement. The precise dates of Xanî's birth and death are not necessarily significant in themselves, however, unless they can be linked to other known and datable events or periods, like the rule of particular local rulers; to developments in the Ottoman empire and its relations with the Safavids; or to the travels of other learned men like, most famously and obviously, Evliya Çelebi. Unfortunately, our knowledge of this wider context remains limited.¹⁰ After the 1639 Zohab/Qasr-e Shirin peace treaty between the Ottoman and Safavid empires, the border region had stabilized and would know a relatively long period of relative peace and stability; the second half of the seventeenth century appears to have seen a slight weakening of central Ottoman authority, but we only know these processes in their barest outline. It is well known, of course, that the Kurdish principalities generally knew a personalized, hereditary rule (*hükûmet*) which—for want of a better term—has been qualified as 'feudal.' The hereditary Kurdish rulers acted as guardians of the frontier; in return, they were exempted from taxation, knew a virtually unchecked autonomy, and had been granted private property (*tamlîk*). This did not necessarily mean, however, that Kurdish mîrs (amirs) were actively involved in the protection of the Ottoman borders, as distinct from their own tribal territories; that is, as Posch (2003: 209) argues, the frontiers of the Safavid and Ottoman empires ran along tribal lines.

Not much is known either about the history of the town of Bayazîd (Armenian: Daruynk) and its surroundings in the seventeenth century CE.¹¹ The old town

⁸ Interviews, local worshipers, and informants, Dogubeyazit, May 2024.

⁹ Anon. (1976: 34); cf. Van Bruinessen (2003: 52). Sagnîç (2002: 400) mentions the medrese library which, he states, existed until 1926. It was in this library, he adds, that Mele Seidê Kurdî (i.e., Said Nursi) stayed for forty days. On the suppressed Kurdish dimensions of Nursi's work, see also Zinar (2022).

¹⁰ For the broader picture, Van Bruinessen (1992: ch. 3) and Jwaideh (2006: ch. 1-3) are still basic; for more recent discussions, see Van Bruinessen (2000a), James (2021), and Atmaca (2021, 2025). On the Kurdish frontier, see also Yamaguchi (2021) and, for a slightly later period, Ateş (2013: ch. 1).

¹¹ For more detailed studies of Bayazîd, see in particular Kaya (2018, 2025).

was located in a mountainous area on the Ottoman–Safavid border; it would be destroyed by the Turkish army after the 1931 suppression of the Ararat rebellion. Present-day Dogubeyazıt lies in the plains; unlike the old town, and unlike the Ishakpaşa palace, it is located at the foot—and in full view—of the imposing Mount Ararat. Incidentally, the Ishakpaşa palace for which Dogubeyazıt has become famous would not be built until well after Xanî’s death. Its fortress is mentioned several times in Evliya Çelebi’s description of Van *eyâlet* (e.g., *Seyahatname*, IV.123, 125, 139), but no further details are given—possibly because Evliya never visited the town in person. It had a sizeable Armenian population; even in the late nineteenth century, Cuinet estimated the Armenian population of Bayazîd sancak at some 10,000 out of a total population of 50,000 (1890: 229–33). Probably already by early modern times, the Armenian population had undergone a substantial language shift to Kurdish, the locally dominant spoken language. Bayazîdî, who in his *Adet û rusimatnemeê ekradiyye*, generically speaks of Christians as *reaya* (lit., ‘flock’), states that “the re’âya and Armenians in Kurdistan in all respects are like the Kurds,” without going into further detail (Dost 2010: 226, 236). In *Mem û Zîn*, however, no mention is made of Christian population groups.

After the end of overt hostilities between Ottomans and Safavids, Bayazîd appears to have become a bit of a backwater. In *Mem û Zîn*, we find occasional memories of the Ottoman–Safavid confrontation, in which, unsurprisingly, Xanî unambiguously declares himself on the Sunnî side (witness mîr Zeyneddîn’s casual remark that Mem and Tacdîn outweigh, or are equal to, “two hundred qizilbash” (i.e., heterodox Shi’ites and/or Safavid warriors, b. 1167)), but otherwise, he gives no signs of any strong attachment to the Ottoman Empire. On the contrary, he repeatedly speaks of ‘those Ottomans’ (*ev Rûm*, b. 206, 208, 221) in a somewhat disparaging if not hostile tone.

From 1646 CE, Bayazîd was ruled by mîr Muhammad Begê Purbelali; Xanî eventually followed in the footsteps of his father and his brother Qasim, serving as the ruler’s court scribe. Upon his death in 1682, Muhammad was succeeded by his son, Emîr Ebdî, who, in turn, was succeeded in 1696 by his son Mîrza, until then the ruler of nearby Eleşgird; Varlı argues that Xanî had accompanied the young Mîrza to Eleşgird, and had written the *Nûbihara piçûkan* specifically with the young prince in mind (Varlı (2004a: 421); cf. Ciwan (2019: 127)); while these claims may be disputed, it seems beyond doubt that this is the Mîrza who—a year before he became the actual ruler in Beyazîd—is addressed in Chapter 6 of Xanî’s *dibaçe*, in a tone that is as paternalistic as it is flattering (b. 274–85).

The political history of the seventeenth-century Kurdish provinces may have been relatively uneventful, but culturally, it has been recently argued, the Ottoman Empire witnessed dramatic developments. Most importantly, Khaled el-Rouayheb (2015: ch. 1) describes the influx of large numbers of Sunnî Kurdish and Persian ‘ulamâ fleeing persecution by the Shi’ite Safavid authorities; this influx, he adds,

gave a major impulse to learning in the early modern empire, and in particular to the study of the rational sciences. It is unclear at present whether and to what extent these changes also reached the Kurdish provinces; el-Rouayheb largely restricts his attention to the major Ottoman centers of learning in Istanbul, and to texts written in Arabic and to a lesser extent Ottoman Turkish.

One significant cultural development in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that is also relevant for the Kurdish provinces is the major wave of *vernacularizations* that took place in various places across the Ottoman Empire. Various vernacular local languages that had hitherto only been spoken or at best known only a restricted written tradition, suddenly started to be used for purposes of learning and high literature, for example Modern Armenian, Modern Greek, Serbian, and Bulgarian among Christians; Ladino among Ottoman Jews; and Albanian, ‘Bosnian,’ and Kurdish among Muslims (cf. Leezenberg 2016). Xanî’s writings may in fact be seen as but one example of this empire-wide vernacularization. We will discuss the significance of this particular moment in Ottoman cultural and linguistic history in the chapters to follow.

3. Xanî’s writings

Of Xanî’s writings, *Mem û Zîn* is, for various reasons, the most substantial and the best known. We know for a fact that it was completed in 1061/1699, as Xanî himself writes:

Lewra ku dema ji xeybê fek bû/Tarîx hezar û şêst û yek bû.

Îsal gihişte çil û çaran...

Because when he was born from hidden world/The year was 1061 [i.e., 1650 CE]

This year, he reached forty-four... (b. 2653-54).

