

Syriac Monasticism in Tur Abdin: A Present-Day Account*

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Tur Abdin is our Holy Mountain, in the soil of which are buried the precious remains of our fathers, the saints, ascetics, and martyrs. Tur Abdin truly means everything to us. In other words it is a summary and complete example of the history of our Syriac Church. Therefore the love of Tur Abdin has a special place in our hearts. The ancient monasteries and churches are sacred to us. . . . We regard Tur Abdin as a holy site, second only to Jerusalem, and look on our visits there as pilgrimages.

THUS SPOKE His Holiness Mor Ignatius Zakka I Iwas, Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch and All the East, on the significance of Tur Abdin for his church.¹ In August 2005, I had the privilege of making such a pilgrimage there and experiencing firsthand the living tradition of Syriac Orthodox Christianity in the Tur Abdin region of southeastern Turkey.² I traveled with a group of academics on a program organized by *Beth Mardutho* (The Syriac Institute) and *Dorushe* (Graduate Students in Syriac Studies). Our group visited both monasteries and village churches, as well as several nearby cities of importance for Syriac

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1. Cited by Hans Hollerweger, *Turabdin: Lebendiges Kulturerbe* (Linz: Freunde des Tur Abdin, 1999) 7. While the Syriac word *Mor* means 'Saint', it is also used as an honorific title for living bishops. The feminine form is *Mort*.

2. *Tur Abdin* denotes the historical area in upper Mesopotamia considered a cradle-land of Syriac Christianity. Located in the modern-day Turkish province of Mardin, Tur Abdin is approximately the size of the state of Delaware. The nation of Syria borders the region on the south, and the Tigris River on the north and east. The city of Mardin, the capital of the province of Mardin, lies just to the west of Tur Abdin.

Christianity.³ Everywhere we visited, we interacted and conversed with local Syriac Christians, learning of the traditions and history of their villages, churches, and monasteries, as well as the present state of their communities and their hopes and challenges for the future. All with whom we spoke were delighted at the opportunity to discuss their Syriac heritage with people so interested in it. In this account, I hope to relate something of what I learned and experienced at the Syriac Orthodox monasteries we visited in Tur Abdin, as well as two other stories from the region that warrant retelling. In this travelogue I will combine local traditions and personal anecdotes along with critical history in the hope of conveying a sense of the importance and relevance of Syriac Orthodox monasticism for those of us in the west.⁴ By way of introduction, I will say a few words about the Syriac Orthodox Church and its history in Tur Abdin.

Tur Abdin: The Heart of Syriac Orthodox Christianity

ACCORDING to ancient traditions, it was Addai (Thaddaeus), a disciple of the Apostle Thomas, who brought Christianity to Edessa, from where it spread throughout the cradle areas of Syriac Christianity in upper Mesopotamia.⁵ The anonymous *Odes of Solomon* are thought by some to

3. In Tur Abdin we visited the following villages (the traditional Syriac name is followed by the current Turkish name in parentheses): Beth Zabday (İdil; this village is commonly known by its Arabic name, Azekh), Benabil (Bülbül), Beth Kustan (Alagöz), Bsorino (Haberli), Dara, Dayro Daslibo (Çatalçam), Hah (Anıtlı), Midyat, Midun (Öğündük), Qilleth (Dereçi), and Salah (Bariştepe). We also visited the following cities outside of Tur Abdin proper but closely connected with it (the ancient name is followed by the current Turkish name in parentheses): Mardin, Edessa (Şanlıurfa), Carrhae (Harran), Nisibis (Nusaybin), Amida (Diyarbakır), Melitene (Eski Malatya), and Harput (near Elazığ).

4. Although I will attempt to be critical in recounting the histories of individual monasteries and churches, the reader must be aware that the line between history and legend is often blurred in the local traditions that were related to our group. While appreciative of and sensitive to these local traditions as stories worth preserving and retelling, as a historian I must alert the reader to their more fabulous claims and tease out fact from fiction. My critical recounting of the local traditions will therefore be complemented by a synthesis of documented historical information found elsewhere.

5. See Eusebius, *h.e.* 1.13; and the fuller account in the late fourth- or early fifth-century *The Teaching of Addai*; George Howard, *The Teaching of Addai* (Chico, CA: Scholars P, 1981). Good synthetic and critical discussions of the complicated and obscure origins of Syriac Christianity can

exemplify the theology and spirituality of early Syriac Christianity.⁶ Bardaisan of Edessa (154–222) is the first known Syriac Christian author.⁷ By the early fourth century both Edessa (present-day Şanlıurfa) and Nisibis (Nusaybin) were episcopal sees: Qona of Edessa erected the first cathedral church in his city after the promulgation of Constantine's Edict of Toleration in 313,⁸ and Jacob of Nisibis attended the council of Nicaea in 325.⁹ Christianity first spread throughout Tur Abdin in the fourth century from nearby urban centers such as Edessa, Amida (Diyarbakır), and Nisibis through the efforts of the urban bishops who converted and baptized the people in the small villages.¹⁰ *Tur Abdin* is Syriac for 'the Mountain of the Servants [of God]' and refers to the numerous ascetics who sprang up in the area from the advent of Christianity there.¹¹ The Syriac church of the fourth century also produced Ephrem, a profound theologian and the greatest lyricist in the Syriac language; born in Nisibis, he was forced to relocate to Edessa in 363 when the Romans ceded his native city to the Persians.¹²

The origins of the Syriac Orthodox Church as an institution, however, lie in the Christological controversies of the fifth through seventh cen-

be found in J. B. Segal, *Edessa: "The Blessed City"* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970) 62–109; Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Vol. 1: *Beginnings to 1500* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992); and Steven K. Ross, *Roman Edessa: Politics and Culture on the Eastern Fringes of the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 2000) 117–38.

6. Syriac text and English translation: J. H. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon: The Syriac Texts* (Missoula, MT: Scholars P, 1977). Scholars differ over the date of the *Odes*, ranging from the first to the third century.

7. On Bardaisan, see Eusebius, *h.e.* 4.30, and Epiphanius, *pan.* 56; also H. J. W. Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1966).

8. See Year 624 of the Greeks (i.e. A.D. 313) of *The Chronicle of Edessa; The Journal of Sacred Literature*, New Series [=Series 4], 5 (1864): 28–45.

9. See Theodoret, *Phil. hist.* 1.10; R. M. Price, *Theodoret Bishop of Cyrrhus: a History of the Monks of Syria*, CS 88 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1985) 12–20; see also Theodoret, *h.e.* 1.6.

10. What is known about Nisibis in the fourth century is ably discussed by Paul S. Russell, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* [<http://syrcom.cua.edu/syrcom/Hugoye>] 8.2 (2005). For Amida, see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis: John of Ephesus and the "Lives of the Eastern Saints"* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990).

11. The name *Tur Abdin* pre-dates Syriac Christianity. Whatever its original meaning, its interpretation as a reference to Christian ascetics both is ancient and still predominant. See Hollerweger 14 and 22.

12. For a good, readily available introduction to Ephrem's life and teaching with a selection of his writings, see Kathleen McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, CWS (New York: Paulist, 1989).

turies generated by the councils of Ephesus in 431 and Chalcedon in 451.¹³ In their aftermath, Syriac Christians became divided among anti-Ephesian, Chalcedonian, and non-Chalcedonian Christological positions.¹⁴ By the early sixth century, most western Syriac areas (including Tur Abdin) subscribed to non-Chalcedonian Christology, whose greatest exponents at the time were Philoxenus of Mabbug (c. 440–523) and Severus of Antioch (c. 465–538).¹⁵ When Justin I became Roman Emperor in 519, he unleashed a persecution of non-Chalcedonians, a policy continued by his nephew Justinian, emperor from 527 to 565. One of Justin's first actions in this persecution was to depose and exile both Philoxenus of Mabbug and Severus of Antioch. The Syriac Orthodox Church developed from those who remained loyal to Severus and his successors, considered by non-Chalcedonians to be bishops of Antioch "in exile."

Hence the Syriac Orthodox Church traces its roots to the Church of Antioch, where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians (Ac 11:26). Therefore the Syriac Orthodox patriarch traces his unbroken line of apostolic succession to the city's first bishop, St. Peter, through Severus.¹⁶ After the death of Severus in 538, the Syriac Orthodox patriarchate was transferred to several different monasteries in Mesopotamia, coming at the end of the thirteenth century to the Saffron Monastery in Tur Abdin, where it remained for over six centuries. Because of the adverse political situation of the early years of the Republic of Turkey, the

13. The history of the Christological controversies of the fifth through seventh centuries is usefully narrated in R. V. Sellers, *The Council of Chalcedon: A Historical and Doctrinal Survey* (London: S.P.C.K., 1961), and W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1972).

14. Supporters of the anti-Ephesian and non-Chalcedonian Christological positions are in the Latin and Greek traditions commonly called, respectively, "Nestorians" and "Monophysites." But these labels are not only polemical but also inaccurate and should not be employed. The anti-Ephesian church thrived in the Persian Empire; today it is officially called the Church of the East; it has had a Catholic counterpart since 1551 known as the Chaldaean Church. The Syriac Orthodox Church developed from Syriac non-Chalcedonianism and has had a Catholic counterpart since 1783 known as the Syriac Catholic Church. While the majority of present-day Christians in Tur Abdin and the surrounding areas are Syriac Orthodox, there are also Protestants, Syriac Catholics, and Chaldaeans, as well as Armenian Orthodox.

15. For their Christologies, see Roberta C. Chesnut, *Three Monophysite Christologies: Severus of Antioch, Philoxenus of Mabbug and Jacob of Sarug* (London: Oxford UP, 1976).

16. At the time of the exile of Severus, the Patriarchate of Antioch split into two lines, both of which continue to this day: the Syriac Orthodox and the Antiochene Orthodox (i.e. Chalcedonian).

patriarchate was transferred to Homs, Syria, in 1933, and in 1959 to Damascus, where it remains today.

