



BRILL

*Iran and the Caucasus* 20 (2016) 369-383



## From Yezidism to Islam: Religious Architecture of the Mahmudî Dynasty in Khoshâb<sup>\*</sup>

Birgül Açıkyıldız-Şengül  
*Oxford University*

### Abstract

The Yezidi Mahmudî Dynasty controlled Khoshâb and surrounding area between Van, Nakhchivân and Marâgha during almost five centuries, from the end of the 14th century to the second half of the 19th century. The Mahmudî rulers consolidated their power by their rational diplomacy with the main political forces of the region, first with the Black Sheep and White Sheep Turkomans and later with the Ottomans and the Safavids. Converted to Islam in the mid-16th century, the Mahmudîs contributed to the Islamic art by endowing buildings in Khoshâb between 1563 and 1671.

The article focuses on the study of Mahmudî religious architecture in Khoshâb, tracing particularly the pre-Islamic Yezidi elements in it.

### Keywords

Mahmudî Dynasty, Islamic Architecture, Khoshâb, Yezidis' Conversion to Islam

### INTRODUCTION

According to Sharaf Khan Bidlîsî, the Mahmudîs were from the same lineage of Marwanids and the Azizan begs of Jazirat (Sharaf Khan Bidlîsî 1870: II/1: 159). The family of Sheikh Mahmud, the founder of the dynasty, migrated to Azerbaijan, north-western Iran, from Jazirat or Syria with other Yezidi tribes when the Black Sheep Turkomans (767-872/1375-1468) were in power in Iran and Eastern Anatolia. Qara Yusuf of the Black Sheep (d. 823/1420) honoured the family of Sheikh Mahmud with the respective ti-

---

<sup>\*</sup> The article is based on a fieldwork in Khoshâb in August 2014. I am grateful to Bitlis Regional Directorate of Vakıflar General Directorate to permit me to do research on the monuments and take photographs.

tle and conceded the fortress of Ashût and Khoshâb to him (Sharaf Khan Bidlîsî 1870: II/1: 159). Evliyâ Çelebi, who visited Khoshâb in 1655, gives the date of 800/1397-98 for their arrival to Azerbaijan (Çelebi 2012: 376).

The first Mahmudî ruler who converted to Sunni Islam (Shafi'î school) was Emîr Hasan Beg bin Iwaz Beg, when he allied with the Ottomans, around 1550. Hasan Beg went on pilgrimage to Mecca, fasted, prayed, and spent his wealth in alms-giving. His sons followed their father's path in Islam. Shir Beg, the second son of Hasan Beg, adhered to Sufi mysticism and spent most of his time in discussions with the Muslim scholars, *ulemas*, and the sheikhs that devoted themselves to an ascetic life (Sharaf Khan Bidlîsî 1870: II/1: 167-168).



Figure 1. Map of the Mahmudî Dynasty Settlements in the 16th – 17th Centuries

The Yezidi Mahmudî Dynasty controlled Khoshâb and surrounding area between Van, Nakhchivân and Marâgha during almost five centuries, from the end of the 14th century to the second half of the 19th century. (Figure 1) The Mahmudî rulers consolidated their power by their rational diplomacy with the main political forces of the region, first with the Black Sheep and White Sheep Turkomans and later with the Ottomans and the Safavids. Converted to Islam in the mid-16th century, the Mahmudîs contributed to the Islamic art by endowing buildings in Khoshâb between 1563 and 1671.

With Emîr Hasan Beg's conversion to Islam, he and his descendants followed the Islamic tradition of constructing buildings in Khoshâb and other settlements to symbolise their religious affiliation. Knowledge about the Mahmudî architecture outside Khoshâb is limited to Evliyâ Çelebi's accounts. Çelebi notes that there was at least one mosque in each village, and mosques, caravanserais, hamams, and shops in the castles (Evliyâ Çelebi 2012: 378-388). Apart from the buildings located in Khoshâb, there are no Mahmudî building remains in other locations in the Van region. We have no information about the present condition of the monuments in Iran and Azerbaijan Republic. No research carried out on the monuments of the Mahmudîs in Ordubad, Khoy, Marâgha and Maku. Conversely, Mahmudî architecture in Khoshâb has been well studied (Ülgen 1953: 83-88; Atsız 1969; Top 1998; Uluçam 2000: 232-235). The remaining buildings of Mahmudî architecture in Khoshâb are two madrasas, two mausoleums, a caravanserai, a bridge and a castle with a mosque, a masjid, a hammam, several kiosks, a bakery, and a dungeon.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE MOSQUE AND MASJID

