

Chapter 6

LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, & PRESS

LANGUAGE

Kurdish vernaculars are members of the northwestern subdivision of the Iranic branch of the Indo-European family of languages. Many Kurdish words are cognate with English, such as *gama=game*, *mâra=marry*, *stâra=star*, *rubâr=river*, *dol=dale* or *valley*, *brâ=brother*, *mong=moon*, *snoy=snow*, *firo=free* (of charge), *standin=to stand*, *sur=sure*, and the like. The major language nearest to Kurdish, however, is Persian, the state language of Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. The close relationship between Kurdish and Persian is similar to that between German and Danish.

Kurdish vernaculars divide into two primary groups: 1) the Kurmânji group, composed of two major branches, Bâhdinâni (or North Kurmânji) and Sorâni (or South Kurmânji) and 2) the Pahlawâni (or Pahlawânîk) group, also composed of two major branches, Dimili (or Zaza) and Gurâni ([Figure 2](#) and [Map 39](#)). These are further divided into scores of dialects and subdialects as well. Some of them, like Awrâmani and Laki (both major dialects of Gurâni), have large bodies of written literature that span more than a thousand years.

The name *Kurmânj* has been proposed by Minorsky to have evolved from the combination of *Kurt* and *Mând*, together meaning “Median Kurd.” This may be less plausible than contending theories asserting that it may have evolved from *Kurt* and *Manna*, i.e., “Mannaeen Kurd.” The original home of Kurmânj was the Hakkâri region, which falls nicely within the territories of the ancient Mannas (see **Ancient History** for the Mannas).

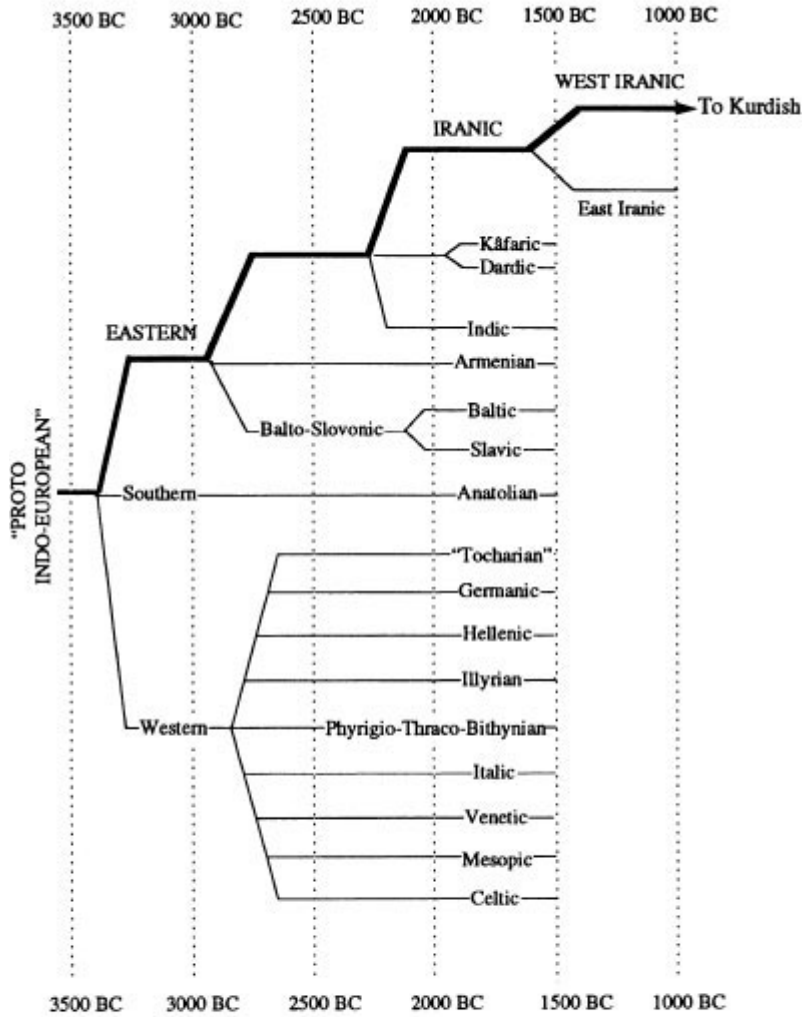
The common appellation *Pahlawâni* for Gurâni, Dimili, and other related dialects of the old language of the Kurds has now fallen out of use by the Kurds and the non-Kurds. *Pahlawâni* used by the medieval authors, and is here revived out of the need for a common name to cover all these dialects.