After the death of Justin I, non-Chalcedonian Christians continued to be persecuted under Justinian, but the Syriac church expanded and thrived through the missionary efforts of Jacob Burd'ono (Baradaeus), the “secret” non-Chalcedonian bishop of Edessa from 542–578. It is said that he consecrated 27 bishops, ordained 100,000 priests and deacons, and baptized hundreds of thousands of Christians.¹⁷ For this reason the Syriac Orthodox Church is sometimes called the Jacobite Church. But the Syriac Orthodox themselves reject this title since Jacob was not the founder of their church, nor did he introduce any significant doctrinal development. In fact, the appellation *Jacobite* was first used by the enemies of the non-Chalcedonians to imply the Syriac Orthodox Church's recent origin and its rupture from apostolicity — a polemical claim without historical merit.

After the Arab conquest of upper Mesopotamia in the seventh century, the Syriac Orthodox Church flourished, for their new Islamic overlords were generally more tolerant than the fiercely Chalcedonian Byzantines had been.¹⁸ Times of adversity and reduced numbers began with the Crusades of the eleventh and twelfth centuries and continued with the Mongolian invasions of Timur Leng (known in the West as Tamerlane) in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

The Ottoman Turks came to dominate in Anatolia in the early sixteenth century, and the Syriac Orthodox Church survived, albeit in reduced form, under the Ottoman Sultanate. Christians suffered terrible atrocities in the final years of the Ottoman Empire, when growing Turkish nationalism led to the massacre of 25,000 Syriac and Armenian Christians in what is now southeast Turkey in 1895–1896. In 1915 the collapsing Ottoman government conducted a genocide of Armenian and Syriac Christians in the same region, resulting in hundreds of thousands

17. On Jacob Burd'ono, see John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, 49 (PO 18:690–97) & 50 (PO 19:153–58). For a critical discussion, see D. D. Bundy, “Jacob Baradaeus. The State of Research, a Review of the Sources, and a New Approach,” *Le Muséon* 91 (1978): 45–86.

18. For a summary of the history of the Syriac Orthodox Church after the Arab conquests until today, see <http://sor.cua.edu/History/index.html>. For the history of the Syriac Orthodox Church in the twentieth century, see Sebastian Brock and David G. K. Taylor, eds., *The Hidden Pearl: The Syrian Orthodox Church and Its Aramaic Heritage* (Rome: Trans World Film Italia, 2001) 3:65–103.

of deaths. Syriac Christians still refer to 1915 as *Sayfo*, ‘the year of the sword’. According to the records compiled by Mor Ignatius Aphrem I Barsoum, Syriac Orthodox Patriarch from 1933–1957 and a prolific scholar of Syriac history, in the years 1895–1915, 90,314 Syriac Christians were killed (including 154 priests) in 13,350 families in 346 villages. This was approximately one third of the Syriac Orthodox population in south-eastern Turkey.¹⁹ The present-day government of the Republic of Turkey refuses to acknowledge this genocide and rejects characterizing the Ottoman killing of Armenian and Syriac Christians as such.

Besides the atrocities of the Ottomans, the Syriac Orthodox community in Turkey suffered much in the twentieth century because of the conflict between Kurdish rebels and Turkish security forces in the south-eastern region of the country. Innocent bystanders, Syriac Christians have incurred the loss of much life and property, caught in the middle between opposing forces. In the Kurdish rebellion of 1925–1926, the Kurds took over several Syriac Orthodox churches and monasteries as their military bases, resulting in their complete destruction. The situation took a drastic turn for the worse in the mid-1980s when the PKK (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan, or Kurdistan Workers’ Party) began a campaign of terrorism and guerrilla warfare in southeastern Turkey in their efforts to establish an independent Kurdish state in the region. Entire villages were destroyed and people lived in a heightened state of fear. William Dalrymple’s account of his 1994 visit to Tur Abdin in his *From the Holy Mountain* offers a striking portrait of the deplorable conditions of the time.²⁰ The hostility, suffering, and savagery experienced by the Syriac Orthodox Church in southeastern Turkey from 1895 onwards has resulted in a Syriac diaspora, in mass emigration to other areas in the Middle East, notably Syria, as well as North and South America, parts of Europe, and Australia, so much so that only around 3000 Syriac Christians remain in Tur Abdin today.

The monasteries of Tur Abdin have been of the utmost importance

19. This is only one assessment of the extent of the losses to the Syriac Christian community; there are others. See Sebastien de Courtois, *The Forgotten Genocide: Eastern Christians, The Last Arameans* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2004) 73–81 and 194–200, for further details.

20. William Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey in the Shadow of Byzantium* (London: Harper Collins, 1997).

for the Syriac Orthodox Church, as it survived through the centuries and as it continues to survive in such adverse conditions even now. They play a role not unfamiliar to monasteries in the West, but play it to a degree far beyond that of western monasteries: the very existence of the Syriac Orthodox Church depends on the social, educational, and pastoral activities of the monasteries. They are places where people can meet and find encouragement and support. In times of local danger, people flee to them for protection and refuge behind their high enclosure walls. Local boys and even those from the diaspora come to them to study Syriac language, faith, and liturgy. The monasteries thus constitute an essential part of the church's transmission of its faith to the next generation. Syriac Christians come not only from Tur Abdin but also from the diaspora to receive pastoral care from the monks, to have their children baptized, and to participate in the monastery's prayer and worship. Syriac Christians from the diaspora visit the monasteries of Tur Abdin to reconnect with their spiritual homeland and to be renewed while living far away from it. The heart of the Syriac Orthodox Church, Tur Abdin has continued to beat, however faintly at times, for over 1600 years, giving life always and even now to Syriac Orthodox Christians throughout the world.

Since the arrest and imprisonment of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in 1999, the situation of southeastern Turkey has improved dramatically. While there are occasional problems with the PKK, Turkish security forces have largely contained the group. The process of rebuilding and restoration has begun, and the Syriac Orthodox Church in the early twenty-first century is experiencing something of a renaissance in Tur Abdin. Both Muslims and Christians visit the monasteries on a scale that was unimaginable only a few years ago. Monastic life has been resumed in monasteries that only recently had to be abandoned. Syriac villages are being rebuilt and churches restored. Syriac is sung in the churches and spoken on the streets.²¹ A few Syriac Christians from the diaspora have even returned to

21. Tur Abdin is home to a Syriac dialect known as *Turoyo*, which means 'the mountain dialect'. It differs from the classical or literary language known as *Kthobonoyo* in pronunciation and vocabulary. *Kthobonoyo* is used in the liturgy and is taught in the monastic schools, and knowledge of it is essential for reading ancient texts. *Turoyo* is the vernacular used at home and informally. Although Syriac is written with its own unique alphabet, the Syriac Christian community in Sweden has adopted the practice of writing *Turoyo* with the Latin alphabet.

Tur Abdin to live in their native villages. While the existence of Syriac Orthodox Christianity in Tur Abdin is still in many ways precarious, its revitalization within the last few years is remarkable and no doubt the answer to many fervent prayers. In the account that follows, I hope to give a sense of the renewed hope within Tur Abdin without omitting the real challenges that face the Syriac community.²²

The Six Active Monasteries of Tur Abdin

TRAVELING in Tur Abdin is itself an experience worth recounting. Our group gathered in Istanbul and flew from there to Diyarbakır where two drivers met us with vans hired for the duration of our visit. One of the drivers had been a student at the Monastery of Mor Gabriyel and so was fluent in Syriac as well as his native Turkish—but not English. Even though only one of our group was truly fluent in Syriac, and another spoke Turkish, the rest of the group had varying degrees of skill in Syriac and Arabic (both drivers had a smattering of Arabic), and thus we managed to talk with and get to know our drivers. Those with better language skills would often translate for the rest of us. In fact, for the duration of our stay in Tur Abdin this was our mode of communication with others whom we met unless they spoke English. German also proved quite useful, as many Turks have either studied or worked in Germany; in fact, Germany is home to one of the largest Syriac communities of the diaspora, and there remain close connections between them and the Syriac communities of Tur Abdin.

For the entirety of our visit to Tur Abdin we stayed in a converted caravansary in Mardin. The hotel had many western amenities, such as flush toilets, showers, and even air conditioning, all of which came to be

22. In telling the history of the monasteries, I have interwoven the reports of two previous visitors to Tur Abdin. The first is Gertrude Bell, an English archaeologist who visited in 1909 and 1911, shortly before *Sayfō*; her transcribed diaries and letters, and hundreds of her pictures can be found at the remarkably useful website dedicated to her: <http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/>. The second is Rev. Stephen Griffith, who visited several times from 1997–2003, the years which saw a marked decrease in PKK activity; his yearly reports can be found at *Margoneetho: Syriac Orthodox Resources*: <http://sor.cua.edu/>. Both of these travelers provide invaluable detailed information about the Syriac Orthodox Christianity in Tur Abdin at crucial junctures of its history.

much appreciated after long hot days trekking through the dust in temperatures well over 100° F.²³ Each day, after making sure we had a good supply of bottled water—a liter or two per person—we would set out with the vans for our destination. Most days we drove around Tur Abdin, visiting several villages in a day. The roads in Tur Abdin are mostly paved, except in the smaller villages where they can be quite rough. We were never in the van for much more than an hour or so between stops. Our trips outside Tur Abdin, such as to Şanlıurfa, took over three hours. I found traveling by van quite pleasant, since we saw a great deal of the Turkish landscape and had time for long conversations, and our drivers played us music by contemporary Syriac artists.

1. *The Monastery of Mor Gabriyel*

The Monastery of Mor Gabriyel (Syriac: Dayro d’Mor Gabriyel; Turkish: Deyrulumur Manastiri) lies twenty kilometers east of Midyat near the village of Qartmin; it is also known as Qartmin Monastery. It is less than an hour from Mardin. After driving through rolling desert hills sprinkled with low sage-like bushes, coming around a bend in the road, we suddenly saw in the distance a sand-colored and fortress-like structure surrounded by a brickstone wall enclosing well-kept fields. When we reached the parking area, we found the abbot, Mor Timotheus Samuel Aktaş, in his bright crimson episcopal habit, chatting with guests in the shade of trees outside the enclosure overlooking a cultivated hillside. It was cooler here than inside the monastery, explained the abbot. He had some refreshments brought to us, sliced honeydew and watermelon—the standard offering generously made to guests, as we were to discover—which both quenches the thirst and cools the body.