The ruins of the mosque lie in the outer citadel wall of the Khoshâb castle. It is located on sloping land. The mosque is in a very bad state of preservation. The ceiling was collapsed and walls are badly damaged. The southern wall is demolished completely. Thus, there is no *mihrab* niche in the direction of Mecca today. Only the whole northern wall and the eastern and western walls still stand above the ground. The description of Evliyâ Çelebi noted that there were eight hundred houses constructed from earth, a mosque, a caravanserai, a hammam and few shops in this part of the castle (Evliyâ Çelebi 2012: 377). The mosque was in use when Evliyâ Çelebi visited Khoshâb in 1655 and it continued to be in use until the second half of the 19th century when the castle was abandoned. The existence of the houses indicates that the mosque was used by the people who lived around the castle, while the masjid that lies in the citadel was for the use of the *amirs* and their families. The mosque is composed of a rectan-

---

<sup>1</sup> For the description of the caravanserai and the bridge, see Top 1998: 34-37; Uluçam 2000: 213-235. Evliyâ Çelebi (2012: 377) cites also a *zawiya* among the monuments, which does not exist today.

gular prayer hall in the north-south direction. The mosque and masjid do not bear any inscription to permit the dating of these edifices. However, according to Sharaf Khan Bidlîsî, Hasan Beg bin Iwaz Beg (943-993/1535-1585) commissioned mosques after his conversion to Islam, and the mosque in question might have been from this period (Sharaf Khan Bidlîsî 1870: II/1: 165).

A single-domed square masjid is located adjacent to the *harem* wall in the citadel. The dome was demolished but the rubble-stone walls have not fallen down. A pointed arched door leads to the interior, which is illuminated by two windows in the western wall. The stone coverings of the walls of the masjid were removed. Although the inscription of the citadel gives the name of Emîr Suleiman Beg to be the founder and 1052/1642-3 for the foundation of the citadel, historical sources mention the existence of the citadel long before Emîr Suleiman Beg. Thus, it is difficult to give a date, but a similar suggestion to that put forward regarding the mosque can also be advanced here. (Figure 2)

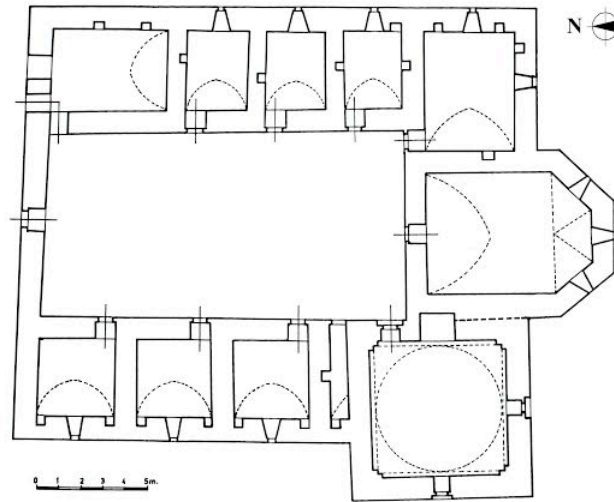


Figure 2. Plan of the Madrasa of Hasan Beg (From: Top 1998: 183, fig. 15)

#### THE MADRASA AND MAUSOLEUM OF HASAN BEG

According to Sharaf Khan Bidlîsî, Emîr Hasan Beg bin Iwaz Beg (943-993/1535-1585) was the first Muslim leader of the Mahmudî Dynasty and the

founder of the first Islamic buildings in Khoshâb. A madrasa in which traditional Islamic sciences were taught, and a mausoleum added to it, are located beneath the famous Mahmudî fortress. An Arabic inscription on the entrance wall of the madrasa mentions Emîr Hasan Beg bin Iwaz as its founder and as the date of its foundation, 971/1563.<sup>2</sup> The mausoleum, appended to the madrasa by demolishing its south-western student rooms, dates most probably to 995/1586. Hasan Beg was killed at the battle between the Ottomans and the Safavids in Sadabad in 993/1585. One year later, his remains were taken to Khoshâb and buried in his madrasa (Sharaf Khan Bidlîsî 1870: II/1: 167; Sevgen 1959: 143). (Figure 3)