The term *Pahlawâni* itself has clearly evolved from *Pahlawand*, i.e., “that of Pahla.” Pahla comprised southern Kurdistan and northern Luristan, perhaps the original home area of the language. The suffix *wand* has already been discussed in the section on **Tribes**. The word *Pahla* is still preserved in corrupted form in the Kurdish tribal name *Fayli*, who incidentally still reside in southern Kurdistan, in the old Pahla region.

Lacking a state apparatus to undertake the task of creating a standard Kurdish language, the Kurds continue to speak a myriad of dialects, despite many unsuccessful attempts by Kurds to create such a standard national language (see **Education** and **National Identity**).

If we were to compare the Kurdish language group to the Romance languages, the relationship between Kurmânji and *Pahlawâni* would be like that between French and Italian. Just as these Romance languages are the modern offshoots of Latin with various degrees of evolution from the original parent tongue, the modern Kurdish vernaculars are the offshoots of a single, now lost, archaic language that may loosely be called “Median” or “Proto-Kurdish” ([Figure 2](#)).

INDO-EUROPEAN FAMILY OF LANGUAGES



 Highlighted branch leads to Kurdish and its major dialect groups

Remark: Dates for separation of each branch is a very rough approximation.

IRANIC BRANCH OF THE INDO-EUROPEAN FAMILY OF LANGUAGES

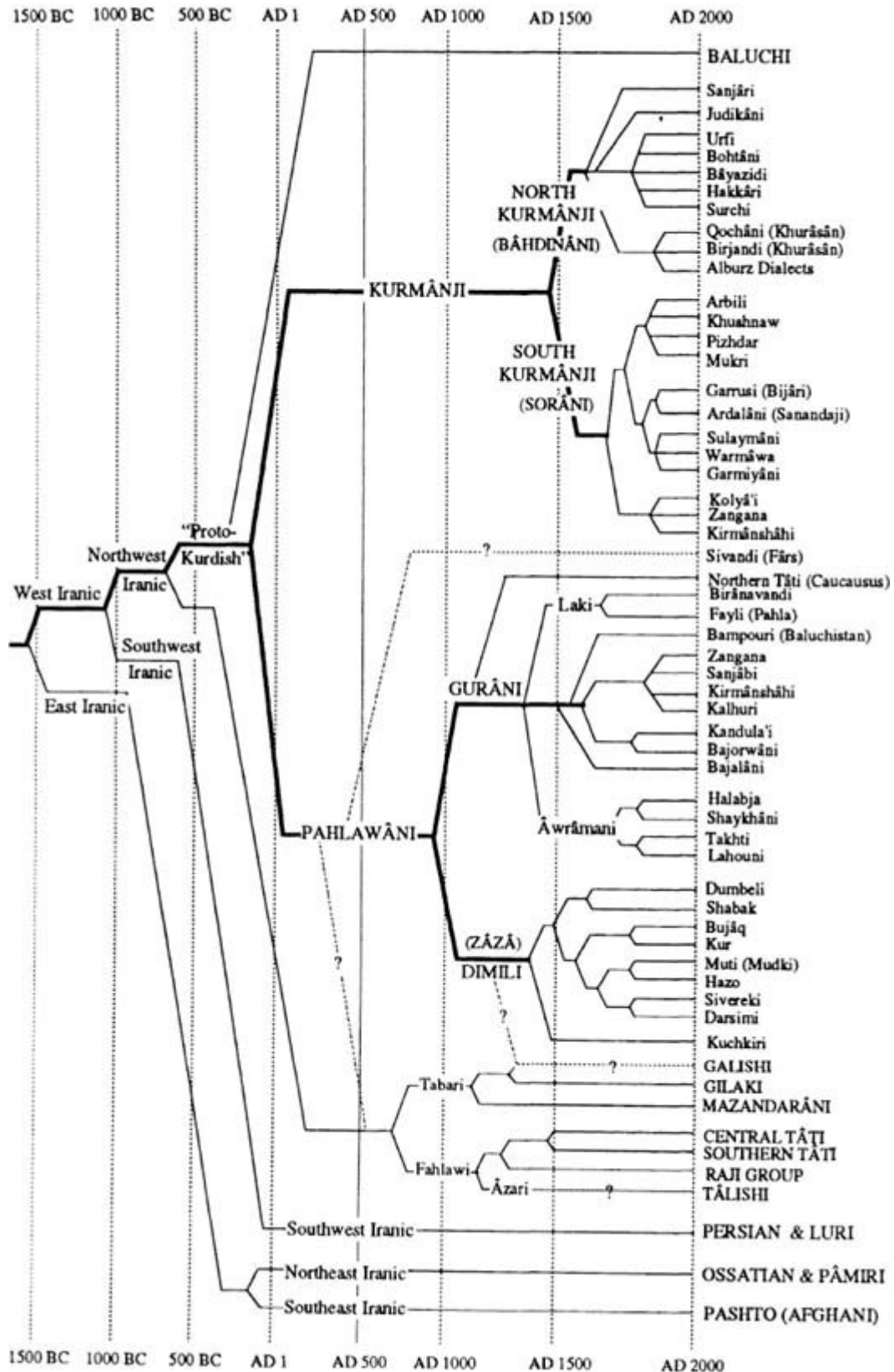


Fig. 2 Genealogy of Kurdish Language In the Context Of The Iranic Branch Of The Indo-European Family Of Languages.

*Only The Kurdish Group Is Shown In Detail.

Kurmânji and Pahlawâni, like French and Italian, now qualify as two bona fide languages, and not dialects of the same language. Their variations are far too great by any standard linguistic criteria to warrant classification as dialects of the same language. Moreover, the level of mutual understanding between the speakers of the two is at best about half. These two Kurdish languages presently are spoken by very uneven segments of the Kurdish nation, with Kurmânji being the vernacular of about three-quarters of all Kurds, and Pahlawâni of the rest. This is the direct