As we arrived shortly before *Ramsho* (Vespers), we had only a little time to meet and talk with the abbot. During our second visit we had more time to converse with him. Mor Timotheus Samuel has a good command of English, having studied in the United States for several years in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He is a quiet man, with a pleasant manner and a subtle sense of humor, but he gave me the impression that he is burdened with many worries. His deep love of the monastic life

23. Our hottest day was in Şanlıurfa, where it reached 42° C—a little over 107° F!

comes across in conversation. He related that he prefers the silence and solitude of the monastery, and he tries to minimize excursions from the monastery demanded by his pastoral responsibilities as metropolitan bishop of Tur Abdin. In fact, it was his love of the monastic life that led him to request that he remain abbot of Mor Gabriyel when he was asked to be bishop. He seems to think of himself first as a monk, second as a bishop.

On our first visit, shortly after arriving we attended the evening liturgy, Ramsho, in the main church, which is sung in classical Syriac. Two choirs stood in circles around two lecterns to the north and the south of the main altar. Each choir consisted of at least one monk, a number of students, and several men in minor clerical orders. The choirs alternated, and in each choir the better singers took turns intoning. The stone floor and walls of the church made for a resonant aural environment in which to listen to the chanting of classical Syriac according to traditions that are over 1600 years old.²⁴

After Ramsho, we dined with the monks in the refectory but ate the guests' meal of stewed meat and curried eggplant. The monks abstain from meat. The monastery has so many visitors that guests must eat in the refectory in shifts, as it holds only 30 to 35 people at a time. The monks eat immediately after Ramsho, on the first shift. After dinner, we enjoyed tea and further conversation with the abbot as he smoked a cigarette on a terrace in the cooling evening.

On our second visit we had a formal tour of the monastery by *Malphono* (Syriac teacher) Isa and we came to learn about the history and traditions of the Monastery of Mor Gabriyel.²⁵ It was officially founded in A.D. 397 by Shmuyel (Samuel) of Eshtin, a village near present-day Savur, and his disciple Shem'un (Simeon). Although the

24. One member of our group who has been a Syriac Orthodox deacon for thirty years and participated in the singing around the lectern noted that Mor Gabriyel is liturgically the most conservative of all the monasteries and that on each of his visits he learns something new when attending the services.

25. The history of the monastery learned from Malphono Isa is supplemented here by Andrew Palmer, *Monk and Mason on the Tigris Frontier: The Early History of Tur Abdin* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990); Andrew Palmer, "The 1600-Year History of the Monastery of Qartmin (Mor Gabriyel)," Hollerweger 37–46; and Brock and Taylor 2:155–56. I should note that Malphono Isa's account of the history of Mor Gabriyel was the most critically-informed I heard in Tur Abdin; in relating local traditions he was careful to point out where modern scholarship differed from them.

monastery was originally named after Shmuyel and Shem'un, later the name of the monastery's renowned seventh-century abbot, Mor Gabriyel, was added to its official title. Today, however, the monastery is known by the name of Mor Gabriyel alone.

According to ancient texts²⁶ and local tradition, soon after his teacher Karpos was martyred by the Persians in c. 350, Shmuyel left Eshtin and became a monk on Umrin Mountain, near Nisibis. When the Romans ceded Nisibis and the surrounding regions to the Persians in 363, he withdrew to Qartmin, where he built a hermitage near a spring. Some time after this he miraculously healed the boy Shem'un, a child of one of the villagers of Qartmin. Shem'un became a disciple of Shmuyel, and the boy's grateful father gave the pair money to build a monastery. They chose the site by walking northeast from Qartmin reciting psalms, deciding to build at the point where they completed the whole psalter. An angel instructed them in a dream to build a monastery far larger than that needed by two monks because the monastery would one day be the home of many monks. Though the monastery's official foundation date is 397, Shmuyel and Shem'un probably began to live the monastic life together on the site of the present-day monastery some time before that date. The official foundation date appears to correspond to when the monastery received a financial benefaction from the Roman emperors Arcadius (395–408) and Honorius (395–423) soon after their accession to the throne, which resulted in the construction of the first monastic complex. None of this original structure survives.

Though he is traditionally held to have died in 409, it is possible that Shmuyel was already dead before the official foundation of Qartmin Monastery. Shmuyel was succeeded as abbot by Shem'un. The monastic complex was further expanded through the benefactions of Theodosius II (408–450). When Shem'un died in 433, the monastery housed fifty monks. The monastery's Beth Qadishe, its "House of Saints" or crypt, contains the tomb of Shmuyel but not that of Shem'un.

Some time during the fifth or sixth century, a theological school was

26. The main sources are the *Qartmin Chronicle of 819* (ed. Aphrem Barsaum in J.-B. Chabot, ed., *Chronicon ad annum 1234 pertinens* [Paris, 1920] 3–22) and the *Qartmin Trilogy*, which consists of the *Lives of Shmuyel, Shem'un, and Gabriyel* (edited with English trans. by Andrew Palmer, on microfiches included with *Monk and Mason*).

founded at the monastery. Two of the earliest and most illustrious alumni of this school were Mor Yuhannun Sa'oro (d. 503), the bishop of Amida, and Mor Philoxenus of Mabbug (d. 523). The head of Mor Philoxenus is interred and still venerated in the monastery's Beth Qadishe. The main church of the monastery was built in 512 with the financial help of the Roman Emperor Anastasius (491–518); even the names of the architects are known: Theodore and Theodosius.²⁷ This is the oldest part of the monastery that survives, and remains of the original mosaic in the apse of the main church and the inlaid marble floor in the sanctuary are still visible.²⁸ In the sanctuary of the main church we saw the elaborate stone altar, erected in 1951 to replace an older one. On it were placed a paten and chalice, a sight we would see throughout Tur Abdin. According to Syriac Orthodox custom, the altar stands in a state of perpetual readiness to celebrate the Eucharist.

Qartmin monastery became the seat of the metropolitan bishop of Tur Abdin in 615. Not much else is known about the monastery during this period before the abbacy of the renowned seventh-century abbot Mor Gabriyel. Born around 594, Mor Gabriyel came from the village of Beth Kustan.²⁹ As abbot of the monastery, he was metropolitan bishop of Tur Abdin. Mor Gabriyel was also bishop of Dara, probably because of the need to fill vacant bishoprics after the Arab conquest of the area. He had become abbot probably by the early 640s, for he negotiated with the Caliph Omar I (634–644) during the conquest of Tur Abdin to secure the rights of the Christians in the region. The monastery's Church of the Virgin Mary, which dates from the seventh century, may have been built under Mor Gabriyel. When he died in 668 (some date his death to 648),

27. Life of Mor Gabriyel LIX, 6–15.

28. For a description of the decoration of the sixth-century church, see Brock and Taylor 2:213 and 216; for an extensive discussion of the building program at Mor Gabriyel undertaken through the benefaction of Anastasius, see Palmer, *Monk and Mason* 119–48.

29. Our group visited Beth Kustan (Turkish: Alagöz), which the villagers told us means 'House of Constantine'. It is a small but important village with a single functioning church dedicated to Mor Eliyo (the prophet Elijah). An inscription in the church states that it was founded in 343. The villagers are still quite proud of the fact that Mor Gabriyel came from their home. Throughout history, many other outstanding personalities have come from Beth Kustan, including the present abbot of Mor Gabriyel, Mor Timotheus Samuel. The villagers claim that Beth Kustan is one of the few villages in Tur Abdin always to have been populated entirely by Christians, i.e., no Muslim has ever lived here. Two websites are dedicated to this important village: <http://www.beth-kustan.com> and <http://www.beth-kustan.org>.

there were between 750 and 1000 monks living at Qartmin monastery. By the eighth century, his name was added to the official name of the monastery. The main church of the monastery then became known as the Church of Mor Gabriyel.

Directly to the east of the sanctuary of the main church is the chapel and the upper prayer room of Mor Gabriyel. We had to crawl through a small hole at ground level to enter the chapel, and the upper room was reached from the chapel only by crawling upward through a curved tunnel about six feet in length cut into the rock wall. Both chapel and upper room were cool but humid. In the rear wall of the upper room there is a crack about six feet high and a foot wide. According to local tradition, Mor Gabriyel used to wedge himself in this crack during his vigils so that he could pray through the night without falling asleep. No ancient source records this practice of Mor Gabriyel, so this tradition may have been piously concocted to explain the crack; however, having wedged myself into the crack I can attest that it could effectively render a man—albeit one somewhat shorter and thinner than I—immobile and stationary for an extended time. A recent painting in the sacristy of Mor Gabriyel Church depicts the saint praying in this manner. Mor Gabriyel is buried in the monastery's Beth Qadishe.

Renowned for its theological school and its production of fine manuscripts, the Monastery of Mor Gabriyel flourished until the late fourteenth century, when the Mongols under Timer Leng ravished Tur Abdin while fighting the Ottoman Turks for domination in Anatolia. In 1393–1394 the monastery's abbot, 32 monks, and 300 lay people in the monastery were killed, and in 1413 a Mongol attack left the monastery with only one monk. Although the monastic life continued to be lived at Qartmin monastery from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries despite further setbacks and attacks, in 1714 it seems finally to have been abandoned.³⁰

By 1834 monastic life there had revived, for in that year there were more than twelve monks and at least three nuns in residence. Yet it was abandoned again in 1915, the infamous "Year of the Sword," when all the monks of the monastery were killed by Kurds. The Kurds occupied the

30. For the history of the monastery after the lifetime of Mor Gabriyel, see Palmer, *Monk and Mason* 159–90.

site until 1919, when monastic life was resumed on a small scale. Since 1950 the monastery has prospered. In 1956 the monastery's school was refounded by Abbot Shabo Gurash. Under the abbacy of Mor Yulius Yeshu Çiçek from 1962 to 1971, many buildings were built, a road was constructed to allow automobile access, and electric power was provided through a generator. The present abbot since 1971, Mor Timotheus Samuel Aktaş, has added many buildings and has had the monastery connected to public electricity, water, and telephone service. Hence, besides the surviving parts of the original church built in 512, the seventh-century Church of the Virgin Mary, and the ancient tombs in the Beth Qadishe, the rest of the monastery has been built during the past fifty years. In 1985, Mor Timotheus Samuel became metropolitan bishop of Tur Abdin while remaining abbot of Mor Gabriyel, thereby reviving the ancient custom of Mor Gabriyel being the seat of the metropolitan bishop of Tur Abdin. As of August 2005 the Monastery of Mor Gabriyel had 2 monks (besides the abbot), 14 nuns (plus 1 novice), and 35 students, boys aged 12 to 18.