Mem û Zîn is a so-called *mathnawi* poem, i.e., a longer narrative poem with lines of ten or eleven syllables arranged in so-called bayts or distichs according to an *aa bb cc*, etc. rhyme scheme. Although this form is originally found in Arabic poetry, it became influential from the eleventh century CE onwards due to its use in classical Persian poetry.¹²

¹² Strictly speaking, the term *mathnawi* indicates a poem’s length rather than its literary genre; mathnawi poems display a great variety in both form and content. We have heroic as well as didactic mathnawi poems, and love stories that have been compared to the High-Medieval Western European genre of chivalric romance. I hesitate to use the term ‘romance,’ however; despite some similarities with the Medieval European chivalric romance, notably an emphasis on courtly love and a focus on

Often, though not always, the narrative proper of a mathnawī poem is preceded by a number of preparatory chapters collectively referred to as the *dibacha*, which as often as not is only loosely related to the narrative proper. Generally, this introduction starts with a number of chapters, or rather, more or less loosely related *qasīda* poems, in praise of God and the prophet, followed by a dedication to and eulogy of the poem's royal patron; a discussion of how, why, and when the poem was written; and a discussion of the value of poetic speech (*sukhan*). Often, we also find descriptions of the *Mi'raj* or ascent of the prophet; later poets like Jami and Amir Khosrow also add verses in praise of their personal spiritual guides. Compared to this tradition, the *dibaçe* of *Mem û Zîn* is distinct in several respects: first, it contains neither a dedication to a royal patron nor praise of a spiritual leader, and it discusses not speech or discourse in the abstract, but much more specifically the reason for writing the poem in the Kurdish language. As I will show below, it also coheres rather more strongly—albeit in perhaps unexpected ways—with the rest of the poem than that of, say, Nizami's *Layli and Majnun*. Finally, as will become clear in Chapter 2, the *dibaçe* employs a vocabulary that was later appropriated by revolutionary romantic nationalism, and by modern identity politics, but these terms did not necessarily mean the same for Xanî as for us.

Next to this longer mathnawī poem, we also have two shorter didactic texts by Xanî, the *Nûbihara piçûkan* ('First-fruits for the young'), a rhymed Arabic–Kurdish vocabulary, and the *Eqîdeya êmanê* ('Profession of the faith'), a catechism presenting the basics of Sunni Islam, as well as a *Dîwan*, or collection of short poems ascribed to Xanî. In his text edition of the first work, Zinar argues that the *Nûbihar* contains an *ebced* implying that it was finished by Xanî on 14 Adar 1094 AH, i.e., in 1683 CE.¹³ Doskî (2022: 18) likewise concludes that it was written in 1683. The *Eqîde* states the basics of the Islamic faith, unsurprisingly of the Sunnî variety, and more specifically reflecting the Shafi'î *madhhab* and Ash'arî theology; it makes no allusions to Naqshbandî Sufism, or to any other mystical doctrines or practices. Both texts, composed in rhymed verse for easier memorization, are clearly written for beginning medrese pupils with little or no knowledge of Arabic; *Mem û Zîn* is obviously intended for rather more advanced readers and listeners, given its rich vocabulary with numerous Arabic and Persian loan words, and given its references and allusions to mysticisms, alchemy, philosophy, and various other sciences.

sexuality and virginity, the latter genre is also associated with Romance languages—an association that is rather misleading in the case of Modern Persian. For an introductory overview of the mathnawī genre, see the lemma in EI2; for a more detailed recent account, see Ashtiany (ed.) (2023).

¹³ Quoted in Ciwan (2019: 75).

Finally, there is the *Dîwan*, a collection of poems that one may qualify as ‘occasional.’¹⁴ As the oldest manuscripts date from long after Xanî’s death, it is difficult to know for certain which of these poems are authentic; hence, one should exercise some caution in extracting biographical information from them and in using them for interpreting *Mem û Zîn*. For a long time, only the copy made by Mela Mahmûdê Bayazîdî in the mid-nineteenth century was known; this version was first published in 1961 by Rudenko. In the twenty-first century, several editions of the *Dîwan* appeared (Durre 2002; Varlî 2004b; Yıldırım 2014; Doskî 2022). All of these editions stand in the *şîrove* tradition of line-by-line (if not word-by-word) commentary informed by classical Islamic learning. Doskî 2021/2022 includes reproductions from several manuscripts, the oldest of which, written by Mela Xelîlê Sêrtî, is dated 1193 AH/1779 CE. As already noted, one poem in the *Dîwan* is a series of rubaiyat or quatrains consisting of one line each in, respectively, Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish, and Kurdish; undoubtedly, this poem signified that Xanî, unlike his uncle, was well versed in Ottoman Turkish as well as Persian.¹⁵

There is another short text ascribed to Xanî, the *Eqîdeya Îslamê*;¹⁶ this text, however, is very different from both the *Eqîdeya Êmanê* and the *Nûbihara piçûkan*. To begin with, other than any of Xanî’s known writings, it is in prose rather than verse; second, both in style and in structure, it is quite close to a nineteenth-century *mujaddidî* Khalidî *aqîda* by Abdullah of Nehri, so it is highly unlikely that this text was, in fact, written by Xanî.¹⁷ Finally, some authors, apparently following Mîr Celadet Bedirxan, claim that Xanî also wrote a book on geography and/or astronomy, but this claim has not been verified.

¹⁴ Often, the shorter poems included in diwans are qualified as ‘lyrical,’ as opposed to the ‘epic’ poetry supposedly expressed in the lengthier mathnawî poems, but these terms imported from Western literary theory carry too many unwarranted assumptions to be useful.

¹⁵ Xanî has also been said to have composed three bayts in Kurdish and Persian for a stone slab placed over the door of the Eski Bayezid Cami near Ishakpaşa palace, with an *ebced* indicating that this mosque was built in 1097 AH/1685 CE (Doski (2022: 16)).

¹⁶ This text was first printed in Alfred von le Coq’s *Kurdische Texte* (1903), which reproduced in facsimile an 1887 manuscript written by one Mullah Mihemmedê Wanî that also included Ehmedê Xanî’s rhymed *Nûbihar* and *Eqîdeya Êmanê*. As a result, this text has long been seen as a work by Xanî; also Qanatê Kurdoev, in his overview of Kurdish literature, lists it among Xanî’s writings (Kurdoev 1984: 105), and it is included in the LIS edition of Xanî’s complete works (2007: 357–65).

¹⁷ Reproduced in MacKenzie (1962); cf. Leezenberg (2026b). Another publication is by Z. Zinar, *Eqîdeya îslamê, Çîra 1 no. 3* (1993). See also Ciwan (1997: 92).

4. Reception and Consecration

As noted above, there is a well-known oral tradition of stories about Mem and Zîn, but this tradition is not attested until the late nineteenth century, so any argument about Xanî's poem deriving from it is speculative at best; instead, in the following, I will be discussing the literate tradition, or traditions, of which we *can* reasonably say that they have shaped Xanî's work.¹⁸ Xanî himself was well aware that he was not the first poet writing in Kurdish. Thus, in b. 251-52 of *Mem û Zîn*, he mentions three earlier Kurdish poets: Elî Herîrî (sixteenth century CE?); Melayê Cizîrî (*takhallus*, or pen name, of shaykh Ahmed Neshanî, d. 1640 CE), whose *qasîdas* betray a strong influence of Persian poet Hafiz; and Feqê Teyran (*takhallus* of Mîr Mihemmed of Muks (d. 1660 CE), a poet whose very pen name, 'pupil of birds,' seems to suggest a link with Ferîd ud-Dîn al-Attâr's *Conference of the birds* (*Mantiq ut-tayr*).¹⁹ In bayt 257, Xanî also briefly refers to two of the most famous classical Persian poets, Nizami Genjevi (d. 1209 CE) and Abdulrahman Jami (d. 1492 CE); as I will show in later chapters, there are reasons to believe that he is particularly indebted to these two Persian predecessors.

Among Kurdish readers, *Mem û Zîn* soon came to be recognized as a major achievement; there are possibly more manuscripts in existence of this work than of any other classical Kurdish poem. Unlike the *Nûbihar* and the *Eqîde*, *Mem û Zîn* did not strictly speaking belong to the curriculum (*rêz*) of medrese instruction, but several medrese alumni confirm that it was widely read, or recited, in these circles.²⁰ Another indication of its relatively wide circulation, and of its primarily medrese-based audience, is the large number of manuscripts, which are for the most part simple and lack the elaborate illustrations that are a characteristic feature of courtly literature, and/or of courtly copies, of works like Firdawsî's *Shahname* and—closer to home—Şeref Xan Bidlîsî's *Şerefname*; in fact, I have seen no evidence that *Mem û Zîn* was actually read by, or to, any courtly audiences at all.