Figure 3. General view of the Madrasa and Mausoleum of Hasan Beg with the Citadelle of Khoshâb

The madrasa is of rectangular cut stones in plan measuring 24 by 20 metres and oriented north to south. The rooms of the madrasa and the mausoleum are organised around an open courtyard. The ensemble is en-

<sup>2</sup> The inscription was in the garden of Khoshâb primary school when Mehmet Top visited the building, (Top 1998: 30). The ruined madrasa was restored recently by the Vakıflar General Directorate, and the inscription was replaced above the entrance door of its building. The inscription is written on a marble panel in the *sülüs* (*tuluth*) script in two lines:

إعلموا يا ايها الناظرون بأن هذه العمارة لوجه الله  
ميرحسن بن عوض في تاريخ سنة واحد سبعين تسعمائة من الهجرة

tered from the north through a small door with round arch. The courtyard is without arcades (*riwaq*) and there are no *iwan* and prayer room. Although Top claims that the rectangular space covered by a pointed vault projecting from the façade as a triangle bay window is the prayer room of the madrasa (Top 1998: 32), there is no material evidence to prove it to be the prayer room. A loophole window is found in each side of the triangular bay and there is no *mihrab* niche in its *qibla* wall. Meanwhile, Uluçam (2000: 228) claims it is a classroom (*dershane*). A very similar design with a pentagonal bay is found in the Ali Pasha Madrasa in Diyarbekir (941-944/1534-1537) and the Ihlasiye Madrasa in Bidlîs (997/1589). While the Ali Pasha Madrasa has a *mihrab* niche, there is a window opening in the Ihlasiye Madrasa in the southern wall. A separate prayer room is located in the south-eastern corner of the Ihlasiye Madrasa with a *mihrab* niche in *qibla* direction. Khoshâb architecture is more related to the Bidlîs tradition. The location and shape of the room indicate it to be a classroom, indeed, as suggested by Uluçam. They recall the main *iwans* used frequently in Iranian and Anatolian madrasa architecture, but the open side of the space is walled here, and a closed area is created, probably because of the climate conditions of Khoshâb. (Figure 4)



Figure 4. Northern façade of the Madrasa of Hasan Beg

The chambers for the students and teachers are located in the eastern and western long sides of the courtyard. With the exception of the first chamber in the northeast corner, all the rooms are oriented east-west and covered by a pointed vault. The rooms have loophole windows opening outwards, and doors open up to the courtyard. To the northeast of the entrance is a rectangular room with two doors; one opens up to the courtyard, the other opens to the exterior. Because of its size and doors, it might function differently than other rooms. Despite the lack of a fireplace in this room today, it could be a kitchen. To the northwest corner of the courtyard lies a water well from which the daily water requirements of the madrasa were supplied.

The madrasa originally had an axial and symmetrical organisation. Nevertheless, the mausoleum attached to the ensemble twenty-three years later creates an asymmetry. This is a single storey square mausoleum measuring 8,30 by 8,30 metres with a dome in the interior and a dodecagon pyramidal roof at the top. On the exterior, a double faced bevel was applied to the three corners of the square shaft beneath the dodecagonal drum to create a transition from the square shaft to the polygonal spire while a tier was used at north-eastern corner. This interesting bevel design was also used on the façades of the majority of the two-storey mausoleums of Akhlat dating to the 13th and 15th centuries, such as Ulu Mausoleum (672/1273), Mausoleum of Bugatay and Shirin Khatun (680/1281), Mausoleum of Erzen Hatun (800/1396-97) and Mausoleum of Emîr Bayındır (886/1481). Moreover, the mausoleums of Kalender Baba (689/1299) in Guroymak, Halime Khatun (760/1358-59) in Gevash, Kadem Pasha Khatun (863/1458) in Ercish, and Akçayuva (Zayzak) Kumbet (?) in Adilcevaz have a similar architectural solution at their foundation level to make a transition from the square crypt to the dodecagon or circular shaft. (Figure 5)

In the interior, four big pointed arches are the constructive unit that carry the dome, and pendentives were employed in the corners to hold the weight of the dome. The arches are decorated with white and black voussoirs. This particularity is also observed in many Islamic and Christian buildings of the Van region including Khoshâb. Two rectangular windows in the southern and western walls provide illumination. A deep rectangular niche with a pointed arch is located in the eastern wall of the