The presence of nuns at Mor Gabriyel warrants comment as the arrangement differs from the "double-monastery" model found in the West. In the Syriac Orthodox monasteries of Tur Abdin nuns neither constitute a separate community nor are headed by an abbess. The abbot is the sole superior for both nuns and monks. There is virtually no interaction between the monks and nuns; their living quarters, work areas, and work times are separate. The work duties of the nuns are mostly limited to the domestic sphere; they cook for the monks, students, and visitors, clean the monastery, wash clothes, care for visitors, work in the gardens, and even look after the cattle. In the gardens the sisters cultivate pistachios, pomegranates, figs, grapes, and vegetables. Yet they participate fully in the daily liturgy, standing in their own section at the rear of the church; they do not join the choirs gathered around the lecterns in the front of the church. The formation of nuns is not as formal or academic as that of the monks, who are expected to know liturgical Syriac and theology so as to become teachers of both. The formation of nuns is limited to informal reading during their free time. A novice nun wears a white veil and a white habit, but a consecrated nun wears a black habit and the *eskimo*, which is a black scarf with

many white crosses embroidered on it, and she may cover it with another black scarf (the practice of covering the *eskimo* varies from monastery to monastery).³¹

Syriac Orthodox nuns in European countries are considerably more educated than those in Tur Abdin. During our trip we met a nun, originally from the village of Zaz in Tur Abdin, visiting from her monastery in Holland. She holds advanced degrees and is a practicing psychotherapist. Such education is comparable to that which Syriac Orthodox monks receive. Not only are monks trained in all aspects of Syriac language, liturgy, and theology at their monasteries, but many go on to universities as far as Great Britain and the United States to pursue advanced degrees. Accordingly, their work is much more pastoral, administrative, educational, and intellectual than that of the nuns.

Founded in 397, then, the Monastery of Mor Gabriyel can claim that it is one of the oldest Christian monasteries in the world that is still functioning, roughly contemporary with the four ancient Coptic monasteries of Wadi al-Natrun, whose origins also lie in the late fourth century. Mor Gabriyel's foundation precedes Mar Saba in Palestine by about 80 years, Saint Catherine on Sinai by about 150 years, and the earliest monastery on Mount Athos by at least 400 years. Thus Mor Gabriyel is one of a handful of monasteries carrying on a tradition that has continued, apart from periods of desertion, for over 1600 years. Recent years have seen a dramatic rise in visitors; the monks and nuns receive several hundred thousand per year. On the weekends as many as 200 tour the monastic buildings each hour. Ninety percent of these visitors are Muslim.³²

Yet the importance of the Monastery of Mor Gabriyel is not limited to its antiquity; it is also the center of Syriac Orthodox liturgical language and tradition. The monastery keeps Syriac Orthodox Christianity alive in the land of its birth by schooling children in the Christian faith and the Syriac language, by ordaining monks (some of whom go on to serve other churches and monasteries), and when necessary physically protecting the faithful behind the massive walls surrounding it. Hence it is truly

31. I am grateful to Christine Altinis Kiraz for her helpful information on the lives of Syriac Orthodox nuns in Tur Abdin.

32. Such are the estimates of Mor Timotheus Samuel Aktaş.

right to say that the Monastery of Mor Gabriyel “serves as the beacon of the Syriac tradition.”³³

2. *The Saffron Monastery*

Situated only five kilometers east of Mardin, the Saffron Monastery (Syriac: Dayro d’Kurkmo; Turkish: Deyrulzafaran Manastiri) takes less than ten minutes to reach from Mardin.³⁴ Not surrounded by walls like Mor Gabriyel, the Saffron Monastery is nonetheless as impressive in its fortress-like appearance. It is situated among desert hills like those around Mor Gabriyel, save that they are steeper and more severe. Gardens and cultivated fields circle the monastery, yet to the north lies a high ridge that serves as a kind of buffer between the monastery and the regions beyond. During our visit we hiked to some of the old hermitages atop the ridge, and afterwards one of the students gave us a tour of the monastic complex. The monastery is the residence of the metropolitan bishop of Mardin. Since 2003 this has been Mor Filüksinos Saliba Özman. At the time of our visit in August 2005, the monastery had two monks and eight students, but no nuns.

The Saffron Monastery was the official seat of the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate from 1293–1932. Founded c. 493 A.D. by a certain Shleymun (Solomon), about whom nothing is known, the monastery was built on the pre-Christian foundations of a pagan temple dedicated to the worship of the sun, which may date to around 1000 B.C.³⁵ Remnants of this structure can be seen today in the vault underneath the Beth Qadishe: the ceiling of this vault is built of self-supporting stone without the use of mortar or any other material to make the stones adhere to one another, an architectural feat proudly pointed out to visitors by tour guides. The temple complex was later used as a fort by the Romans. Some time after they abandoned it, Shleymun converted the buildings into a monastery. Though it was originally named after Shleymun, the monastery was later named for Mor Hananyo (Ananias), the metropolitan bishop of Mardin and Kefertuth (793–800) who refounded and ren-

33. Brock and Taylor 2:156.

34. The monastery has a website: <http://www.deyrulzafaran.org>.

35. This history of the Saffron Monastery is derived from Brock and Taylor 2:165–66, and a brochure published by the monastery, entitled: “The Deyrulzafaran Monastery: The Pearl of Mardin.”

ovated the monastery. “The Monastery of Mor Hananyo” remains its official name today. Since the fifteenth century it has been called the “Saffron Monastery” due to either (for explanations vary) the saffron-colored stone of the buildings,³⁶ the saffron-colored dye used in the plaster,³⁷ or the saffron flowers growing around the monastery.³⁸

The main church is said to have been built between 491 and 518 with the assistance of the Roman emperor Anastasius and since the eighth century has been called the Church of Mor Hananyo. It is also sometimes called the “Domed Church” because of the cross engraved into the impressive dome of the church. A fresco on the south wall depicts Mor Hananyo, and in the sanctuary one can see the patriarchal throne, in which is displayed a list, in the traditional spiral form, of all the patriarchs since Saint Peter.³⁹

In this church we also saw the exquisite *sutoro d'madbho* (sanctuary veil), a type of artwork encountered everywhere in Tur Abdin. Each church we visited in Tur Abdin had at least one *sutoro* that separated the altar from the congregation at certain times during the liturgy. This *sutoro* is affixed to a curtain rod so that it can be easily drawn and retracted when necessary. Yet most churches also contain several other *sutore* (the plural of *sutoro*) either hanging on a bare wall or covering another alcove or doorway. These *sutore* are examples of a Turkish handiwork particularly popular in Anatolia called *basmacılık*, which literally means “stamping.” The art of *basmacılık* involves taking wooden moulds carved into various figures and shapes, pressing them into paint, and then stamping the cloth with them. An alternative way of achieving the same result is drawing the outline of the figures and shapes on the cloth and then painting them by hand. The *basmacılık* process is used for a number of handiworks besides *sutore*, including table covers, pillow cases, and so forth. The end product resembles batik, although these processes differ significantly.⁴⁰

Most of the *sutore* we saw were squares approximately eight feet by eight feet. Each had one or two large images in the center of the cloth, typically of the Mother of God, the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, and the

36. See <http://sor.cua.edu/ChMon/MardinDKurmo/index.html>.

37. Brock and Taylor 2:165.

38. The brochure “The Deyrulzafaran Monastery: The Pearl of Mardin.”

39. See <http://sor.cua.edu/Patriarchate/PatriarchsChronList.html> for a picture of this spiral list.

40. I am grateful to Sara Tanoğlu for information regarding *basmacılık*.

Resurrection. Almost without exception, in small circles at each of the four corners were images of the four evangelists together with their symbols: John with an eagle, Matthew with a man, Mark with a lion, and Luke with an ox. Other images might include seraphim or angels. Each of the images on the *sutoro* is generally surrounded by decorative intertwined floral arrangements or elaborate scrollwork. While some *sutore* were somber in tone, using mainly browns and tans, most were bright and vibrant, employing deep reds, blues, and aquas. All the *sutore* we saw in Tur Abdin were made within the past thirty years or so, but perhaps they are based on older models.