There are indications that today's (rural) Kurdish 'ulamâ have continued a long tradition of learning poems by authors like Xanî and Melayê Cezîrî by heart, and of studying, and orally explaining to younger pupils, the precise meanings of technical

¹⁸ Chyet (1991) is still the most detailed and sophisticated discussion of oral versions of the Mem and Zîn story. For a more recent, and more theoretically oriented, discussion of Kurdish Folk literature, see Perteve (ed.) 2015.

¹⁹ Intriguingly, Xanî does not mention Melayê Bateyî, the author of a Kurdish-language *Mawlûd*, or rhymed biography of the prophet; does this imply that Bateyî lived after Xanî, as has recently been suggested (Öztürk 2018), and not in the fifteenth century CE, as had long been believed?

²⁰ For lists of this *rêz*, see Zinar (1993: 63-100); cf. Öztoprak (2003: 185-89), el-Buti (2011: 20-23n; N.B. this list is not featured in the Arabic original, al-Bûtî (1998: 16-18)); on the (Northern) Kurdish medrese curriculum, see also Leezenberg (2014).

terms and of Arabic and Persian loanwords, but I know of no detailed study of these practices.²¹ We do not find any written discussions of or commentaries on *Mem û Zîn*, however, until almost two centuries after its completion. Apart from Evliya Çelebi's useful but somewhat disjointed notes on Kurdish poets at various courts, which do not include references to either Xanî or court culture at Bayazîd, our oldest sketch of the history of Kurdish literature is Mela Mahmûdê Bayazîdî's short *Risale* ('essay'), presumably written at Jaba's request in the 1850s, which briefly discusses eight classical Kurdish poets.²² This is less a literary history than a list of the older Kurmancî poets of whom Bayazîdî was aware; it does not include any of the classical poets writing in Gorani or betray any awareness of the then-ongoing rise of a poetic literature written in the Sorani dialect. It does, however, give an idea of the early recognition of Xanî's exceptional stature among Kurdish poets. Xanî, Bayazîdî writes, is "the most famous and excellent of all the poets in Kurdistan, and he is more beloved and praised than all other poets" (*jî şe'rayêd Kurdistanê hemuyan meşhur û fayiq e, belko ji hemû şe'iran meqbûl û memduh e*); he adds some basic but unreliable biographical data (asserting, erroneously, that he arrived in Bayazîd from Hakkarî in the year 1000/1591 and died there in 1063/1652), and lists the books that he has written, merely stating about *Mem û Zîn* that it is "a book about lovers and beloveds" (*kitêbek aşiq û me'sûqan*), and mentioning the *Nûbihara piçûkan* and a number of ghazal poems in Kurdish, Arabic, and Turkish, but not the *Eqîdeya îmanê*.²³ Although the terms *aşiq* and *me'sûq* may, and in Xanî's case clearly do, have a mystical significance, Bayazîdî is intriguingly silent about the mystical dimensions of his poetry. The same holds for his prose summary of *Mem û Zîn*, likewise written for Jaba. Although not published in Kurdish until much later, this summary is remarkable for its lack of any references either to the original poem's overtly mystical elements or to Xanî's discussion of the condition of the Kurds, and for its suggestion that Xanî deals with a purely human love story.²⁴

The final years of the nineteenth century mark a wholly new phase in the Kurdish reception of *Mem û Zîn*. It was in the new textual genre of Kurdish journalism, produced for a new, i.e., urban and not necessarily medrese-educated, audience, that *Mem û Zîn* was consecrated as a Kurdish national epic, and gradually transformed from a mystical love poem into a secular national epic. Thus, in the second issue of the *Kurdistan* journal, published in 1315 AH/1898 CE, Miqdad Midhat Bedirxan started publishing fragments from Xanî's text, starting with the poem's

²¹ Interviews with medrese alumni, Diyarbakır, Hakkari, 2011-2012; Yusuf Çelik, p.c., July 2025.

²² Included in Jaba (1860: 13-16Kd; 8-11Fa).

²³ Jaba (1860: 15Kd/10Fa) renders this praise rather more weakly as "c'est un des plus remarquables pètes kurdes, et en général on lui donne la préférence sur les autres poètes."

²⁴ Published as Bazîdî (2007); for Jaba's French rendering of this text, see Hakim (1989).

opening bayts; these fragments primarily consist of passages from the *dibâce* rather than the narrative sections. Bedirxan adds that he has read out and translated the poem for Turkish and Arab ‘ulamâ, and that all of them replied that “they had never seen anything of this kind that was better than this book.”²⁵ This comment resonates with the fact that in the nineteenth century, several translations of *Mem û Zîn* into, among others Ottoman Turkish, appear to have been made (cf. Chapter 6 below).

The *Kurdistan* journal also reproduces a famous distich written, in Sorani, by Hacı Qader Koyî, reportedly written down originally in Koyî’s copy of *Mem û Zîn*:

Le kurdan xeyrî Hacı û Şêxî Xanî/Esasî nezmî kurdî danenawe

Among the Kurds, apart from Hacı [Qader Koyî] and Şêx [Ehmedê] Xanî/None has laid the foundations of Kurdish poetry.²⁶

From these bayts, and from Miqdad’s comments, it does not become clear when Koyî first became acquainted with Xanî’s work, but he is unlikely to have known it prior to his arrival in Istanbul and to his establishing contacts with the Bedirxan family. In fact, I have not seen any reference to Xanî’s *Mem û Zîn* in texts in Central Kurdish (or ‘Sora,’ as Miqdad calls it) prior to the twentieth century.

These early statements, although by no means blind to the poem’s religious and mystical dimensions, do take the first steps in consecrating *Mem û Zîn* as a national epic of the Kurds. The turn of the twentieth century was, after all, the period when, in a virtually worldwide process, all nations aspiring to recognition if not independence, were scrambling for a national epic as a legitimization for their claims to nationhood and concomitant aspirations for a territorial state. Around the same time, we can also observe the transformation of the *Shahnameh*, which until then had been read primarily as a work of cosmopolitan Persianate *adab*, of chivalric nobility and of royal legitimacy, into an Iranian national epic; the 1874 discovery of the Armenian folk epic *Sasuntsi Davit*, recited in a rural Armenian dialect rather than classical or ‘civil’ Armenian, and its rapid subsequent transformation into an Armenian national epic, initially to the horror of refined and literate urban

²⁵ “Min ev kitêb carna hîn ulemayên Tirk û ‘Ereba re xwendîye û tercume kiriye, hemîya jî gotîye ku ‘vê rê de ji vê kitêbê çêtir me nediye” (*Kurdistan* (ed. Bozarslan), vol. I, p. 127). The passages reproduced are the entire first chapter (no. 2); bayts 37-73 from chapter 2 (no. 3); bayts 74-105 from ch. 2 and 3 (no. 5); bayts 106-88 from ch. 3-4 (no. 6); bayts 189-94 from ch. 5 (no. 7); bayts 189-234, i.e., the entire ch. 5 (no. 8); the entire ch. 6 (no. 9); bayts 322-61 from ch. 7 (no. 11); bayts 402-26 (no. 13); bayts 427-70 (no. 15); and bayts 471-512 (no. 16). It may be significant that the invocation of the cupbearer in ch. 7, which explicates the poem’s mystical intent, is not reproduced here, but Bozarslan’s edition does not include no. 10, which may have reproduced bayts 286-321, and no. 12, which may have featured bayts 362-401.

²⁶ *Diwan*, p. 11; *Kurdistan* (ed. Bozarslan), vol. I, p. 136.