Figure 5. Southern façade of the Madrasa and Mausoleum of Hasan Beg

mausoleum. It is wider and deeper than the door next to it. The presence of the niche in the eastern wall can be explained by the orientation of the Yezidis when they pray. They pray towards the sun twice in the morning and once in the evening, and they use the fire in the mausoleums when they pray. As the eastern wall is bordered by the madrasa's wall, which does not permit for a window opening, a big niche was placed, probably for fire rituals. The sarcophagus does not exist today. Only around the windows of the mausoleum on the façades can the decoration of the ensemble be seen. The windows are flanked by pointed arches, and the surfaces of the arches are decorated with geometric patterns, generated from combined and interlaced lozenges and partitioned into repeated octagonal motifs.

#### THE MADRASA OF EVLIYÂ BEG

According to the Arabic inscription (lost today), published in 1957 by Cüzeyri Yazıcıoğlu, the madrasa (Figure 6) was built by Emîr Evliyâ Beg, the ruler of Khoshâb fortress (Yazıcıoğlu 1957: 7). Emîr Evliyâ Beg was also the founder of the beautifully designed stone bridge that lies beneath the fortress and over the Khoshâb stream, which dates 1082/1671. Evliyâ Çelebi mentions Emîr Evliyâ Beg as the Mahmudî ruler of Qara Hisar and Emîr



İbrahim Beg as the ruler of Khoshâb in 1655. It can be supposed that Evliyâ Beg succeeded İbrahim Beg in Khoshâb and built the madrasa and the bridge around 1670s. The most interesting revelation of the inscription read by Yazıcıoğlu is that it identifies Evliyâ Beg as the descendant of Khâlid ibn al-Walîd.<sup>3</sup> The Azizan Beks of Jazirat, the relatives of Mahmudîs, also allege to decent from Khâlid. According to Sharaf Khan Bidlîsî, the Jazirat rulers were of the Yezidi faith too and converted later to Islam (Sharaf Khan Bidlîsî: I/II: 142).

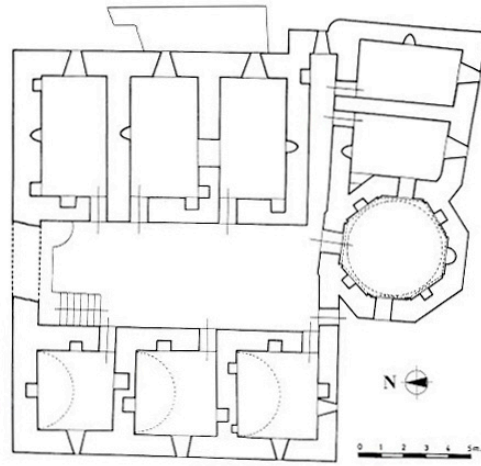


Figure 6. Plan of the Madrasa of Evliyâ Beg (From: Top 1998: 182, fig. 14)

The Vakıflar General Directorate recently restored the badly damaged Madrasa of Evliyâ Beg. It covers a space of 20,50 by 19,50 metres and presents an asymmetrical and irregular plan. Although it is known as a madrasa, the building has an ascetic appearance due to its size and austerity. Thus, it might also be a *zawiya* for spiritual retreat and the education of Sufi groups sponsored and protected by Evliyâ Beg. The building is with an open courtyard without arcades, cloistered on the long sides by an arrangement of three rooms, and a mausoleum<sup>4</sup> in the south, facing the en-

<sup>3</sup> Khâlid ibn al-Walîd (592-642) was the commander of mobile-guard and one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad. He played a crucial role in conquering Mesopotamia. Some non-Arab Muslim notables, including the Kurds, claim to be descendants of Khâlid ibn al-Walîd to link themselves with the Prophet of Islam.