The first church built in the Saffron Monastery was not the main church where the patriarchal throne is kept, but the Church of the Mother of God, the apse of which contains traces of sixth-century mosaics. Today this church houses an octagonal baptismal font, which is still used for baptisms, and two several-hundred-year-old paladins that were once used to transport the patriarch around Tur Abdin. The monastic complex also contains a church dedicated to Saints Peter and Paul, formerly where the newly elected patriarch was consecrated. Today it is no longer used, but inlaid into the altar of this church is a stone from the ancient Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate in Antioch. Some identify this stone as the back of the so-called “Throne of Antioch”—the patriarchal throne of the archbishop of Antioch before the exile of Severus.⁴¹ Whatever its original use, the polished pink limestone is conceivably the back of a throne because of its size and shape. On it is carved a cross supported on a triangular base and sprouting a peacock-like plume above. The cross is flanked by two horses apparently bowing down to it in reverence. Around it is a Syriac inscription: “Everything you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven, and everything you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven” (Mt 16:19)—the words Jesus spoke to Peter.⁴² Hence this stone from Antioch vividly “symbolizes the apostolicity of the Patriarch of Antioch.”⁴³

There are also three “mountain” churches in the hills behind the monastery to the north, dedicated to Mor ‘Ozoziel, Mor Jacob of Serug, and the Mother of God. During our visit we hiked to the latter late in the

41. Brock and Taylor 2:213.

42. My thanks to George A. Kiraz for helping me read and interpret this inscription.

43. Brock and Taylor 2:213.

day and came down the mountain as the sun was setting. The trip both up and down afforded spectacular views of the Saffron monastery illuminated in the fading light of day. As we had missed Ramsho because of our hike, one member of our group, a deacon in the Syriac Orthodox Church, led us in the recitation of the *Abun d'bashmoyo* (Our Father) in the church. Although it is unclear when these churches were built, they were used by the hermits until PKK activities in the area in the 1980s made them unsafe. Today they are abandoned, starting to be filled with graffiti and the droppings of the sheep herded by locals.

The Saffron Monastery has throughout its history been a center of intellectual activity, both religious and secular, as is evidenced by its extensive and varied manuscript collection.⁴⁴ This tradition of intellectual excellence has continued until modern times. Patriarch Ignatius Peter IV (d. 1895), then residing at the Saffron Monastery, visited England in the winter of 1874–1875 and purchased a printing press, which continued to be used until 1969.⁴⁵ It was used to print liturgical and other religious books not only in Syriac but also in Turkish, Arabic, and Ottoman Turk. The monastery also published a monthly magazine called *Öz Hikmet* (*The Real Wisdom*) until 1955. Today this printing press is displayed in the Church of the Mother of God near the paladins. In addition, Mor Ignatius Aphrem I Barsoum, Syriac Orthodox Patriarch from 1933 to 1957 and a prolific scholar of Syriac history, was originally a monk of the Saffron Monastery.⁴⁶ His “incomparable knowledge of Syriac literature” was distilled in his “invaluable” *History of Syriac Literature and Sciences*.⁴⁷ Finally, Mor Philoxenus Yuhanon Dolabani (1885–1969), a monk of the Saffron Monastery from 1908 and Metropolitan Bishop of Mardin from 1947 to 1969, was the author of numerous important works in Syriac, Arabic, and Turkish, including translations of Syriac liturgical and reli-

44. For the intellectual tradition of the monastery until the present, see Brock and Taylor 2:165–66, and “The Deyrulzafaran Monastery: The Pearl of Mardin.”

45. For the life of Mor Peter IV, see <http://www.syrianchurch.org/bio/MorPathrosIV.htm>.

46. For the life of Mor Aphrem, see <http://sor.cua.edu/Personage/PAphrem1/index.html>.

47. Brock and Taylor 2:213. Originally published in Arabic, *al-Lu'lu' 'al-Manthur* (2d. ed. Aleppo, 1956; repr. Baghdad, 1976), the work was translated into Syriac by Metropolitan Philoxenus Yuhanon Dolabani, *Berule bdire* (Qamlishli, 1967), and into English by Matti Mousa, *The History of Syriac Literature and Sciences* (Pueblo, CO: Passeggiata, 2000). The same translation has recently been republished as *The Scattered Pearls: History of Syriac Literature and Sciences* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2004).

gious texts into Turkish and Arabic, as well as histories and poetry.⁴⁸ This tradition of intellectual excellence is continued by the present Metropolitan, Mor Filüksinos Saliba Özman.

Tea and conversation with Metropolitan Filüksinos Saliba was a delight not only because he speaks perfect English, having studied at Oxford for some years, but also because of his charm, wit, and humanity. Within a few minutes of meeting him, I immediately sensed his vitality and vigor and the enthusiasm that he has for caring for his flock and for promoting Syriac Christianity, language, and culture. In June 2003, Rev. Stephen Griffith wrote thus of Mor Filüksinos Saliba and the hope that attended his arrival, also giving hint of the political situation and significance of the Saffron Monastery:

The arrival of Bishop Saliba Özman at Deir Zafaran as Bishop of Mardin has made a clear impact on the town and the monastery. Before his arrival the former Abbot, Fr Ibrahim Turker, had continued with some excellent work in providing new stone steps at the entry of the monastery and to the interior door, replacing ugly concrete work dating back to the 1950s. Fr Ibrahim had borne the brunt of caring for the monastery during extreme times in the Kurdish uprising and must be praised for his steadfast presence against all manner of problems. Bishop Saliba has arrived in Mardin as an Oxford educated Turkish national, and this seems to have a considerable impression on the local population, for whom Germany would be the more obvious place for further education. He is the first Bishop in Mardin since 1969,⁴⁹ and his presence gives support to the local Christian population. He visits and has been visited by the local Governor, with whom the Monastery continues to have a warm relationship. He has a monastery with eight boys resident who study at the local high school in Mardin, and is restoring rooms to give them better accommodation. It is permitted to teach the boys Syriac, as the new [Turkish] constitution allows the teaching of the languages of compact minorities in private, however, as an alumnus of Oxford University's Oriental Institute, Bishop Saliba is keen to

48. On Bishop Dolabani, see <http://syriacchristianity.org/bio/MorDolabani.htm>. A biography has been published: Gregorios Yuhanna Ibrahim, *Dolabani: The Ascetic Metropolitan of Mardin* (Aleppo: Mardin, 1999).

49. Because of the adverse political climate, after the death of Mor Philoxenus Yuhanon Dolabani in 1969, the metropolitan see of Mardin remained vacant. The naming of a new bishop in 2003 was a sure sign of better days to come for the Syriac Orthodox Church in Tur Abdin.

develop Turkey's teaching of Syriac and hopes that Deir Zafaran might become a recognized institute for the teaching of Syriac.⁵⁰

I came away from meeting the bishop with a hopeful feeling that Syriac Orthodox Christianity will perdure and perhaps even thrive in the area under his tenure.

At the Saffron Monastery we were also fortunate to meet Malphono Abrohom Nuro, a renowned teacher of the Syriac language, who was visiting the monastery from his home in Aleppo. Considered by some to be the living embodiment of Syriac culture, Malphono Abrohom's books are used throughout the world for the teaching of Syriac as a living language. For those of us on the trip who were students of Syriac, it was nothing less than a grace to meet this man who has done so much to maintain the Syriac language as a living tradition and to experience his warmth and encouragement.

It is fitting to conclude this section with a poem about the Saffron Monastery written by Mor Philoxenus Yuhanon Dolabani, who was a monk there from 1908 and Metropolitan Bishop of Mardin from 1947–1969. Even in translation this poem conveys a sense of the author's love for his monastery, its significance for Syriac Christians, and its precarious predicament in the middle of the twentieth century:⁵¹

A SONG FOR THE SAFFRON MONASTERY

How beautiful is our mother, worthy of all praise,
The glory of the churches, the throne of the wise patriarchs!
Sweet is the shadow of your protection for the children of our people.
Gathered in your vaults are all the heroes of the Syriac faith.

The love for you in my heart is not feeble,
But ablaze like a burning fire.
Your enemies I will utterly destroy,
And every army rising up to torture you I will throw down.
A crown of glory will I weave upon your head,
for this is what you are: my boast and my pride.

50. From <http://sor.cua.edu/Pub/StephenGriffith/VisitSETurkeyJun2003.html>.

51. The Syriac text of this poem consists of two stanzas of four and six lines, respectively, with a rhyming pattern of AAAA and BBBBCC. The Syriac text can be seen at Hollerweger 351; the translation is mine.

3. *The Monastery of Mor Jacob the Recluse*

The Monastery of Mor Jacob the Recluse (Syriac: Dayro d’Mor Ya’qub Hbishoyo; Turkish: Mor Yakup Manastiri), is located in the village of Salah (Turkish: Bariştepe). About an hour’s drive from Mardin, to get there one must pass through Midyat, the largest city within Tur Abdin proper. Little is known of the early history of this monastery, and there is no literary mention of it before the tenth century.⁵² Hence the early history of the monastery has the status of legend.

According to local tradition,⁵³ the Monastery of Mor Jacob the Recluse is named for its founder, who supposedly was born c. 330 in Egypt and was initially a monk of the Monastery of Bishoi in Wadi al-Natrun. During the reign of Julian the Apostate (361–363) he fled Egypt, eventually coming to Amida (present day Diyarbakır), then Salah, founding a monastery there in 419. While there are definite historical links between the Coptic- and Syriac-speaking churches of antiquity because of their shared non-Chalcedonian stance, connecting the foundation of Mor Jacob Monastery with the monastic movement in Egypt smacks of typical late-antique apologetic attempts by Greek-speaking ecclesiastics in Syriac cultural milieux to validate Syriac monasticism to a Byzantine audience.⁵⁴ It may be the case, as Gertrude Bell suggested, that the monastery is named for the hermit Jacob encountered by the Persian Shah Kawad I on his way to the siege of Amida in 502.⁵⁵ According to the story recorded by Procopius, Jacob lived an ascetic life within a small area enclosed by a kind of fence in a place called Endielon, a day’s journey from Amida. One day during the war between the Romans and Persians he held off a band of attackers by making their

52. Gertrude Bell, *Churches and Monasteries of the Tur Abdin and Neighbouring Districts* (Heidelberg, 1914; repr. Nendeln/Liechtensten: Kraus, 1978) 74.

53. The local tradition regarding the early history of Mor Jacob Monastery is derived from our tour guide and a brochure published by the monastery entitled “Mor Jacob Monastery, Salah-Turabdin.”

54. Two particularly helpful articles that highlight the native character of Syriac monasticism and unmask its purported roots in Egypt are Sebastian P. Brock, “Early Syrian Asceticism,” *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984) art. 1, and Sidney H. Griffith, “Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism,” *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford UP, 1995) 220–45.

