



BEDLĪS

BEDLĪS (Turk. Bitlis, Arm. Balēš, Ar. Badlīs), town and province of Turkey, of Kurdish population, situated twenty km southwest of Lake Van, and commanding the passes between the Armenian highlands and the Mesopotamian lowlands (specifically, between Van and Dīārbakr (Diyarbakir). Šaraf Khan, writing in 1005/1596, says the town (*qašaba*) is a natural pass (*darband*) connecting Azarbaijan with Dīārbakr, and (Dīār) Rabī'a with Armenia, a busy thoroughfare for pilgrims, merchants, and other travelers (I, p. 339). Similarly Tavernier, a century and a half later, says that both the Ottoman sultan and the Persian king have an interest in maintaining good relations with the bey or prince of Betlis, "for he can easily stop up the passage from Aleppo to Tauris, or from Tauris to Aleppo" (1679, p. 303; 1713, p. 375).

The early history of the town is obscure. Šaraf Khan records the popular tradition according to which the citadel was constructed at the command of Eskandar (i.e., Alexander) by his underling named Bedlīs (I, pp. 335-39), a legend repeated up to the present day. This imposing structure is situated in the center of the unwalled town, at the confluence of two streams that go to make up the Betlīsčāy (see view by Hommaire de Hell, IV, pl. XLIX). An Armenian center before the Islamic conquest in 641, the town flourished especially in the Saljuq period, and the earliest extant monument, the Great Mosque (Ulu Cami in Turkish), dates from 545/1150. Subsequent religious architecture maintained a pleasant regional Saljuq style, which Arık (see bibliography) has termed "Seljuq renaissance."

The close association of Bedlīs with the Kurdish Rožekī (Rūzagī) tribe probably



dates from the 8th/14th century. Šaraf Khan devotes a sizeable portion of his Kurdish history to this subject (I, pp. 358ff.; see summary by Minorsky in *EI*² V, p. 458).

Following the decline of the Āq Qoyunlūs, the Rožekī amirs asserted their independence, and a cultural florescence ensued under the amir Šaraf, upon whom Shah Esmā'īl bestowed the title khan (Bedlīsī, I, p. 409). After the battle of Čālderān (920/1540), Sultan Salīm confirmed Šaraf Khan in his hereditary government (*ḥokūmat*), but in 938/1531-32 Šaraf Khan shifted his allegiance back to the Safavids, and in the following year he was killed by Olāma Takkalū, the Safavid renegade in Ottoman service whom Sultan Solaymān then appointed governor of Bedlīs (*ibid.*, I, pp. 418-34). In 986/1578 Morād III restored Bedlīs to its hereditary governors, awarding the investiture to Šaraf Khan's grandson and namesake (actually Šaraf-al-Dīn), author of the *Šaraf-nāma*.

Except for the nearly fifty years when Bedlīs was under direct Ottoman authority, the Rožekī khans were able to maintain a precarious independence during the long period of Ottoman-Safavid rivalry. The situation in the mid-11th/17th century, when the formidable Abdāl Khan was ruler, is illuminated by two travelers, the Frenchman Tavernier, and the Turk Awliā' (Evliya) Čelebī. Tavernier states that the "Bey" of Bedlīs is the most powerful of the Kurdish amirs, "since he acknowledges neither the Grand-Seigneur (the Ottoman sultan) nor the king of Persia, whereas the other Beys are tributary to one or the other" (*ibid.*). Awliā' Čelebī gives a lengthy and admiring portrait of Abdāl Khan (he spells the name 'Abdāl), depicting him as a kind of Renaissance prince, master of a thousand skills (*hazār-fann*), a poet in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, and a patron of the arts. The Rožekī dynasty maintained its independent status until 1263/1847; Bedlīs has been part of Turkey since that date.

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