Armenians; and the revaluation of Shota Rustaveli's thirteenth-century mathnavi-inspired chivalric romance, *The Man in the Panther Skin* (*Vepkhistqaosani*) as a Georgian national epic. We will return to this point below.²⁷

At some point in the twentieth century, the secularized reading of *Mem û Zîn* as an allegory of the political fragmentation of the Kurds gained ground, but I have no clear idea when or with whom this reading originated.²⁸ In a way, it was anticipated by Bayazîdî, whose prose summary, as noted above, omitted its religious and mystical elements, but this work can hardly have been a formative influence, as it was not published until much later and only gained a somewhat wider circulation in Western orientalist circles due to its—uncredited—use in Lerch's overview. Rather, the nationalist-allegorical reading appears to have been first elaborated and propagated in and around the *Hawar* journal, published by Celadet Bedir Xan in Mandate Syria, but more detailed research is needed before this hypothesis can be conclusively confirmed or refuted.

Closely linked to the history of the modern Kurdish consecration of *Mem û Zîn* is the history of scholarship on this work.²⁹ Generally, the European orientalist reception of Xanî's poem was as reserved as the Kurdish nationalist reappropriation was adulatory. In Western languages, discussions of Xanî's poem are few and far between. It was first introduced to a German-reading audience by Russian scholar Peter Lerch in 1858, in an article that primarily summarizes Auguste Jaba's translation of Mela Mahmûdê Bayazîdî's summary of Xanî's poem and short overview of Kurdish poets. Jaba's contribution is acknowledged by Lerch; Bayazîdî's is not. In doing so, Lerch initiates a practice of marginalizing the contributions of Kurdish scholars to modern orientalist knowledge. This active marginalization by Western orientalists of works of Kurdish vernacular learning, like Xanî's poems, 'Elî Teremaxî's grammar, and Bayazîdî's ethnographic writings, has contributed to what one may call the *folklorization* of the Kurds: the misleading representation of Kurds as a people purely defined by oral folklore rather than written traditions of learning and high literature, combined with the even more misleading insinuation that only modern Western philological learning is genuinely scholarly knowledge.³⁰

After a discussion of different Kurdish dialects, Lerch turns to what Jaba calls Xanî's 'poème erotique' and provides a brief summary of its plot, concluding that

²⁷ On the transformation of the *Shahname* into an Iranian national epic, see, e.g., Tavakoli-Targhi (2001: ch. 6); on *Sasuntsi Davit*, see Der Melkonian-Minassian (1983: ch. 1); Nichanian (1989: 333-69); on *The Man in the Panther Skin* see Rayfield (2009: ch. 8). See also Leezenberg (2021).

²⁸ Cf. Tawfiq Wahby, *Dingî gitiy Taza* 2 (1943): 27-29.

²⁹ For a more detailed overview, see Ciwan (2019: 19-60).

³⁰ On this process of marginalization, see Leezenberg (2011); on the concomitant condescension towards Kurdish learning, see Leezenberg (2020b, 2024).

Xanî has “sung about a national subject matter” (“einen nationalen Stoff”).³¹ The story as summarized by Lerch diverges in minor points from Xanî’s own text; thus, Lerch has Zîn berate her brother, Prince Zeyneddîn, for the injustice that he has done to Mem and herself, and ask him for several favors after her death. Discussing the intertwined rose bushes growing from the lovers’ tombs, Lerch further notes a parallel with “an Afghan love legend, at the end of which it is said that two vines grew on the graves of the unhappy lovers, their branches likewise entwining each other”; presumably, he is alluding to the Pashto tale of Adam Khan and Durkhanay here.³² Otherwise, he shows little if any interest in the literary merits of the poem (or of its summary), merely stating that the original manuscript may serve as a source for the history of the Kurdish language and bemoaning inadequacies in Jaba’s transcription.

A similar lack of interest in Xanî’s poem emerges from the writings of later German scholars like Martin Hartmann and Oskar Mann. The former, despite confidently stating that Xanî’s version has “nothing to do” with oral versions of the poem (1903: 106n), acknowledges that it is often difficult to understand with the aid of existing handbooks, so he abstains from summarizing its contents. Of the Syriac translation made at Sachau’s request by one Jeremias Shamir (no. 82 in Fuad’s 1970 description of Kurdish manuscripts), he notes that it is “completely useless, and at best of merely psychological interest” given the translator’s dislike of things Kurdish, and perhaps of Sachau (1904: 108). The lack of Western scholarly interest in the written version of the tale is even more blatant in Oskar Mann, who summarily dismisses Xanî’s version without even bothering to read it. “Already with the aid of Lerch’s table of contents,” he writes, “one can see to what extent the folk tales are superior in poetic value to the barren products of the artist poet.”³³

This condescending attitude among Western orientalisks stands in stark contrast not only to the enthusiastic reception of Xanî’s poem by modern Kurdish readers; the latter also show a marked preference for the written version over the oral tradition, in contrast to German authors who praise the purity of the oral versions and bemoan the Persianness of the written text. Thus, Celadet Bedirxan reportedly warned orientalisks like Makas and Hartmann against wasting their time on ‘useless’ if not positively ‘harmful’ (*nuisible*) folk songs, and instead suggested that they focus their attention on the writings of ‘good poets’ like Xanî (Strohmeier (2003:

³¹ Lerch (1858: 254).

³² “Eine Liebeslegende, an deren Schluss es heisst, dass auf den Gräbern des unglücklichen Liebespares zwei Weinstöcke wuchsen, die sich ebenfalls mit ihren Aesten umschlangen” (1858: 254); presumably Lerch refers to the Adam Khan and Durkhanay tale as recounted in Elphinstone (1815: 185-86). I am indebted to Mateusz Klagisz for his pashtological help here.

³³ “Schon mit Hülfe der Inhaltsangabe Lerchs lässt sich sehen, um wie viel die Volkserzählungen dem öden Erzeugnisse des Kunstpoeten an dichterischen Werte überlegen sind.” Mann (1906: 41).

34)). Strohmeier (ibid.) sees this as indicating a disagreement with the Herderian (or more correctly, the Grimm brothers') view of folklore as the 'archive of the nation,' and the 'essence of national character,' but one may also see it as reflecting the then-widespread view that a proper nation should have a written classical literature and a national epic of its own.

In any case, Bedirxan's call went unheeded; what little research on Kurdish literature was conducted by European scholars in subsequent decades tended to focus on oral traditions rather than written works. The abovementioned process of folklorization is especially clearly visible in imperial Russian and early Soviet scholarship on the Kurds, but its results have persisted elsewhere, too, not least among scholars who are themselves of Kurdish backgrounds.

The single most important step in the modern consecration of *Mem û Zîn* was undoubtedly the first complete printed edition of the work in 1919, edited by Hemzeyê Muksî under the auspices of the *Ta'mimî Ma'arif ve Neşriyat Cemiyeti*, the cultural section of the nationalist *Kurdistan Te'ali Cemiyeti* (KTC), the 'Society for the Rise of Kurdistan.'³⁴ For Hemze, Xanî was the Kurdish 'national poet,' comparable to Firdawsî for the Iranians—a typical romantic-nationalist notion. Like Firdawsî, he writes, Xanî 'worked for his nation' (*Xanî wek Firdawsî jîbo milliyeta xwe xebitîye*), but unlike the former, he did not completely succeed in reviving his nation, since Xanî's age, unlike Firdawsî's, was 'evil and hard' (*berbad û çetin bû*). Yet, he adds, the importance of such a national poet for the Kurdish nation can hardly be overstated, as any nation worthy of the name should have a national poet, and a national literature, of its own: "Each people or nation that wants to create its national existence and sovereignty must first give strong care to its literature and literary works."³⁵

From the mid-1920s on, such voices were effectively silenced in the Republic of Turkey for the next four decades. Hemze's edition was banned, and burned, at some point between 1920 and 1925; only a few copies have been preserved. The KTC itself was banned in 1920, and it is possible that books published under its umbrella were banned with it, but the burning of *Mem û Zîn* may also have been a part, or a consequence, of the 1925 language law. After the bans on the Kurdish language and on medrese education, however, the transmission of Kurdish vernacular learning did continue clandestinely in the North, with handwritten copies of works like Xanî's continuing to be made. It was primarily in mandate Syria, though, and above all in the early Soviet Union, that printing and publishing in Kurmancî Kurdish could develop further. In mandate and monarchical Iraq, Kurdish publishing was almost exclusively in Sorani rather than Kurmancî. Kurdish nationalists like Celadet Bedirxan continued

³⁴ On KTC, see Göldaş (1991).