55. Bell 74. The encounter is recorded in Procopius, *De bello persico* 1.7, 8–13.

arms so stiff that they could not hold their weapons. This miracle was reported to Kawad, who then came to ask the holy man to release the men from their incapacity. Jacob did so, and Kawad, expecting a demand for money, asked Jacob what reward he might like. The Shah was surprised when the hermit requested that all who fled to him during the war be granted immunity. The request was granted, and it is reported that many lives were saved. While this Jacob may be the founder, the actual namesake of the monastery remains uncertain.

The monastery's brochure also reports that Emperor Anastasius financed the construction of the monastery and that its architects were named Theodorus and Theodosius, but this is incorrect, as these facts are known to pertain to Mor Gabriyel Monastery (see above). Furthermore, according to the local tradition, the ruins lying outside the main church are the remains of Mor Jacob's fifth-century hermitage. The present structure of the main church has been dated more securely on inscriptional grounds to the eighth century—there are eight inscriptions from the years 752–755.⁵⁶ The monastery's Beth Qadishe supposedly houses the tomb of Mor Jacob.

For 475 years, from 1364 to 1839, Mor Jacob was the seat of an anti-patriarchate set up in opposition to the Saffron Monastery. In this period there were five reconciliations between the two patriarchates, the last being in 1839.⁵⁷ In 1720 the monastery was abandoned and inhabited by Kurds, but in 1851 Metropolitan Mor Filüksinos Zaytun of Anhil reclaimed it and installed there a monk named Havschabo. The monastic life continued to be lived at Mor Jacob until the instability of World War I caused its suspension there.⁵⁸ Shortly before this, Gertrude Bell visited twice, in 1909 and 1911.⁵⁹ She reports that in 1911 there were two monks in residence who regularly conducted the liturgical services. On her 1911 visit, Bell found herself “impressed even more than” in 1909 “by the beauty and solidity of the architecture. The masonry is better finished here

56. Palmer, *Monk and Mason* 186–87, and Brock and Taylor 2:214.

57. Palmer, “The 1600-Year History of the Monastery of Qartmin (Mor Gabriyel),” Hollerweger 37–46, at 45.

58. These details regarding Mor Jacob from the eighteenth to the twentieth century are only reported in the brochure “Mor Jacob Monastery, Salah-Turabdin.”

59. For her report, see Bell 71–75. Pictures of the monastery from both her visits are available at <http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/>, photos M182–M195, R191–R193, R195–R197, and R201.

than anywhere in the Tur Abdin, except in the church of the Virgin at Hah, and the brickwork of the vaulted roofs is the finest in the district.”⁶⁰

The monastery was re-inhabited in 1965 by Abbot Yakup Tekin, who remains in office. In 1973 he was joined by two nuns (named Nisane and Hazme), for whom a new convent was built and whom we met preparing vegetables near the monastery garden during our visit. This trio was joined by two younger monks, Doniel and Saliba, in 1987 and 1996, respectively.⁶¹ Therefore, as of August 2005, the Monastery of Mor Jacob the Recluse was home to three monks, two nuns, and twelve students. Only one Syriac Orthodox family lives in the village of Salah, the rest of its inhabitants being Muslim. On our visit to the monastery, we did not meet any of the resident monks, but one of the boys attending the monastery’s school gave us a tour of the complex.

4. *The Church of the Mother of God*

As Hah (Turkish: Anitli) lies only a few kilometers east of Salah, so we visited the Church of the Mother of God directly after the Monastery of Mor Jacob the Recluse.⁶² It is sometimes also called by its Arabic name *El Hadra*, i.e. *al-‘Adra*. Local tradition claims that the Church of the Mother of God (Syriac: Idtho d’Yoldat Aloho; Turkish: Meryemana Kilisesi) in Hah was founded by the Kings of the Orient as they returned to their native land after visiting the infant Jesus in Bethlehem. According to this legend, twelve kings from the east came to Hah following the star that signified the birth of the new king, and from there they sent three of their group to Bethlehem. After they saw the child Jesus, the three returned to Hah with a strip of his swaddling-clothes. The twelve kings were unwilling to divide the cloth into pieces, so they burned it with the intention of sharing its ashes among them. But the fire transformed the cloth into twelve golden medallions instead. In honor of this miracle, the kings built a church dedicated to the Mother of God. So the legend goes, its fabulous nature quite obvious.⁶³

60. Bell 71.

61. These details regarding the re-founding of Mor Jacob and its subsequent growth are reported in the brochure “Mor Jacob Monastery, Salah-Turabdin.”

62. The village of Hah has a website: <http://www.hahoye.org>.

63. We were told a shorter version of this story during our visit; this fuller account is found in Hollerweger 169.

Whatever its origins, the Church of the Mother of God is the sole monastery of several in the vicinity of Hah that survives to the present day. For example, we visited the nearby ruins of the Monastery of Mor Sobo. The Mother of God's octagonal church, which dates perhaps to the late seventh century and has been extensively restored in recent years, is considered to be one of the most beautiful in Tur Abdin.⁶⁴ An older pointed roof on the dome made of tile was replaced with the present cubical structure made of stone in 1907. In 1909 a resident monk complained that the new roof leaked when it rained, whereas the older roof, being very solid, never leaked!⁶⁵ The brickwork of the vaulted ceiling of the dome is exquisite, arranged in a floral pattern and displaying one of the finest examples of the masonry and intricate stone-carving for which Tur Abdin is famous. Set against the bright blue sky, the cubical stone exterior of the church's dome carved with two registers of colonnaded arches on each side was also breathtaking to behold.

The church's recent restoration is made all the more remarkable by the fact that the monastery had to be abandoned in 1985 because of the activities of the PKK and was left to fall into disrepair. The monastery's re-vitalization began in the late 1990s when its grounds began to be cleared, and in 2000 a monk came to reside permanently there.⁶⁶ The Church of the Mother of God serves the seventeen Syriac Orthodox families who live in Hah as of August 2005. During our visit we were unable to meet the resident monk but were served a delicious lunch in the refectory.

5. The Monastery of Mor Hobil and Mor Abrohom

The Monastery of Mor Hobil and Mor Abrohom (Syriac: Dayro d'Mor Hobil w'Mor Abrohom; Turkish: Mor Abrohom Manastiri) in Midyat is commonly referred to by the name of Mor Abrohom alone. Mor Hobil (Abel) and Mor Abrohom (Abraham) were two late fifth-century monks

64. Brock and Taylor 2:214. The architectural significance of this church is indicated by the fact that it was visited twice by Gertrude Bell, in 1909 and 1911; for her 1909 description, see Bell 82–86. Pictures of the church from both her visits are available at the website on Gertrude Bell at <http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/>, photos M214–M241, M250–M254, and S002–S005.

65. See Gertrude Bell's diary for May 23, 1909, at <http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk>.

66. For these details about the abandonment and recent revival of monastery, see Rev. Stephen Griffith's reports for 1997–99, November 2000, and May 2001 at <http://sor.cua.edu>.

who lived near Midyat.⁶⁷ Mor Hobil was originally a monk of Qartmin Monastery and a contemporary there of Philoxenus of Mabbug (c. 440–523) who became a stylite in the vicinity of Midyat.⁶⁸ All we know of Mor Abrohom was that during the lifetime of Philoxenus he headed a monastery near Midyat. It seems that during their lifetimes Mor Hobil and Mor Abrohom were not associated in any particular way. Rather, they became linked in death when Mor Abrohom was buried in the monastery where Mor Hobil was buried. A new, larger church devoted to Mor Abrohom was built, and the older, smaller church of Mor Hobil became the Beth Qadishe and baptistery.⁶⁹

Not much else is known of the monastery's history. It was still active when Gertrude Bell visited twice, in 1909 and 1911.⁷⁰ She reports that little of the ancient structures remained, the entire complex having been reduced to a state of complete ruin and that it had been rebuilt recently according to the original plan. The monastery has three churches, the main church dedicated to Mor Abrohom and two smaller churches dedicated to Mor Hobil and the Mother of God. The vitality of Tur Abdin's ancient tradition of masonry is evident in all three churches, and the church of Mor Hobil displays a sutoro of Elijah ascending into heaven on his chariot, as Elisha watches the scene on his knees, with his hands raised in prayer and Elijah's cloak in front of him.

At some point after Bell's visit the monastery was abandoned.⁷¹ The barrel roof of the main church was destroyed by military action in the mid-1920s. It is reported that in the mid-1990s the monastery was subject to much plundering, grave-robbing, and vandalism. In the late 1990s high walls were built to secure the monastery, and the buildings began to

67. Our source of knowledge for Mor Hobil and Mor Abrohom is Elia of Qartmin, *Life of Philoxenus*, 101–18 and 402; ed. André de Halleux, *Eli de Qartamin: Memra sur S. Philoxène de Mabbug*, CSCO 233–34, Scr. Syr. 100–1 (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1963).

68. The *Life of Shmuyel* says that Hobil was the disciple of Shmuyel. Halleux argues that this information is derived from the *Life of Philoxenus*, making it chronologically impossible for Hobil both to have been a disciple of Shmuyel, who died c. 409, and even to have met Philoxenus, who was born c. 440 (Halleux, CSCO 234:vi).

69. See A. Mingana, "New Documents on Philoxenus of Hierapolis, and on the Philoxenian Version of the Bible," *The Expositor*, ser. 8, 19 (1920): 149–60, at 157.

70. See Bell 68–70. Pictures of the church from her 1909 visit are available at <http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/>, photos M159–M170.

71. The details regarding the history of Mor Gabriyel after Bell's visit until the present is gleaned from the reports of Rev. Stephen Griffith at <http://sor.cua.edu>, November 2001.

be restored. In 2003, the former abbot of the Saffron Monastery, Mor Ibrahim Turker, became the abbot of Mor Abrohom Monastery, thereby reviving monastic life there. He has since been joined by two nuns. Our visit to the monastery was regrettably brief, and the extensive restorations of the monastic complex left me with the impression of being in a brand new monastery. Its white-washed exterior looks nothing like that seen in the pictures by Gertrude Bell from 1909.