result of the major historical movements of people in Kurdistan since the middle of the classical era, as well as the introduction of new religions, which often resulted in alteration of the local speech as well as culture and economy (see **Historical Migrations** and **Religion**). These changes are manifest not just in the language of the Kurds, but in their entire social and cultural spectrum (see **Internal Subdivisions**). The extent of literature and the writing system employed in each of the Kurdish vernaculars are discussed under **Literature** and **Education**.

To add to this complexity, there is no standard nomenclature for the divisions of Kurdish vernaculars, not just in the works of Western scholars but among the Kurds themselves. All the native designators for local languages and dialects are based on the way the spoken language of one group sounds to the unfamiliar ears of the other. The Dimila and their vernacular, Dimili, are therefore called *Zâzâ* by the Bâhdinâni-speakers, with reference to the preponderance of *z* sounds in their language (Nikitine 1926). The Dimila call the Bâhdinâni dialect and its speakers *Kharawara*. The Gurâns refer to the Sorâni as *Korkora* and *Wâwâ*. The Sorani speakers in turn call the Gurâns and their vernacular, Gurâni, *Mâcho Mâcho*, and refer to the tongue and the speakers of Bâhdinâni as *Zhe Bâbu*. How the speakers of these vernaculars refer to their own language is even more interesting. The Gurâns call their language *Kurdi*, i.e., “Kurdish.” But so do the common speakers of Sorâni. This is the name they use for their languages, and not their local dialects, for which they would produce a traditional name on

demand. The speakers of North Kurmânji (or Bâhdinâni) call their *language* in general Kurmânji, and never *Kurdi* (Kurdish). This is quite interesting, as North Kurmânj speakers by themselves constitute, as was mentioned earlier, the numerical majority of the Kurds. It is instead the Gurâns (in toto) followed by the South Kurmânj (the majority) who call their language “Kurdish.” The Dimila call their language Dimili among themselves, and Zâzâ when speaking to a non-Dimila Kurd or anyone else.