³⁵ *Her qewm û millet ku arzûya mewcûdiyet û selteneta xwe ya millî bikin, lazîm e ji ewwel emir we ihtînamekê qewî bidîne edebîyat û asarê xwe yê edebî* (Hemze 1919: dibaqe).

their work in Syrian exile. Among others, Bedirxan started publishing the *Hawar* journal in Syria during the French mandate period. This journal further consolidated Xanî's position as the Kurdish national poet, or as Bedirxan wrote in 1941, Xanî is "the prophet of our national faith" (*pêxemberê diyaneta me a milli*).³⁶ Simultaneously, the introduction of the Latin alphabet in *Hawar* implied a wish to break with the tradition of Islamic learning and medrese culture, just as the introduction of the Latin alphabet had marked a cultural rupture in the republic of Turkey.

In the Sorani-speaking areas of Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan, Xanî's *Mem û Zîn* appears not to have become widely known until well into the twentieth century. Although a few oral versions of the Memê Alan tale have been preserved in Mukriyani Kurdish and other dialects, neither these oral tales nor manuscripts of Xanî's poem appear to have been anywhere near as widespread as further North. Early in the twentieth century, theatrical stagings of the story by Pîremerd and others gained popularity, in particular in Sulaimaniya (cf. Chapter 6 below). It was only from the 1960s that Xanî's version became better known in these areas, due primarily to Hejar's Sorani translation (which incidentally, renders invisible much of the poem's religious and mystical content).

A very different kind of consecration may be observed in Muhammad Sa'îd Ramadan al-Bûti's 1958 prose retelling of the story in Arabic, a work that saw numerous reprints. Although it does not completely eliminate reference to the poem's Kurdish setting and origins, it eliminates any political message and de-emphasizes the original work's mystical content in favor of a generically Sunnî religious vision, intended for a modern Arabic-speaking and Arabic-reading audience, and showing no more sympathy for early modern mysticism than for Kurdish national aspirations. But here, we enter the topic of modern adaptations and reworkings of the story of Mem and Zîn; I will have more to say about this twentieth-century *Nachleben*, and about these reappropriations, in Chapter 6 below.

In the Soviet Union of the later 1920s and early 1930s, the folklorization of the Kurds became official state policy, in particular as a result of the early Bolshevik *korenizatsiia* or 'nativization' policy (i.e., the drive to create new local administrative elites), and even more importantly as a result of the emancipation of 'small nations' in a concerted effort to counter national chauvinisms in the individual Soviet republics, and Russian chauvinism in the Soviet Union at large. As a result, in early Soviet Armenia, the use of (Kurmançî) Kurdish in education, printing, and broadcasting was officially encouraged, and led to the redefinition, if not the performative constitution, of the Kurds as a 'small nation' defined by its spoken language and oral traditions. Simultaneously, the Soviet Union's officially atheist (*bezbozhnik*) policies systematically played down all religion, and by extension

³⁶ Herekol Azizan 1941 *Klasikên me* ('Our classics'), *Hawar* no. 33.

religious learning, among the different Soviet nationalities. Given these anti-religious nationality policies, and given this folklorization of Kurdish culture, it should cause no surprise that when Iosif Orbeli (1938: 1-2) made his oft-quoted remark comparing *Mem û Zîn* to Firdowsi's *Shahname* and Rustaveli's *Man in the Panther Skin*, he was referring to the oral versions of the poem, and not to Xanî's written work. In the 1930s, only oral versions of the poem were published, as well as a Russian translation of one of these.³⁷ It was not until the 1960s that Xanî's version of the tale, along with several other texts of classical Kurdish literature, including Feqiyê Teyran's *Şêx Sen'an* and Mela Mahmûdê Bayazîdî's *Adet û rusumâtnameê ekradiyye*, would be published in the Soviet Union, primarily due to the indefatigable efforts of Margaret Rudenko.

After World War II, the further Kurdish consecration of Xanî can be seen primarily in writings by Iraqi Kurdish scholars like Elaeddîn Seccadî (1907-1984), Marûf Xeznedar (1930-2010), and Izeddin Resûl (1934-2019). Seccadî, author of *Mezhuy edebî kurdî* (1952), the first book-length history of Kurdish literature, had had a *hujra* education, but Xeznedar and Resûl had also been trained in the Soviet Union or its satellites, and accordingly tended to reproduce the modernist, atheist, and folklorizing categories of Soviet kurdology, which had elaborated and solidified the imperial Russian folklorization of the Kurds. Thus, in an early article, Xeznedar had already qualified Xanî as "the Homer of Kurdish poetry" (*Humirus al-shi'r al-kurdî*), that is, as the Kurdish national poet; he further elaborated this view in his 7-volume *Mezhuy edebî kurdî* (2010), which he wrote in part during the years 1983-1988 while living in Algeria.³⁸ Much of this study consists of lengthy quotes accompanied by brief summaries or explanations. Its most remarkable aspect is undoubtedly the fact that Xeznedar compares Xanî's poem to oral versions of the tale, but not to any written classical Persian poem. Although he pays lip service to Xanî's knowledge of poets like Rûmî, he nowhere discusses any possible influence of classical Persian literature; when, in an interview, I asked him about the influence of works like Nizami's *Layli and Majnun* on *Mem û Zîn*, he explicitly denied that these were of any importance, arguing that the Persian versions of the poem derived from an Arabic tale anyway.³⁹ Thus, Xeznedar not only reproduces an orientalist assumption of the Kurds as a folkloric nation, but possibly also the ideological anti-Persianism that also prevailed in early republican and Baathist Iraq. Below it will become clear that, *pace* Xeznedar, Persian influences on *Mem û Zîn* are undeniable, and in fact pervasive.

It was only in 1979 that the first book-length academic study of Xanî, Izeddin Resûl's *Ahmadî Khanî 1650-1707: shâ'iran wa -mufakkiranfalyilasûfan*

³⁷ See in particular Cindî and Evdal (1936); for the Russian translation, see Vilcevskij (1938).

³⁸ Xeznedar (2010: 367-485; 2024: 247-308).

³⁹ Interview, Erbil, July 2009; cf. Xeznedar (2010: 373, 392; 2024: 251, 264).

wa mutasawwifan was published; this study was written in Arabic and printed in Baghdad.⁴⁰ Although this study was based on the author's *habilitatsiia* thesis, which had been defended in Moscow in 1977, it was never published in Russian. In 2007, Avesta published a Turkish translation, made by Kadri Yıldırım; it has also been rendered into Sorani Kurdish. Even in this translation, however, Resûl's book has remained virtually unknown to Western scholars, but it remains one of the most important monographs on Xanî and *Mem û Zîn*; in fact, for many years it was virtually the only published academic study. It has been criticized by locals for its relatively introductory character; as the author himself already indicates, it is based on a series of lectures for an undergraduate audience (2007: 7). In this work, too, Xanî is placed primarily against the background of a Kurdish folkloric nation, and—in orthodox Marxist–Leninist style—of Kurdish ‘feudalism,’ but Resûl pays far more attention than Xeznedar to the poem's Sufî backgrounds and, to a lesser extent to its Persianate heritage.⁴¹

Likewise, the Soviet Kurdish scholar Qanatê Kurdo, in his two-volume *Tarîxa Edebyeta Kurdî* (1983), a work explicitly written not only for academic students but also “for Kurdish rural workers and peasants,”⁴² places Xanî primarily against a background of Kurdish oral traditions and working-class or peasant culture rather than of Persianate *adab*, courtly culture, and/or medrese learning.