<sup>4</sup> Top (1998: 29) names this room as the masjid because of the *mihrab* niche, and Uluçam (2000: 29) calls it both as a classroom and masjid.

trance. This octagonal room with a dome in the interior resembles a tomb more than a masjid. Two unidentified rectangular chambers are adjacent to the mausoleum in the east and opened to a narrow rectangular hallway, which joins to the courtyard. The mausoleum was probably built for Emîr Evliyâ Beg and has usual plan for its kind. The southern wall bears a *mihrab* niche. Moreover, the diagonal walls of the octagon contain deep rectangular niches, which are rare for a prayer hall in Islamic architecture, but usual for the Yezidi mausoleums. Distinctive features of the Yezidi mausoleums are that they are not simple funerary buildings where the deceased rest, but they also function as oratories where prayers and devotions are made. They replace the function of a temple, as temple architecture does not exist in Yezidism. Thus, almost every Yezidi mausoleum has wall niches where votive oil wick lamps are lightened (Açıkyıldız 2010: 146-177). The mausoleum that was used also as masjid of the ensemble of Evliyâ Beg might be the inheritor of this tradition continued by Muslim Mahmudîs. (Figure 7)



Figure 7. General view of the Madrasa of Evliyâ Beg and Mausoleum of Suleiman Beg

## THE MAUSOLEUM OF SULEIMAN BEG

To the southeast of the madrasa of Evliyâ Beg lies the freestanding mausoleum of Suleiman Beg on sloping terrain. The mausoleum no longer bears a foundation inscription. Arık (1967: 67) dates it to the 16th century, Yazıcıoğlu (1957: 7) attributes it to the Mahmudî prince Alî Beg who participated the Iranian expedition with Sultan Murad IV in 1638. Top and Ünal mention the mid-17th century as the date of its foundation (Top 1998: 33; Ünal 1995: 150), and Tuncer (1992: 336) alleges the third quarter of the 17th century. Emîr Suleiman Beg, the ruler of the Mahmudî Principality is famous for having constructed the fortress of Khoshâb in 1052/1642-3, and this mausoleum must belong to him. As Evliyâ Çelebi, writing in 1655, quotes Ibrahim Beg as the ruler of Khoshâb and mentions Suleiman Beg as a deceased dynast in his account (Evliyâ Çelebi: 377), we understand that Suleiman Beg was no longer the ruler of the Mahmudîs during his visit. Hence, it can be suggested that his mausoleum was constructed between 1643 and 1655. (Figure 8)



Figure 8. Façades of the Madrasa of Evliyâ Beg and Mausoleum of Suleiman Beg

The mausoleum is built of cut stones. The exterior of the mausoleum is octagonal, while the interior is circular in plan and covered by a hemispherical roof, consisting of a low dome on the inside and a pyramidal

roof on the outside. The diameter of the interior circle is 4 metres. The building rises on a square platform, which is reached by stairs on the north. A beautifully carved door gives access to the interior through the northern wall. A pointed arch flanks the rectangular door and a recess lies beneath the arch. A frieze of geometrical motifs on both sides delineates the pointed arch. The face of the pointed arch is decorated with repeated muqarnas designs. The recess has a tri-lobed arch that probably once bore the foundation inscription. The edges of the recess contain the same muqarnas pattern of the arch in a smaller dimension. The side lobes of the arch contain an articulated palmette with eleven leaves while the upper lobe of the trefoil encloses three palmettes. On the beam of the door is carved a central medallion, which contains a six pointed star pattern composed of two equilateral triangles, like the Star of David. A hexagon was created in the intersection and a rosette with a six petal flower-like pattern dominates its middle. The six triangles of the hexagon are also filled with a plain rosette. The surface between the hexagon and the edges of the medallion is carved with half-flower patterns. However, the pattern of the hexagon was used as a decoration in Islamic art as the symbol of Solomon's seal (*Mühr-i Süleyman*). The motif of the hexagon in a medallion is used also on the western façade of the sanctuary of Sheikh 'Adî in Lalish, the centre of the Yezidi faith. It is not clear if this symbol was used on the façade of the mausoleum because of its Yezidi or Islamic iconographic importance or only as an ornament. (Figure 9)

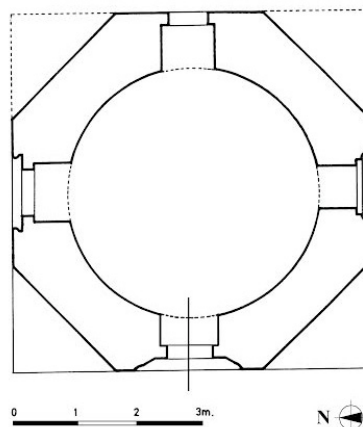


Figure 9. Plan of the Mausoleum of Suleiman Beg (From: Top 1998: 185, fig. 17)