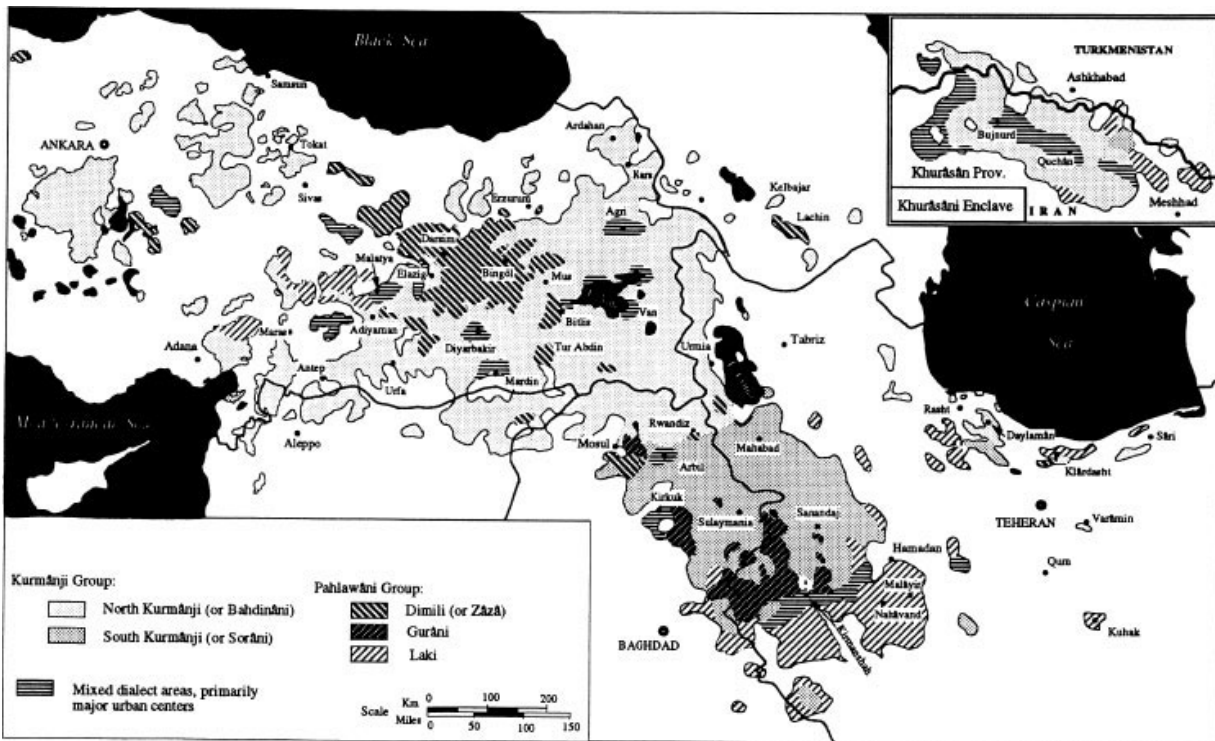
The more educated Kurds have now come to call these dialects and languages more or less by the titles that appear in this work. The only exception is the survival of the pejorative designator *Zâzâ* for the Dimili language and the Dimila people. This name has so far withstood the many attempts of educated Kurds to replace the old names with a proper nomenclature.

The linguistic situation in Kurdistan is in reality less complex than the above classification and terminology may imply. The basic similarity between the two branches of Kurmânji, i.e., Bâhdinâni and Sorâni, is very strong, and the speakers of each can communicate with the other to a reasonable degree, which increases markedly with a few days of practice. This stems from the fact that North and South Kurmânji separated from one another in comparatively recent times—perhaps as recently as 400–600 years ago.