Like various other modern exercises in Kurdish Studies, these works of Kurdish literary history are not merely descriptive: they are also normative in constituting particular texts as canonical, and performative in constituting Kurdish letters as a national literature with a history of its own. In doing so, they go well beyond Bayazîdî's brief sketch, which merely lists a number of poets without tracing their backgrounds or the development between them.

The twentieth-century folklorization of the Kurds, however, was not restricted to Soviet-trained scholars: it quickly became an entrenched dogma also among Western scholars of other backgrounds, like Basile Nikitine (1956: 255) who, quoting Vilcevskij, famously spoke of a ‘hypertrophie de folkore’ supposedly specific, if not unique, to the Kurds, and Roger Lescot, whose brief overview in the prestigious *Encyclopédie de la Pléiade* confidently states that the Kurdish mentality “remains strongly impregnated with an ethic of nomadism and feudal rule” (1977: 796). Acknowledging that Xanî is the ‘national poet’ of the Kurds (1977: 801), Lescot—probably following his long-standing collaborator Celadet Bedir Xan—reproduces

⁴⁰ On Resûl's life, career and publications, see Mossaki (2024).

⁴¹ Mossaki (2021: 121) argues that, despite some Marxist–Leninist signposting, Resûl's book does not really present a properly Marxist analysis of Xanî's poem and its social environment, nor did its author have the intention to do so.

⁴² “Bona xwendkarên kurd, bona karker gundî û rencberên kurd” (Kurdo 1983: 12).

the modern nationalist reading of Xanî, arguing that the latter's "precocious" vision "pushed his age ahead by several centuries by proclaiming, at a time when nationalism was unknown in Muslim lands, the personality of the Kurds and their right to independence" (ibid.). Even more enthusiastically, he has Xanî stating that he wanted to create a work written in Kurdish and based on an exclusively Kurdish story, although the poet nowhere says any such thing. In the end, however, Lescot berates Xanî precisely for departing from the Kurdish oral tradition, and for getting closer to written Persian literature, concluding that Xanî has succeeded "too well" in turning a Kurdish topic into an "epic of Persian taste" (1977: 801). Thus, he appears to reproduce the romantic-nationalist view that oral folk literature by illiterate nomads is the most authentic expression of a Kurdish mentality or *Volksgeist*.

In English, there are, to the best of my knowledge, only two book-length studies of *Mem û Zîn*: Ferhad Shakely's 1992 [1983] study of Kurdish nationalism in the poem, and Kamal Mirawdeli's 2012 *Love and Existence*, which sets out to analyze the poem as a tragedy in the terms set by Aristotle's poetics. The merits of both works will be discussed below. Apart from these, there are a handful of academic articles in languages like English, French, Russian, and German, and a number of translations into Western languages, most of which were made in the early twenty-first century—another indication of just how recent sustained academic interest in the poem is.⁴³

The reasons for this lack of attention are, of course, in part political. For decades, it was difficult if not impossible to publish anything literary or academic on Xanî's poem in Turkey, where the spoken and written use of Kurdish had been banned since the 1920s. Hence, for a long time, Resûl (1979) remained the only substantial academic study of Xanî's poem; having been published in Arabic in Baghdad, it was not easily accessible for students elsewhere. It was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that appreciable numbers of works in Kurdish and Turkish started emerging—at first in Sweden, and subsequently also in Turkey (see, e.g., Bulut 1995; Bozarslan 1995; Ciwan 1997; Mem 2004), and it was not until the twenty-first century that the academic study of *Mem û Zîn*, and of classical and modern Kurdish literature more generally, really started gaining pace in all parts of Kurdistan. Further, from the late 1980s on, a considerable body of exegetical scholarship, consisting of line-by-line commentaries, called *sharh* in Arabic and *şîrove* in Kurdish, was produced; there are indications, however, that these works emerged from a longer medrese tradition of oral exegesis of classical Kurdish works. Although, in a sense, Bozarslan's 1968 edition may be said to derive from this tradition as well, it primarily consists of the Kurdish text in Latin transcription and a Turkish translation, and has only

⁴³ For a list of these translations with some brief discussion of these renderings, see the bibliographical essay.

a modest—though, at the time, essential—vocabulary of archaic Kurdish, Persian, and Sufi expressions. For as far as I am aware, the first published full-fledged *şîrove* was Perwîz Cîhanî's 1,000-page commentary, originally published in 2004 in Duhok and reprinted in a Latin transcription by Nûbihar in 2010. In 2005, Tehsîn İbrahim Doskî published a similarly voluminous commentary. In 2010, a rather shorter commentary together with a modern Kurdish translation by Jan Dost, which was in fact a Kurdish version of a work originally written in Arabic, was published by Avesta, and Yıldırım's commentaries on Xanî's works, collectively known as *Ehmedê Xanî Kulliyatı* and published between 2008 and 2014 by Avesta, also fall into this category, with his (Turkish-language) commentary on *Mem û Zîn* being published in 2010. Finally, a *şîrove* in Sorani written by Mohammad Mela Shaykh Mistefa Zrari and edited by Hemîn 'Umer Khoshnaw, was published in 2024.⁴⁴

All of these works hail from a medrese tradition rather than a university environment, but that does not simply make them 'traditional,' as opposed to a university-based 'modernity.' Despite a largely shared medrese background, these commentaries show major divergences from the tradition of textual commentary in classical Islamic learning. On the one hand, with the exception of Cîhanî, these scholars no longer have as self-evident a knowledge of Persian and of Sufi vocabulary as earlier generations. This rupture is notable not only among authors hailing from the Turkish republic, where medreses and *tarîqas* had—alongside the Kurdish language—been banned from the 1920s; also among authors in Iraqi Kurdistan, where—unlike in Turkey—neither medreses nor *tarîqas* had been banned, the knowledge of both classical Persian and Sufism steadily declined during the twentieth century.⁴⁵ Bozarslan, in fact, rejects *tarîqa* Sufism as a religious innovation that clashes with the egalitarian tendencies in Islam (cf. Yüksel (2009: 357-58)); it should be noted, though, that he is rather less outspoken about Sufi doctrine as found in *Mem û Zîn*. There are obvious political and religious-historical reasons for this change. On the other hand, religious orthodoxy and, more generally, Islamic orthodoxy today is not what it was in Xanî's time, and branches of religious learning that for Xanî were unproblematic and innocuous, like alchemy and Ibn 'Arabî's speculative mysticism, nowadays appear alien or even heretical. We will return to these peculiarities in Chapters 4 and 5 below, but clearly, the continuity of the tradition of Islamic learning should not be overstated.

The *şîrove* literature is, of course, of great value for Kurdish-language students, and of inherent interest for scholars, but, like any tradition, it also has its conceptual and discursive limits. For example, a substantial part of these commentaries consists of a line-by-line, or rather word-by-word, explication and explanation of

⁴⁴ I am indebted to Sherzad Barzani for this information.

⁴⁵ Interviews, Perwîz Cîhanî, Tehsîn İbrahim Doskî, Van, May 2024.

the ‘dictionary meanings,’ so to speak, of the expressions employed in *Mem û Zîn*. This is obviously useful for Kurdish readers who are less familiar with Kurdish words that are no longer in use or have changed meaning, or with the Arabic and Persian loan words that pervade the poem. Such line-by-line commentaries, however, rarely if ever discuss questions of style, composition, textual structure, or literary merit; as I will argue below, present-day *şîrove* commentaries are also less factual about the philosophical, mystical, and/or scientific aspects of Xanî’s poetic language. Thus, not all commentaries appear equally aware of Xanî’s Aristotelian natural-philosophical vocabulary of matter and form, of essence and accident and substance (*cewher*), and of the Neoplatonist cosmological vocabulary of emanation (*feyd*), and are remarkably reticent concerning his mysticism. Likewise, Xanî’s use of technical terms from the sciences, in particular alchemy, is not always recognized in the modern commentaries and translations. In Chapters 4 and 5 below, we will discuss these points in greater detail.

