

The Foundation-Inscription of the Qawālīsī Mosque

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Keywords:

Sharaf-nāma, Qawālīsī, Kurdish history, Ottoman Empire, Arabic, 15th century

Cite this article:

Dehqan, Mustafa, Vural Genç. “The Foundation-Inscription of the Qawālīsī Mosque”
Keshif: E-Journal for Ottoman-Turkish Micro Editions 4/1 (Winter 2026): 44-49.
Available under <https://doi.org/10.25365/kshf-26-01-06>.

Article DOI [10.25365/kshf-26-01-06](https://doi.org/10.25365/kshf-26-01-06)

Published online March 23, 2026

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Context¹

A fifteenth-century foundation-inscription was recently identified at the village of Irun, some 5 km northeast of Bidlīs in eastern Anatolia. In December 2022 Vural Genç and Mehmet Demirtaş made several visits to Irun, surveyed the remains of the Qawālīsī mosque, and took numerous photographs of every detail of the building.

The inscription of the mosque, located within the historical cemetery site registered by the Van Regional Council for the Protection of Cultural Heritage on 24 September 2008, was first published in 2006 by Kadir Pektaş.² In this study, while the architectural features of the building were emphasized and the inscription was transcribed, the reading contains several inaccuracies. Most importantly, Pektaş misread the name of the building's patron,³ which led him to conclude that the individual could not be identified in historical sources.⁴ Furthermore, his interpretation of the epithet "Aka/Ağa" only among the Turks of Iran is problematic, since the epithet was in fact employed widely across Turco-Mongol polities and even by the Kurdish emirates.⁵ Building upon this, he incorrectly suggested that the mosque was constructed under the patronage of Turkmen dynasties, emphasizing the Qarakoyunlu and Aqqoyunlu presence in the region. Finally, he characterized the monument in broad art-historical terms, incorrectly asserting that "with its inscribed plaque providing information on its plan, date of construction, and patron, this mosque stands out as a monument of considerable importance in fifteenth-century Anatolian-Turkish art, distinguished by its figures that can be traced back to Central Asian traditions while also reflecting regional interactions".⁶ The misreading of the most crucial part of the inscription, along with the resulting misinterpretations and

¹ We are grateful to Mehmet Demirtaş and Sacha Alsancakli for helping us to prepare this short note.

² Kadir Pektaş, "Güroymak (Norşin) Yakınlarında Figürlü Bir Mescid", in: *Sanatta Anadolu Asya İlişkileri, Prof. Dr. Beyhan Karamağaralı'ya Armağan* (Ankara: Hacettepe Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2006), pp. 389-402.

³ "Süleyman Aka ibni Abd, Er-Rahman El-Kavvasi". See Pektaş, "Güroymak (Norşin) Yakınlarında Figürlü Bir Mescid", pp. 389-390.

⁴ See Pektaş, "Güroymak (Norşin) Yakınlarında Figürlü Bir Mescid", p. 390.

⁵ See Pektaş, "Güroymak (Norşin) Yakınlarında Figürlü Bir Mescid", p.390, n. 4.

⁶ See Pektaş, "Güroymak (Norşin) Yakınlarında Figürlü Bir Mescid", pp. 393-4.

erroneous conclusions, obscures the true identity of the building. It is therefore essential that this issue be corrected.

Irun (probably by metathesis > Yirun), now known as Gölbaşı, seems to have been paid no attention by the early geographers.⁷ The sole mention of the village that we have been able to find is a contemporaneous one by *taḥrīr* makers who visited the place in 1539, that is, almost a century after the building of the mosque. It is particularly interesting to note that the *taḥrīr emīnī*⁸ makes no mention of a Qawālīsī mosque at Irun or other villages in the Çukur area.⁹ In a later Ottoman primary source, however, the author mentions the same mosque, at the same village, as Süleyman Ağa Kalesi.¹⁰

This inconsistency is not, strictly speaking, about the historical buildings of Bidlīs. Rather it is about the legal, moral, and political dialogue that the Bidlīs royal conflicts have provoked among tribal successors and political commentators. The Kurdish emir and historian Sharaf Khān Bidlīsī and his grandfather, Sharaf Khān I, might have objected to any mention related to the Qawālīsī family because of the negative role that ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Qawālīsī (c.1438-1505), a very powerful and influential *ağa* of the Qawālīsī subdivision of the Rōzhikī tribe, and his relatives played against the Sharafkhānids of Bidlīs.¹¹

⁷ The name sometimes suffers from faulty identification. It should not be confused with Irun of Shīrwān. Compare Scheref, Prince de Bidlis, *Scheref-nameh ou Histoire des Kourdes*, Ed. V. Véliaminof-Zernof. St.-Pétersbourg: Commissionnaires de l’Académie Impériale des Sciences, 1860-62, i, 232, 238; Evliya Çelebi, *Seyāḥatnāme*, vols. I-VI, Ed. A. Cevdet; vols. VII-VIII, Ed. K. Rif’at; vols. IX-X, Ed. Anonymous. Istanbul: Ikdam, 1896-1938, iv, 157, 204.