Within each of the two Kurdish languages, various degrees of linguistic evolution are observed among their respective dialects. In Kurmânji, for instance, while Bâhdinâni retains the older gender distinction, Sorâni has lost all vestiges of gender. The Awrâmani dialect of Gurâni, likewise, has noun genders, while Laki has lost them completely. On the other hand, the ergative construction (verbs agreeing with object rather than subject) is present in all dialects of Kurmânji, but Pahlawâni does not use this grammatical construction.

Some linguists in the past have tended to label Kurmânji (North and South branches) the “real Kurdish,” thus declaring the Pahlawâni branch non-Kurdish. If by *non-Kurdish* is meant non-Kurmânji, then such assertions are true. However, this is quite ironic in that, as noted above, it is the Gurân who always call their language *Kurdi*, or “Kurdish,” while the vast majority of the Kurmânj (the supposedly “real” Kurds), never do. But the assertion that the *speakers* of Pahlawâni are not ethnic Kurds is born

only of a lack of proper knowledge of the history and society of the Kurds. The Gurâns and the Dimila are the oldest identifiable branches of the Kurdish nation—much older in fact than the Kurmânj. They have been called, and having been calling themselves, Kurds since before the advent of Islam in the 7th century (see **Classical History**). However their language may be classified for linguistic purposes, the people remain Kurdish.



Map 39. Linguistic Composition of Kurdistan

Further Readings and Bibliography: D.N. MacKenzie, “The Origins of Kurdish,” *Transactions of the Philological Society* (London, 1961); Mohammed Mokri, “Kurdologie et Enseignement de la Langue Kurde en URSS,” *Revue de la Société Ethnographie de Paris* (1963); C.J. Edmonds, “Some Developments in the Use of Latin Characters for the Writing of Kurdish,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 2 parts (London, 1931 and 1933); Amir Hassanpour, “The Language Factor in National Development: The Standardization of the Kurdish Language, 1918–1985,” unpublished doctoral dissertation (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois, 1989); Basile Nikitine, “Kurdish Stories from My Collection,” *Bulletin of the School of*

Oriental and African Studies IV (1926–28); V. Minorsky, “The Gûrân,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* XI (1943–46).

Kurmânji. The vernacular with the largest number of speakers is Kurmânji (or Kirmâncha), spoken by about three-quarters of the Kurds today. Kurmânji is divided into North Kurmânji (also called Bâhdinâni) and South Kurmânji (also called Sorâni).

North Kurmânji, or Bâhdinâni, is the language of most of the Kurds of Turkey and almost all of the Kurds of Syria and the former Soviet Union, as well as being the predominant language of the Kurdish enclave in northern Khurâsân in Iran ([Map 39](#)). In fact, North Kurmânji alone is spoken by a little over half of all Kurds, making it the most common Kurdish vernacular. There are at present about 15 million speakers of North Kurmânji. Major subdialects of North Kurmânji are Buhtâni, Bâyezidi, Hakkâri, Urfi, and Bâhdinâni proper.

South Kurmânji, or Sorâni, is the language of a plurality of Kurds in Iran and Iraq, with about 6 million speakers. Major subdialects of South Kurmânji are Mukri, Ardalâni, Garmiyâni, Khushnow, Pizhdar, Warmâwa, Kirmânshâhi, and Arbili (or Sorâni proper). A line can be drawn to divide Sorâni-speaking areas into a Persianized southeastern section and a more orthodox northwestern section, running from Bijâr to Kifri. The ergative construction in the Persianized Sorâni has begun to disappear, while it is being retained in the non-Persianized northwestern section. Also, under the influence of Arabic and Neo-Aramaic languages, the northwest section of Sorâni has acquired two fricative sounds (faucalized pharyngeal fricative ‘ayn, and hâ), absent from other Kurdish, and in fact Indo-European languages. Realizing this, the Iraqi Kurds tend to expunge these sounds from their Kurdish to move away from their Semitic Arab neighbors and overlords. In Iran, where few Kurds can pronounce the sounds and even fewer have them in their dialect, the tendency is the reverse. This is to distinguish their increasingly Persianized language from Persian.