6. *The Monastery of Mor Melke*

Unfortunately our group did not have time to visit the Monastery of Mor Melke (Syriac: Dayro d'Mor Melke; Turkish: Mor Melke Manastiri), located two kilometers south of the village of Arkah (Turkish: Harapali). It was founded in the fourth century (supposedly in A.D. 315) and is named for Mor Melke (Malchus), whose tomb is found in the Beth Qadishe. A legend is told concerning Mor Melke that in Constantinople he captured a demon after exorcizing it from the emperor's daughter and brought it back to his monastery, collared by a mill stone, which now stands at the top of the monastery's well.⁷²

Since the monastery had been destroyed and rebuilt several times through the centuries, Gertrude Bell found little of architectural interest there when she visited in 1909.⁷³ At the time there were three monks. Mor Melke was badly damaged in 1915 and subsequently, particularly in the Kurdish rebellion of 1925–26, when Mor Melke was used as a Kurdish base. It remained unoccupied until 1955. More recently, the monastery was situated near the no-man's land between the PKK guerrillas and the Turkish army. Nonetheless, despite a brief period of abandonment, the monastery has been occupied by a monastic presence for most of the twentieth century, and as of November 2001 there were two monks and two nuns, as well as four students, in residence.⁷⁴

72. Hollerweger 237.

73. See Bell 70–71, and her diary for May 20, 1909, at <http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/>. Pictures of the monastery from her 1909 visit are available at same website, photos M142 and M144.

74. The details regarding the twentieth-century history of Mor Melke is gleaned from the May and November 2001 reports of Rev. Stephen Griffith at <http://sor.cua.edu>.

Two Notable Inactive Monasteries of Tur Abdin

1. The Monastery of the Holy Cross

The Monastery of the Holy Cross (Syriac: Dayro da'Slibo; Turkish: Dayro Daslibo Manastiri) is located in the village of Dayro Daslibo (Turkish: Çatalçam), which lies a few kilometers northeast of Hah. We visited it on the same day as we did Salah and Hah. The monastery was founded by Mor Aho c. 575–600 (the locals prefer an earlier foundation date of c. 500). Mor Aho was a native of Resh'aina (modern day Ra's al-Ain in Syria) and became a disciple of a local monk at the age of twelve. In 573 he was captured during a Persian raid and conscripted into the Persian army. Subsequently extricating himself, he returned to the Tur Abdin region and founded a monastery.

Some time after this he traveled to Jerusalem and Constantinople, from where he smuggled away a relic of the Holy Cross. Mor Aho hid the relic in a slit in his leg, which miraculously healed over the wound, demonstrating divine approbation of the theft. The monastery's main church, today dedicated to Mor Aho, was built over the relic, which was positioned in an undisclosed location (no doubt to prevent its further theft). Hence the relic cannot be seen and no one knows exactly where it is, though local tradition remains certain of its presence. Mor Aho is also responsible for the conversion of four villages in the area of Melitene (present day Eski Malayta) and for the foundation of another monastery in the same region. He died at a great age, and his tomb can still be seen today in the monastery's Beth Qadishe.⁷⁵

Whatever its history after the death of Mor Aho, Dayro da'Slibo was abandoned as a monastic site during the massacres of 1915. Subsequent attempts to revive monastic life there failed, with some of the monks being killed. The situation of the village in the late 1990s was so precarious that in May 2000 Rev. Stephen Griffith wrote: "[The village of] Dayro Daslibo has only 13 old people who are waiting to die. Their stories of the massacres of 1915 and 1924 are still vivid, but it is the migration of their children which will end the 1400 year old Christian history of the village."⁷⁶

75. Hollerweger 208.

76. From <http://sor.cua.edu/Pub/StephenGriffith/VisitSETurkeyMay2000.html>.

The situation of Dayro Daslibo has improved since then. One family has returned to the village from the diaspora, a young man returned to the village after his military service, and the local community and visiting emigrants have expended much energy restoring and improving the church. A new well has been sunk for the village by the local authorities.⁷⁷ Finally, a nun named Meryem (Mary) has lived at the monastery since 2001. She explained to us, however, that since there are no monks residing at the monastery and the liturgy is not performed on a regular basis, the Syriac Orthodox do not consider Dayro da'Slibo an active monastery. Nonetheless, the presence of Meryem is perhaps the prelude to the full revival of monastic life there. A visiting priest celebrates the liturgy every twenty to forty days for the five Christian families that now reside in the village.

When we visited Dayro da'Slibo, the lively Meryem gave us a tour of the monastery, speaking to us in German and becoming slightly embarrassed when her hearing aid would whistle. We were able to scan the magnificent horizon from atop the church, speaking also to a local woman as she dried tomatoes on the roof.

2. *The Monastery of Mor Augen*

Though it is presently unoccupied and we were unable to visit it during our trip, the historical importance of the Monastery of Mor Augen demands that it be mentioned. Located twenty-four kilometers northeast of Nusaybin, on the southern slope of Mt. Izlo, the monastery affords a spectacular view of the Mesopotamian plain. According to tradition, it was founded in the fourth century by an Egyptian monk named Augen (Eugenius or Eugene), who brought many disciples with him from Egypt.⁷⁸ Apparently the monastery had been abandoned and fallen into ruin by the end of the seventh century, for it had to be restored at that time by Abraham of M'arre. After its re-founding, the monastery flourished, becoming a center of monastic fervor and learning from which were founded many other monasteries. At some time before 1838,

77. These details of the recent history of Dayro Daslibo are gleaned from the November 2000, November 2001, and June 2003 reports of Rev. Stephen Griffith at <http://sor.cua.edu>.

78. See my comments above on the late-antique apologetic attempt to validate Syriac monasticism by tracing its roots to Egypt.

ownership of Mor Augen was transferred to the Chaldaean (East Syriac) Christians, following the pattern of several monasteries on the southern slopes of Mt. Izlo. But by 1842 Mor Augen had returned to the Syriac Orthodox.⁷⁹

Gertrude Bell visited Mor Augen on May 19, 1909. She wrote of her visit:

There are 10 monks; they live mostly in caves some of which have upper chambers. I do not doubt that this is the real primitive monasticism. The bishop, an old man, has shut himself up in a cave, walled in and almost inaccessible above the monastery and intends to spend the rest of his days in silence. He eats once a day; the food is hoisted up to him in a basket – burghul, bread, lentils and oil – none of the monks eat anything else. The rais [i.e. abbot] entertained me and told me how they were oppressed by the Kurds. He took me up to Mar Augen's cell in the rocks above the monastery to the W[est]. The kitchen is a half open cave with a big cave behind it as storehouse – skins of burghul in it. Several of the monks would not look at a woman and were carefully sent into their caves. The rais made an exception in my favour. The monastery owns lands and vinyards [*sic*] but only so much of the produce is assigned to it by the church at large as is necessary for the livelihood of the monks. Rather heated discussion as to whether all Moslems go to Hell, apropos of the Sultan! The rais gave me lunch in his cell, omelet, burghul and raisins. He proposes, if allowed, to spend the rest of his days at Mar Augen. His native place is Mardin.⁸⁰

Although the monastery was ravaged in the Kurdish rebellion of 1925–26, it retained a small monastic presence until its last monk died in 1974, and the instability of the area caused by PKK activity made it impossible to revive the monastic life there. However, in 2001 the Turkish government encouraged the Syriac Orthodox to visit the site in preparation for its restoration to use as an active monastery again.⁸¹ As of August 2005, the monastery had not been revived, and I was unable to determine to what extent efforts had been made to that end.

79. This sketch of the history of Mor Augen is derived from Brock and Taylor 2:134–36.

80. From Bell's diary for May 19, 1909, at <http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/>. *Mar* is a variant pronunciation and spelling of *Mor*.

81. See Rev. Stephen Griffith's report for November 2001 at <http://sor.cua.edu>.

Therefore at the time of our visit, Tur Abdin was blessed with six active Syriac Orthodox monasteries. Each of them is able to manage with only a few monks and nuns because of the support they receive from the wider Syriac Orthodox community in Tur Abdin and beyond. It is to this wider, non-monastic community of Syriac Orthodox Christianity that I now turn in order to recount two remarkable stories that we heard.

The Miracle of the Virgin of Azekh

CHRISTIANITY in the Tur Abdin village of Azekh⁸² (Turkish: İdil) is far older than that of Tur Abdin in general. Whereas local tradition holds that the first Christian church was built in Azekh in A.D. 57, there is documentary proof that Azekh had a bishop in A.D. 120 (when it was called Beth Zabday).⁸³ Like many other villages in Tur Abdin, Azekh is no longer the home of a large Christian population. Today the Syriac Orthodox have one church, which is dedicated to Adrat Azekh, “the Virgin of Azekh.” Until recently there was also a Syriac Catholic community in the village. When the Catholics departed, they gave to the Orthodox a picture of the Virgin Mary depicted as the Immaculate Conception with the Latin caption: *O Maria sine labe concepta, ora pro nobis ad te confugientibus*.⁸⁴ This painting—so very western in style and theology—is now displayed in the Syriac Orthodox Church! As of August 2005, there were seven families of Syriac Orthodox Christians resident in Azekh, with a total of eighteen people. There is no resident priest, but one comes from Midyat every three months to celebrate the liturgy. During our visit we met a fourteen-year-old boy named Yusuf; not only is he the grandson of the last resident priest, who died a few years ago, but he is also the last person baptized in the church, in 1991. He is the tenuous hope for the perseverance of nearly 1900 years of Syriac Christianity in Azekh.

The Christians of Azekh were quick to relate the miracle story about the Virgin of Azekh, for whom their church is named. In 1915, when the Ottoman government was conducting a genocide of Armenian and

82. *Azekh* is actually an Arabic name, yet it is the most common in use.

83. Hollerweger 14.

84. “O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who flee to you!”