⁸ The *taḥrīr emīnī* can be identified as the surveyor responsible for recording all resources and productive activities in the survey registers (*taḥrīr defters*) with the aim of increasing the revenue of the imperial treasury.

⁹ For Irun as a village in the Çukur area, see Ahmet Yılmaz, “413 Numaralı Mufasssal Tapu Tahrir Def-terine Göre Bitlis Sancağı (1555-1556)”. Konya: T. C. Selçuk Üniversitesi, unpublished MA thesis, 2010), 41, 44, 47, 54.

¹⁰ See Eralp Yaşar Azap, *Bitlis Salnameleri: Devlet-Vilayet-Maarif*. Istanbul: BETAV Yayın No: 6, 2017, 95.

¹¹ For Qawālīsī as both a Kurdish tribe of Bidlīs and a name given to a collection of (twelve) Kurdish tribes of the Rōzhikī confederation, and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Qawālīsī, especially the role he played in the rulership of Bidlīs, see Scheref, *Scheref-nameh ou Histoire des Kourdes*, i, 358, 361, 382, 400-403, 405.

Sharaf Khān adapts all Kurdish oral traditions to create a legitimate genealogy for his grandfather, Sharaf Khān I, and his patrons. In telling the history of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Qawālīsī as the political rival of his grandfather, Sharaf Khān takes a partial approach to making rival historical traditions relevant to Bidlīs emirate history. To him, the disintegration of the Bidlīs emirate after the death of a powerful emir followed the normal pattern for Kurdish independent powers based on a military tribal elite. This corporate claim to sovereignty created a free-for-all situation in which individual members of the princely Rōzhikī clan clamored to assert their claims to rule the steadily shrinking territory under Bidlīs’ control.

‘Abd al-Raḥmān Qawālīsī was one of the hereditary *ağas* in the Bidlīs emirate. The *Sharaf-nāma* has created a lasting picture of the life and career of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, with a corresponding lack of impartiality for the place he holds within Bidlīs history. The understanding of Sharaf Khān Bidlīsī does not match certain historical and ideological strategies evident in the *Sharaf-nāma* and in other historical sources. According to the following foundation-inscription, for example, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Qawālīsī had exercised a tight hold on the government of Bidlīs, and his lineal male descendants shared the right to claim political sovereignty over the dependencies of Bidlīs. In the sixteenth century, the long reigning Sharafkhānids saw in this situation of political decentralization an opportunity to remove the name and importance of Qawālīsī from *taḥrīr* registers as illegitimate dissident political *ağas* across the Bidlīs emirate.

The following foundation-inscription suggests that, even if Kurdish chronicles like that of *taḥrīr* registers have little to say about the Qawālīsīs (and this silence itself is worthy of note), they still give us valuable information on the Sharafkhānids’ political and ideological programs.

The condition of the inscription is remarkably good, considering its exposed position, and it remains legible. The ostensible purpose of the inscription is to record the date of the end of building work at the mosque, that is 1466, and to show or imply Qawālīsī patronage. It was built to mark the foundation of the Mosque of Qawālīsī by order of Sulaymān Āqā, a son of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān. His name and title (*āqā*) are

displayed in the epigraph, as well as that of his father. Taken more literally, the inscription is an effectively worded and carefully laid out epigraphic tribute to the building and an expression of pride in the new foundation on the part of the *ağa* who founded it.

Text

[قد بنا] عمارة هذا المسجد المبارك سليمان آقا ابن عبد الرحمن القواليسی فی تاریخ سنة سبعة و ستين و ثمان مائة

Transcription

[*qad banā*] *‘amārat hadhā al-masjid al-mubārak Sulaymān Āqā ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥman al-Qawālīsī fī tārikhi sanata sab‘atīn wa sittīn wa thamān mi’ata.*

Translation

The building of this blessed mosque [was undertaken] by Sulaymān Āqā, son of ‘Abd al-Raḥman al-Qawālīsī, in the year 867.

Facsimile

Qawālīsī foundation-inscription. Photograph courtesy of V. Genç



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