Since the last century many formerly Gurâni-speaking tribes in the Kirmânshâh region have partially switched to South Kurmânji, although they retain much of the vocabulary, syntax, and mood of the Gurâni in their new language. This has prompted many linguists to consider this a new

branch of Kurmânji, independent of Sorâni altogether. Since the transition is exceedingly gradual and no boundaries can be drawn to separate the two (as can be drawn between North and South Kurmânji), the Kurmânji of Kirmânshâh should be considered a division of Sorâni and not a new branch.

Many tribes in the Kirmânshâh region have both Sorâni and Gurâni speakers among them. The Kalhur, Zangana, Sanjâbi, and Nankeli tribes are among these. [Figure 2](#) thus contains the dialect designators Kalhuri and Kirmânshâhi in both the Sorâni and Gurâni branches.

As a major Kurdish tongue, Kurmânji is relatively recent. It has achieved its present position by replacing Pahlawâni as the language of the majority. Like Pahlawâni, Kurmânji is descended from the old Median or “Proto-Kurdish.” Kurmânji remained for a very long time the language spoken only by the Kurdish nomads in the mountains of the Hakkâri region west of Lake Urmiâ. It was not until the beginning of the 14th century and the progressive nomadization of Kurdistan that it expanded. It had begun to expand rapidly by the middle of the 16th century, when the destruction of the agriculturalist economy and massive deportations of the sedentary Kurds, coupled with the loss of overland trade routes through Kurdistan, paved the way for a fundamental change in Kurdish society (see **Early Modern History**). As the nomads gradually expanded from the Hakkâri region into various corners of Kurdistan, they carried with them, and in time imposed upon the remaining agriculturalists, their Kurmânji language. With it they also introduced Sunni Islam of the Shafi‘ite rite as the predominant religion of the land.

Kurmânji first advanced out from Hakkâri through Bâhdinân to Mosul. This divided Kurdistan into a Dimili northern half and a Gurâni southern half, with Kurmânji in the middle. The expansion then continued into the Dimili linguistic domain, as it was the first to experience the full force of the socioeconomic calamities of the early modern times. The Bâhdinân dialect of Kurmânji in time became the predominant language of northern and western Kurdistan. The assault on the Gurâni domain began in the early 18th century with the onset of the socioeconomic disruption of this part of Kurdistan through wars and deportations. The Sorâni dialect and the nomads carrying it expanded from the Sorân region (modern Arbil-Rawanduz area) into central and eastern Kurdistan, replacing Gurâni. The hegemony of the Pahlawâni language over Kurdistan was thus gradually

broken by Kurmânji, which was expanding from the geographical center. Pahlawâni was in time pushed into its present limited domains on both extreme ends of Kurdistan.

Pahlawâni. To the far north of Kurdistan along the upper courses of the Euphrates, Kizilirmaq, and Murat rivers in Turkey, the Dimili branch of Pahlawâni (less accurately but more commonly known as Zâzâ) is spoken by about 4.5 million Dimila Kurds. The larger cities of Darsim (now Tunçeli), Chapakhchur (now Bingöl), and Siverek, and a large proportion of the Kurds of Bitlis, are Dimili-speaking. There are also smaller pockets of this language spoken in various corners of Anatolia from Adiyâman to Malatya and Maras, in northern Iraq (where the speakers are known as the Shabaks) and northwest Iran (the tribes of Dumbuli and some of the Zarzâs) as well. The language seems in late classical and early medieval times to have been more or less spoken in all the area now covered by North Kurmânji in contiguous Kurdistan. Its domain also stretched west into Pontus, Cappadocia, and Cilicia, before a sustained period of assimilation and deportations obliterated the Kurdish presence in the area in the Byzantine period (see **Integration & Assimilation**). The Dimili further retreated from its former eastern domains to its present limited one under pressure from the advancing North Kurmânji-speaking pastoralist Kurds. This loss of ground, which started at the beginning of the 16th century, continues to this day.