5. Method

All these earlier studies are to a greater or lesser extent informed by a number of assumptions that, under closer scrutiny, become increasingly problematic. First, they assume that Xanî paints a realistic and reliable picture of social, economic, and political conditions in seventeenth-century Kurdistan. Second, among most scholars writing on *Mem û Zîn*, it is virtually taken for granted that Xanî’s *Mem û Zîn* derives from an older folkloric tradition, and that this tradition is purely Kurdish. Third, virtually all modern authors discussed share a belief that Xanî was a poet in the modern, romantic sense of the word, and that his is the most authentic voice of his nation, who formulates the most authentic expression of his individual inner self as well as his nation’s *Volksgeist* or ‘people’s spirit.’ Against these (tacit or explicit) assumptions, it should be noted, first, that *Mem û Zîn* is not simply a realistic description of Kurdish society but a work of fiction. One can, of course, legitimately try to infer from Xanî’s writings both biographical information on the poet himself and sociological information concerning the world in which he lived, but we should exercise caution here: the *persona* which Xanî presents in his verse may be a literary convention as much as an autobiographical revelation. For example, he calls himself a “dog-like evil doer” (*bed ‘emelê kîlaban*, b. 160) and “the vanguard of the sinners” (*pêşrewê gunahikaran*, b. 2654), but one need not read such phrases as actual confessions of concrete crimes or sins, or as anything more than conventional appeals for divine mercy. Earlier scholars do not always pay sufficient attention to such literary conventions, and instead treat *Mem û Zîn* as a purely factual, and reliable, source of information both on the outward

social conditions and on the inner psychological states of the poet. Thus, authors like Nebez, Resul, Shakely, and Mirawdeli tend to take terms and descriptions in *Mem û Zîn* as direct evidence both of the social realities and of the poet's authentic innermost feelings. For example, Nebez (1969: 9) describes *Mem û Zîn* as a "mirror of seventeenth-century Kurdish society," and gives concrete and realistic information about the Kurdish class structure: for example, he states that Mem, unlike the aristocrat Zeyneddîn, is a "simple man of the people" (ibid.), even though the former is explicitly characterized by Xanî as "the offspring of the scribe of the diwan" (*ji xelefê debîrê diwan*, b. 464). More generally, Resûl, in his more Marxist vein, appears to read Xanî's comments as giving us a direct insight into the political economy (i.e., class structure, mode of production, etc.) of Kurdish feudal society.⁴⁶ As will become clearer below, this assumption of both psychological and societal realism is not necessarily warranted.

Second, the assumption that Xanî's poem is based on a folkloric tradition, while not implausible in itself, is impossible to prove, as our oldest sources concerning this tradition date from the late nineteenth century, i.e., a full two centuries after Xanî. Not even Bayazîdî mentions any oral tale of Memê Alan in his description of Kurdish customs; more generally, he appears not to have had a concept of 'folklore' at all (cf. Leezenberg (2020: 453-56)). Likewise, we have little if any reliable information on Mem and Zîn as either historical figures or fictional characters prior to Xanî. The stone on Mem and Zîn's tomb underneath the Abdaliya medrese in Cizre mentions 854 AH, i.e., 1450-1451 CE, as the year of their death, but one may doubt that this qualifies as solid evidence that the protagonists of Xanî's poem have actually ever existed, let alone lived in the fifteenth century CE in historical Jezira. Earlier researchers have looked in vain for references or allusions to the two lovers in the *Şerefname*, in particular in the section on Jazira Botan. Ebdurreqîb Yusif, however, has interpreted an illustration on fol. 42b of the 1597/1005 manuscript of that work, currently in the Bodleian library in Oxford, as alluding to an episode of the oral tale of Mem and Zîn (Yusif 2007: 73-79). This episode does not occur in Xanî's version, however.

There is one other early written source that alludes to the story of Mem and Zîn. In Melayê Cizîrî's *Dîwan*, we find the lines:

Mûyekî ez ji te nadi bi dused Zîn û Şîrînan/Çi dibit ger tu hesêb kî bi Ferhad û Memê
I will not exchange a single hair of yours for two hundred Shirins or Zîns//What would happen if you considered me a Farhad or a Mem? (*Dîwan*, ed. Tunç, p. 432; cf. Resûl (2007: 60), Mirawdeli 2012: 28).

⁴⁶ See, esp., Resûl (2007 [1979]: ch. 9, 19). As noted, this seems at least in part a concession to orthodox Soviet Marxism–Leninism; cf. Mossaki (2021: 121-22).

From this brief mention, however, we can infer little more than the suggestion that for Cizîrî, and for his audience, the (or some) story of Mem and Zîn was sufficiently well-known for him to refer to them as lovers as proverbial as Farhad and Shirin.

Likewise, most authors who argue that *Mem û Zîn* builds on folk traditions rely on the tacit assumption that these traditions are purely oral and specifically if not uniquely Kurdish, that is, local and national. Thus, there is a virtual consensus that, unlike poems like Feqiyê Teyran's *Şêx Sen'an*, or Selimiyê Hîzanî's *Yûsuf û Zuleyxa*, Xanî's romance is based on a purely Kurdish tradition. What little evidence we have about the premodern oral traditions of the region, however, directly contradicts this assumption. We know for a fact, first, that written poems informed oral traditions as much as the other way around; and second, that the same or similar stories circulated among audiences in different regions, speaking different languages, and adhering to different religions.⁴⁷ Thus, we also have Armenian and Syriac versions of the oral tale of Memê Alan, and we know that Kurdish-language folk tales were recited not only by Muslim *dengbêj*, but also by both Jewish and Christian bards (and more specifically by Armenian *ashugs*).⁴⁸ In short, these assumptions have not been argued for in detail, let alone conclusively established, and, in fact, there is considerable evidence against them.⁴⁹ Instead, all these assumptions appear motivated both by romantic-nationalist and by folklorizing orientalist beliefs, rather than based on actual research.

Third, there are good reasons for not thinking of Xanî as a poet in the modern, romantic sense of the word. As seen above, we have precious little information about Xanî as an individual person or as an author: there is not even a consensus about exactly which works he wrote. Hence, inferences about Xanî's psychology or character, his social background, and his political outlook are largely if not purely speculative. Thus, Shakely (1992: 19-21), taking a number of remarks at face value (e.g., b. 355), claims that Xanî hailed from a poor family rather than an aristocratic

⁴⁷ On the complexities of this circulation, see in particular Yamamoto (2003). For a recent overview of oral traditions in the Iranian world, see Kreyenbroek & Marzolph (ed.) (2010), which, however, in true romantic-nationalist style carves up these traditions into separate, language-based traditions in Kurdish, Pashto, Baluchi, etc.; Chapters 1-3 specifically deal with Kurdish oral and—remarkably—written literary traditions. Thus, to some extent, even this recent volume reproduces not only a long-standing methodological nationalism, but also the marginalization of non-Persian languages in the Iranian world (or Persianate cosmopolitan) as primarily if not exclusively oral.

⁴⁸ Sabar 1982, Cindî & Evdal 1936; Chyet (1991) vol. 2.