Three rectangular windows set on the axial walls illuminate the interior. Only the window on the eastern wall is decorated, while the others are plain. Giving importance to the eastern wall can be also a remnant of the Yezidi tradition. The form of the eastern window is similar to the inscription recess above the door. The rectangular window is flanked by a tiered design. The corners of each tier are carved with a half-shell design, and the top of the tiers with motifs of whole shells. The use of the shell motif is frequent on the façades of the mausoleums of Alimoglu Hurshit (?) in Akhlat, Erzen Khatun Kumbet (799/1396) in Akhlat, Kadem Hatun Pasha (863/1458) in Erciş and Memi Dede (980/1572) in Bidlîs and Horhor Mosque (17th century) in Van. (Figure 10)



Figure 10. Northern façade of the Mausoleum of Suleiman Beg

#### CONCLUSION

While the two madrasas and two mausoleums that were analysed here are located in the town of Khoshâb and represent characteristics of the region, the mosque and masjid that lie in the citadel of Khoshâb are small in size and modest in appearance. The Mahmudî rulers' propensity to Sufism is reflected in the austerity of their educational buildings. They are organised around an open courtyard without arcades and constructed of rubble and irregularly cut stones without decoration. On the contrary, the

mausoleums are built of cut stones and represent the distinctive local styles of buildings found in a wide region around Lake Van. The decoration of Mahmudî façades is concentrated around the doors and windows and is of fine stone masonry. The mausoleums are of more interest for two reasons. They are considered sacred and function as worship places in the Yezidi tradition. The two mausoleums, those of Hasan Beg and Suleiman Beg, were built with elegance in mind. Moreover, Eastern Anatolia is an important region regarding the Islamic tomb architecture. Many tomb structures from various Islamic eras survived in Bidlîs, Akhlat, Adilcevaz, Guroymak, Erciş and Gevaş that display distinct central plans of square, cylindrical, octagonal, decagonal and dodecagonal forms with a pyramidal or cylindrical roof and prominent articulated façades. In contrast to the two-storey mausoleums of the Anatolian Seljuks and Black and White Sheep Turkomans, the Mahmudî mausoleums are single-storey buildings, which are peculiar for the mausoleums built under Kurdish principalities in the whole region.<sup>5</sup> Although Islamic features predominate in Mahmudî architecture and reflect the dynasty's conversion to Islam, nevertheless, the articulated eastern walls of their mausoleums and the use of niches also recall their ancient Yezidi beliefs.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Açıkyıldız, B. (2010), *The Yezidis: The History of a Community, Culture and Religion*, London-New York.
- Arık, O. (1967), "Erken Devir Anadolu Türk Mimarisinde Türbe Biçimleri", *Anadolu (Anatolia) II*: 57-100.
- Atsız, E. (1969), "Van (Erciş, Gevaş, Holap) Türk Mimari Eserleri" (Istanbul University unpublished MA Thesis), İstanbul.
- Bidlîsî, Sh. K. (1870), *Chèref-nâmeh ou fastes de la nation kourde*, F. B. Charmoy (tr.), vols. I/II, II/I, St. Petersburg.
- Çelebi, E. (2012), *Günümüz Türkçesiyle Evliyâ Çelebi Seyahatnâmesi*. 4/1, İstanbul.
- Sevgen N. (1959), *Anadolu Kaleleri*, vol. I, Ankara.
- Top, M. (1998), *Hoşap'taki Mahmudi Beylerine Ait Mimari Eserler*, Ankara.

---

<sup>5</sup> The Mausoleum of Halime Khatun is an exception for its two-storey construction, ordered by İzzeddin Shir, the ruler of the Hakkârî Principality, for his wife Halime Khatun in 760/1358-59 in Gevaş. This can be explained probably by Halime Khatun's ethnicity, which was a Black Sheep Turkoman.

- Tuncer, O. C. (1992), *Anadolu Kümbetleri, Beylikler ve Osmanlı Dönemi*, vol. III, Ankara.
- Ülgen, A. S., (1953), "Hoşap (Mahmudi) Kalesi", *İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 2/ 4: 83-88.
- Uluçam, A. (2000), *Ortaçağ ve Sonrasında Van Gölü Çevresi Mimarlığı-Van*, vol. I, Ankara.
- Ünal, R. H. (1995), "Türk Döneminde Van", *Van*, İstanbul: 105-152.
- Yazıcıoğlu A. C. (1957), *Van'ın Tarihi Kitabeleri*, Ankara.