Dimili is closely related to Gurâni, a relationship indicative of a time when a single form of Pahlawâni was spoken throughout much of Kurdistan, when after the late classical period, Kurdistan was homogenized through massive internal migrations (see **Classical History** and **Historical Migrations**). At that time the domain of the Pahlawâni language was uninterrupted across Kurdistan. Today, in only one place, around Mosul, do Gurâni (in the form of the Bajalân dialect) and Dimili (in the form of the Shabak dialect) still neighbor each other. The main bodies of Dimili- and Gurâni-speaking Kurds are now at the extreme opposite ends of Kurdistan.

Major dialects of Dimili are Sivereki, Kori, Hazzu (or Hazo), Motki (or Moti), Shabak, and Dumbuli. The dialect of Gâlishi now spoken in the highlands of Gilân on the Caspian Sea may be a distant offshoot of Dimili as

well, brought here by the migrating medieval Daylamites from western and northern Kurdistan.

Dimili has served as the prime language of the sacred scriptures of the Alevis, but not the exclusive one. Despite this, not much written material survives to give an indication of the older forms of Dimili and its evolution. The documents come from rather unexpected sources: the early medieval Islamic histories. Ibn Isfandiyâr in his history of Tabaristân, for example, preserves passages in the language of the Daylamite settlers of this Caspian Sea district, which resembles modern Dimili.

In far southern Kurdistan, both in Iraq and Iran, in an area from Halabja and Marivân to Dinawar, Hamadân, Kirmanshâh, and Khânaqin, all the way to Mandali, Gurâni predominates. It is also the language of the populous Kâkâ'i tribe near Kirkuk and the Zanganas near Kifri. The Kurdish colony of western Baluchistân is also primarily Gurâni-speaking. There are also populous pockets of Gurâni found in the Alburz mountains. A major dialect of Gurâni, i.e., the prestigious Awramani, now spoken in a small pocket between the towns of Halabja, Marivân, and Pâwa, was once the predominant language of central Kurdistan, where now South Kurmânji (Sorâni) is spoken. The language of sedentary farmers and old urban centers, it was the language of the important Kurdish princely house, that of Ardalân, until its fall in 1867. Most of the popular and polished poetry written under the auspices of the Bâbân princely house of central Kurdistan, even though itself a house of South Kurmânji speakers, was written in this dialect, until the beginning of the 19th century. The switch to South Kurmânji is traditionally ascribed to the reign of the early 19th-century Bâbân prince Abdul-Rahmân Pâshâ.

Gurâni and its dialects began their retreat in the 17th and 18th centuries and are now still under great pressure from South Kurmânji speakers. With the avalanche of the Iraqi Kurdish refugees, nearly all speakers of South Kurmânji, into eastern and southern Kurdistan in Iran, the process of Gurâni dilution and assimilation has been hastened tremendously. Kirmânshâh, once the center of the Gurân, is now a multi-lingual city, and very likely has a South Kurmânji plurality. The population of Halabja, the northernmost outpost of the language, and the former seat of the Houses of Ardalân and Bâbân, was annihilated by chemical warfare in 1988. It now houses more than 100,000 refugee Kurds, who speak almost exclusively South Kurmânji.

In fact, the Gurani-speaking Pâwa, Newsud and, ancient Awrâman, opposite Halabja on the Iranian side of the border, have also been overrun by these refugees.

The past expanse of Gurâni can still be detected in pockets of Gurâni-speaking farmers from the environs of Hakkâri in Turkey to Mosul (the Bajalâns/Bajarwâns), and to Shahrabân—less than forty miles northeast of Baghdad. Other major dialects of Gurâni, besides Awrâmani and Bajalâni, are Kalhuri, Nânkeli, Kandula'i, Sanjâbi, Zangana, Kâkâ'i (or Dargazini), and Kirmânshâhi. Today, there are roughly 1.5 million Gurâni speakers in Iran and Iraq.