⁴⁹ Shakely (1992: 49) interprets *fesaneyêd Botan* ('Botan legends') as an "obvious indication of the folkloric origin of *Mem û Zîn*," but this bold conclusion is not warranted; moreover, it misses Xanî's pun, noted in the commentaries, on *efsane*, 'tale' and *fesane*, 'trick.' Likewise, both Resûl (1979: 47; 2007: 61-62) and Mirawdeli (2012: 27) take Xanî's stray comments about sage 'old men' and 'narrators' as direct evidence of an oral tradition of elderly storytellers from which Xanî had allegedly emerged, but strictly speaking, there is no such evidence.

background. Likewise, Mirawdeli takes Xanî's comments about coins and gold in Chapter 6 as evidence of his "great dislike of money," and of his "championing the welfare of the poor people" (p. 3), but this talk of coinage is part of the literary convention—also to be found in the works of Nizami and Jami—that the poet's words are more valuable than common verbal currency; moreover, in Xanî's case, Kurdish words are compared to worthless copper coinage that only gets its value by being recognized by a prince (b. 281-82). We will return to this seemingly monetary imagery in Chapters 2 and 5 below.

But although we are not able to draw a psychological portrait of the poet, we are able to give a sociological sketch of his environment. As a member of the learned elite, Xanî would have been expected to have a command of Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman next to his—presumably—native Kurdish, but for provincial scholars, this command was perhaps not quite self-evident, as the experience of his uncle shows. Like countless other medrese pupils before and after him, Xanî is likely to have studied Arabic grammar, Qur'anic exegesis, and Islamic jurisprudence as part of the medrese curriculum, and to have learned Persian by reading Sa'di's *Golestan* and having the words and grammatical points explained to him orally by his teacher. Although it is less clear exactly which texts, if any, Xanî had read, he obviously stands in the tradition of mystically inspired classical Persian poetry. This poetic tradition was quite unlike modern national literatures; it was not an arena for individual self-expression but rather an occasion to exploit a common stock of conventional images and to show off one's command of the Persian and Arabic languages.

Accordingly, the quadrilingual poem in Xanî's *Dîwan* may, on one level, be read as a showpiece of precisely such a multilingual skill and of the ability to write verse in three languages alongside his native Kurdish. Another poem in the *Dîwan*, *Kan Mihemmed Beg gelo*, appears to have been written on the occasion of the latter's death in 1091/1680, but one may ask to what extent this poem expresses conventional gestures of public mourning rather than Xanî's personal feelings towards the emir, as most commentators appear to do.

In short, as I will be arguing in more detail in Chapter 4, Xanî was a Persianate rather than a romantic poet. More radically, one might also argue that his was a classical Persianate rather than a modern national self: recently, the poets working in the classical Persianate tradition have been qualified as 'Persianate selves,' who did not have anything like either an individual or an ethnic (let alone national) identity in the modern sense as based on blood, descent, or territory, but rather a wider—and ambiguous—collective belonging on the basis of written *adab* (Kian 2020). One may of course debate such claims, but one should not proceed as if they do not exist.

Given my focus on Xanî's book in relation to literate traditions, I will not be discussing the relation between Xanî's poem and the various oral versions of the tale

in any great detail here. Several studies have, in fact, been devoted to this topic.⁵⁰ Some of these tacitly assume, or confidently declare, that Xanî had heard orally recited Kurdish folk tales in his youth, but for such claims, plausible as they are, we have no concrete—let alone conclusive—evidence. Clearly, however, Xanî stands in a tradition not only of oral recitation but also of written poetry in both Kurdish and Persian. One central thesis of this study is that one can, and indeed should, read Xanî against a literate Persian, or more precisely Persianate, background as much as against an oral and purely Kurdish one.

My own methodological approach to questions of language and national identity is guided by two recent theoretical currents. First, it is informed by recent insights from linguistic anthropology, in particular Michael Silverstein's (1979) concept of *linguistic ideologies*, that is, the folk generalizations about language and its role and status in the (social) world. Second, it is *genealogical*, in Nietzsche's and Foucault's sense: I am interested in exposing unnoticed discontinuities in seemingly continuous traditions, in uncovering differences in apparent identities, and in unmasking the modalities of power and domination involved in seemingly apolitical power-free bodies, or spaces, of knowledge and literature. The readings and analyses that follow below have been shaped and guided above all by Michel Foucault, who points out the radical historical variability and discontinuous development of such seemingly simple and timeless notions like *man*, *language*, *literature*, and *self*, as constituted by historically specific forms of knowledge and learning.

A genealogical approach also rejects the explanation of people's identities or essences in terms of their origins, the figure of thought frequently occurring in nationalist movements and ideologies. Although Foucault rarely thematizes the ideology of nationalism or the institution of the nation state, his writings do supply a lot of pertinent criticisms and analyses.⁵¹ Nietzsche himself had already distinguished monumental, antiquarian, and critical kinds of history, and rejected the Hegelian view of history as a universal and dialectically developing process (a

⁵⁰ Various editions of such oral performances have been published both in the region and in the West. For an early collection, see, e.g., Cindî & Evdal (2008 [1936]: 307-59), but the most famous of these collections is probably Roger Lescot, *Textes kurdes, II: Mamé Alan* (1942), which collates three versions into a single narrative, and includes a French translation. Michael Chyet (1991) presents the most detailed discussion of the epic's oral tradition to date, and reproduces several (partly previously published) versions with English translations. For a brief discussion of this oral tradition, see, e.g., Xeznedar (2010: 393-97; 2024: 265-67).

⁵¹ For a brief (and characteristically dense) early formulation of his brand of genealogy, see his 'Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire' (1994 [1971]). Hassanpour briefly mentions Foucault's genealogical criticism of the search for origins but rejects it for allegedly essentializing all historiography into a single origin-seeking enterprise, adding that Foucault's reading of Nietzsche's concepts of origins is "seriously flawed" (2003: 108). This criticism, however, misses the relevance of genealogy for the study of nationalism.

view that is obviously reproduced in many Marxist writings). Foucault refines this criticism by arguing that a genealogical sense of history is opposed to any history of continuity or tradition, and seeks to unmask all nationalist hero worship. Like anti-quarian history, it hopes to uncover not the roots of our present-day identity but to make visible the discontinuities that separate us from the past (1994: 154). Thus, it rejects not only the Hegelian view of history as a lawlike and teleological dialectical continuity, but also the search for origins as explaining a thing's essence or identity (1994: 138). In doing so, it also targets thinkers like Husserl and Heidegger (the latter, after all, had written things like "the question concerning the origin (*Ursprung*) of the work of art asks concerning the beginnings (*Herkunft*) of its essence (*Wesen*),"⁵² but the genealogical criticism applies with like force to nationalist histories. It does not seek to reestablish a continuity, a coherence or an identity—whether of an individual self or collective like a nation. Here, however, I have tried not to bother my readers with any high-theoretical discussions, or to let my theoretical concerns stand in the way of a detailed close reading of Xanî's texts. Theoretical questions may guide the careful philological study of texts, but they should not replace it.

One may ask, however, if an academic study by a scholar from the West, or global North, which uses the theoretical and conceptual tools of the modern humanities and social sciences developed there, does not amount to an orientalist attempt at appropriation and domination. The question is a real and important one, especially in the case of a work that has for so long been the target of oppression as *Mem û Zîn*—as has been Kurdish culture more generally. In reply, I can only say that I do not speak on behalf of any other individual or group; rather, I would like to see this book as an intervention in an ongoing dialogue. I am fully aware that many of my readings, for example concerning the expression of a national identity and/or concerning gender and sexuality in *Mem û Zîn*, will invite disagreement; indeed, I welcome such debate. It has not been my intention, of course, to debase Xanî's masterpiece, or to disparage modern authors with whom I happen to disagree. On the contrary, in uncovering the Persianate backgrounds and the, at times, surprising contents of *Mem û Zîn*, I hope to give my readers a sense of the wealth and complexity of classical Kurdish literature, the very existence of which has been sidelined—if not denied outright—for far too long.

⁵² Heidegger (1977: 143).



Figure 2. Ehmedê Xanî's tomb in Dogubeyazit (Bayazîd), Turkey (photograph by author).