Laki. This vernacular is just a major dialect of Gurâni and is treated here separately not on linguistic grounds, but ethnological. The speakers of Laki have been steadily pulling away from the main body of Kurds, increasingly associating with their neighboring ethnic group, the Lurs. The phenomenon is most visible among the educated Laks and the urbanites—in the countryside, the commoners still consider themselves Kurds in regions bordering other parts of Kurdistan, and Laks or Lurs where they border the Lurs. The process is a valuable living example of the dynamics through which the entire southern Zagros has been permanently lost by the Kurds since the late medieval period: an ethnic metamorphosis that converted the Lurs, Gelus, Mamasanis, and Shabânkâras into a new ethnic group (the greater Lurish ethnic group), independent of the Kurds (see **Integration & Assimilation**).

Laki is presently spoken in the areas south of Hamadân and including the towns of Nahâwand, Tuisirkân, Nurâbâd, Ilâm, Gelân, and Pahla, as well as the countryside in the districts of Horru, Selasela, Silâkhur, and the northern Alishtar in western Iran. There are also major Laki colonies spread from Khurâsân to the Mediterranean Sea. Pockets of Laki speakers are found in Azerbaijan, the Alburz mountains, the Caspian coastal region, the Khurâsâni enclave (as far south as Birjand), the mountainous land between Qum and Kâshân, and the region between Adiyâman and the Ceyhân river in far western Kurdistan in Anatolia. There are also many Kurdish tribes named Lak who now speak other Kurdish dialects (or other languages altogether) and are found from Adana to central Anatolia in Turkey, in Daghistân in the

Russian Caucasus, and from Ahar to the suburbs of Teheran in Iran (see **Tribes**).

The syntax and vocabulary of Laki have been profoundly altered by Luri, itself an offshoot of New Persian, a Southwest Iranian language. The basic grammar and verb systems of Laki are, like in all other Kurdish dialects, clearly Northwest Iranian. This relationship is further affirmed by remnants in Laki of the Kurdish grammatical hallmark, the ergative construction. The Laki language is therefore fundamentally different from Luri, and similar to Kurdish.

There are at least 1.5 million Laki speakers at present, and possibly many more, as they are often counted as Lurs.

Further Readings and Bibliography: W. Ivanow, "Notes on Khorasani Kurdish," *Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, new series, XXIII:1 (1927); Ch. Bakaev, *Yazik Azerbaidzhanskii Kurdov* (Moscow: Akademi Nauk, 1965); Ch. Bakaev, *Govor Kurdov Turkmenii* (Moscow: Akademi Nauk, 1962); Karl Hadank, *Mundarten der Gûrân, besonders das Kändûlâi, Auramânî und Bâdschälânî* (Berlin, 1930); Karl Hadank, *Mundarten der Zâzâ, Hauptsächlich aus Siwerek und Kor* (Berlin, 1932); Karl Hadank, *Untersuchungen zum Westkurdischen: Bôtî und Êzädî* (Leipzig, 1936); Peter Andrews, ed., *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey* (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert, 1989); Mehrdad Izady, "A Kurdish Lingua Franca?," *Kurdish Times* 11–2 (1988); Hugo Makas, *Kurdische Studien: 1) Eine Probe des Dialektes von Diarbekir, 2) Ein Gedicht aus Gâwar, 3) Jezidengebete* (Heidelberg, 1900); Age Meyer Benedictsen, *Les Dialectes d'Awromân et de Pâwä* (Copenhagen, 1921); D.N. MacKenzie, *The Dialect of Awroman (Hawrâmân-î Luhôn): Grammatical Sketch, Texts, and Vocabulary* (Copenhagen: Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 1966); P. Pikkert, *A Basic Course in Modern Kurmanji* (Genk, Belgium: Alev Books, 1991).

LITERATURE

Kurdish is heir to a rich and extensive, but now mainly oral, literature extending back into pre-Islamic times. A large portion of the written literature has been lost to over eight centuries of nomadic dislocation into