Syriac Christians in Anatolia on the ground that they were rebels, the residents of Azekh, who were mostly Christians at the time, turned their village into a fortification to withstand the impending attacks of the Ottoman army. Later that year, a force of approximately eight-thousand Ottoman troops together with German officers and Kurdish auxiliaries descended upon Azekh. The villagers not only resisted their enemies for twenty-five days but also inflicted heavy losses upon them. The Ottomans abandoned the siege, and thus Azekh successfully defended itself from the fate of so many other villages in the Tur Abdin region. All these facts are historically verifiable from documents of the period.⁸⁵

The Syriac Christians attribute their victory to the Virgin of Azekh. According to their story, during one of the cease-fires when (ultimately unsuccessful) negotiations for surrender were being discussed, a German officer related to the villagers that a cannon shot from their church was decimating the attacking Ottomans. Now the villagers knew they had no such weapon, possessing only rifles and other such small-caliber firearms. The officer added that he had seen not only this cannon firing at his troops from the church but also the Virgin Mary standing over the village of Azekh protecting it. It is said that this vision sparked a religious conversion in the officer. Reportedly, after the war, he became a Catholic priest, bishop, and later cardinal and wrote a book about his conversion experience at Azekh. While this miracle has been reported in a book recently published, neither I nor my colleagues have been able to discover the book written about Azekh by the German officer.⁸⁶ Whatever the

85. See Courtois 190–91.

86. The story is recounted in a recent book on Azekh: Yusuf Jibraa'il and Iliyaas Hidaaya [with a foreword by Yuhanna Ibrahim], *Aazikh: ahdaath wa-rijaal* (Halab: Daar al-Ruhaa, s.a.) 67–69. According to the authors, the name of the German officer was Bernard Louis, and he died in Rome in 1965. The authors give as the main source of the story Metropolitan Istifan Bello (Chaldaeian Bishop of Aleppo and Jazira, 1960–1989), who once met the “cardinal” at a meeting in Rome and from whom one of the authors heard the story on September 9, 1984, in Qamishli (in Syria, directly across the border from Nusaybin, Turkey). An additional source, from whom one of the authors heard the cardinal’s name and the date and place of his death, is Fr. Jacques Behnam Hindo, the Syriac Catholic Metropolitan of Hassake-Nisibis since 1997. I am grateful to Prof. Hidemi Takahashi of the University of Tokyo for this reference and his summary of it. Without mentioning the miracle story, Courtois (191), reports that the German officer was named “Bernard Pulls” and that he became a Trappist monk in Bavaria after the war. However, none of the present-day German-speaking Trappist monasteries I contacted have any record of either a “Bernard Louis” or a “Bernard Pulls” (or variant spellings thereof) who entered after the First World War.

means of Azekh's successful defense of their village, the Christians attribute it to the Virgin Mary and remain proud of her protection. On our visit, the caretakers of the Church of the Virgin of Azekh gave us each a holy card depicting the Virgin hovering over the city protecting it, the miraculous cannon firing at her feet.

Abouna Yusuf Akbulut: A Christian Witness in Diyarbakır

THE CITY of Diyarbakır (ancient Amida) is located approximately ninety kilometers to the northwest of Mardin, outside of Tur Abdin proper. Situated strategically on the bank of the Tigris River in the upper Mesopotamian plateau, Diyarbakır was fought over in turn by the Romans and the Parthians, by the Romans and the Persians, by the Byzantines and the Arabs, and by the Mongols and the Turks. Its fate to be the battleground between competing armies has continued to the present day, for Diyarbakır was badly damaged in the fighting between Kurdish rebels and Turkish military forces in the late twentieth century. Nonetheless, the ancient dark basalt walls of Diyarbakır are generally intact and constitute some of the best-preserved and most-impressive defensive walls in Turkey. During our visit we had the chance to examine the southwestern section, walking on top of the wall for a good portion of our inspection and enjoying the commanding view of the upper Mesopotamian plains from it.

It is not known precisely when Christianity came to Amida, but it was an episcopal see by the fourth century. In the southwestern quarter of the city (the Alipasa district) lies the Meryemana Kilisesi, the Church of the Mother of God, all that remains of a much larger monastic complex. While scholars dispute the date of the original foundation (probably sometime between the third and sixth centuries), local tradition holds that the church was built in the third century, re-using a pagan temple dedicated to the worship of the sun; stonework from this earlier temple has been incorporated in the church's altar rail and can be seen today.⁸⁷ The church is also the location of the tombs of two renowned

87. Gertrude Bell identified this piece of stone as a "marble window mullion reused as chancel post." See photo T030 at <http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/>.

Syriac writers: Mor Jacob of Serug (451–521), called “the Flute of the Holy Spirit” because of his prolific poetic genius, and Dionysius Bar Salibi, a theologian and the bishop of Amida from 1166 until his death in 1171.

In Diyarbakır we met the local Syriac Orthodox priest, Abouna (Father) Yusuf Akbulut, who gave us a tour of the Church of the Mother of God, as well as the nearby Chaldaean church, Saint Peter’s (built in the seventeenth century).⁸⁸ In fact, he is the priest for both communities, a consequence of the progressive Christian depopulation of Diyarbakır. The city was home to approximately 13,500 Christians in 1870. It lost more than 5000 in the massacres of 1915. In 1966, about 1000 Christians still resided in the city. Yet on account of emigration to Istanbul and into the western Diaspora, today there are only four Christian families left. Abouna Yusuf is the sole priest, and thus he serves the remaining Christians in Diyarbakır, regardless of denomination.

In 2000, Abouna Yusuf (aged 36 at the time) became the center of international attention when one of the major Turkish newspapers, *Hürriyet*, published a report claiming that in an interview he had confirmed the Armenian genocide and added that Syriac Christians had suffered the same fate. A few days earlier *Hürriyet* reporters had approached Abouna Yusuf hoping to have him deny, on record, the historicity of the Armenian genocide. He refused to speak to them. They promised him that his comments would remain between them, so Abouna Yusuf made a few off-the-record comments. But he was secretly being videotaped, and *Hürriyet* published his comments in a sensationalist article by Ramazan Yavuz on October 4, 2000.⁸⁹

Hürriyet reported that Abouna Yusuf had said: “Not only the Armenians, but also the Suryani [i.e., Syriac Christians] were victims of the genocide, for the only reason that they were Christians. The Suryani were massacred in great numbers, and the Kurds were used for this genocide.” When asked the reason for his assertions, Abouna Yusuf replied:

The homeland of the Suryani is Beth Nahrin [Mesopotamia], and for the Armenians the provinces of Mush, Erzurum, Van, Erzincan and

88. There is also an Armenian church in Diyarbakır; unfortunately, the caretaker was away and no one else had a key for it.

89. For the original newspaper article, see: http://www.aramnaharaim.org/yusuf_akbulut.htm, or the *Hürriyet* archives for October 4, 2000, at <http://www.hurriyetim.com.tr>, under “Arşiv Arama.”

Sivas. The Armenians had settled in these areas. Why are there no more Armenians today when there was such a big population at that time? In our area one remembers this time as “kafle.” What does “kafle” mean? It means genocide. All people of this area know the truth. I don’t say this just to support the Armenians. What I am saying is that the fact of the genocide is correct. Nobody can deny it. I am a religious person; what I am saying is true.

When asked about the Kurdish involvement in the genocide, Abouna Yusuf remarked:

They [the Turks] promised the Kurds that whoever killed seven Christians would go to Paradise. And therefore the Kurds who believed this took part in this genocide. The Kurds who sometimes visit our church today realize this and feel sorry about it. The numbers of Suryani are very diminished today in Mesopotamia, their real native country. But in the states of Europe they are very numerous. They have been forced to emigrate. Today there is no more repression against us. We feel more or less good, no more under pressure. We are content with our life. But we cannot deny history.

In a radio interview on December 7, 2000, Abouna Yusuf’s defense attorney, Abdul Kadir Pekdemir, reported the priest’s concluding comments a bit differently (perhaps he was paraphrasing): “Today we are living happily and safely and we are not subjected to any harm. In a very free manner, we are allowed to celebrate our religion and traditions.”⁹⁰ In any event, it was his preceding comments on the genocide that would arouse the wrath of many in Turkey.

The caption on Abouna Yusuf’s picture that accompanied the article read *İçimizdeki hain* (“A Traitor Among Us”). The publication of the incendiary story sparked outrage throughout Turkey because the government of the Republic of Turkey has consistently denied that the Armenian killings of 1915 can be characterized as a genocide, claiming that, in the context of widespread partisan fighting in Anatolia in 1915, some Armenians were killed as rebels acting on behalf of Russian interests in the region. The newspaper story was calculated to provoke a

90. See <http://www.bethsuryoyo.com/Code/Music/AbounaYousif.html>. This site also has an audio recording of a radio interview conducted in Syriac with Abouna Yusuf that took place on December 4, 2000.

political reaction, since in 2000 several western governments were proposing and passing resolutions characterizing the killings of Armenians during World War I as genocide (e.g., HR596, the Armenian Genocide Resolution of the U.S. Congress, which ultimately passed). Such resolutions were fiercely opposed in Turkey where they were seen as jeopardizing Turkey's hopes to become a member of the European Union.

On October 6, Abouna Yusuf was arrested at his church in front of locals and foreign tourists on suspicion of treason, a crime punishable by death in Turkey.⁹¹ He was interrogated for eighteen hours, then placed under house arrest. He was formally indicted on October 18 on charges of "inciting public and racial hatred," a crime punishable by one to three years of imprisonment. Abouna Yusuf remained thus until his first appearance in court on December 21. His case attracted international attention,⁹² and several countries of the EU as well as the USA sent delegations to the trial to observe whether Turkey would uphold the priest's human rights. Hence, once again, Diyarbakır had become a battleground between opposing forces, this time between Turkey's denied past and its hope for the future.

Abouna Yusuf's trial commenced on December 21 and was continued in two more sessions on February 22 and April 5, 2001. The court acquitted him of "inciting public and racial hatred" by his comments recorded in *Hürriyet* in October 2000. Upon examining Abouna Yusuf's videotaped comments, the court characterized them as "an issue of freedom of thought" and private opinions, which, as such, did not constitute a public attempt to incite hatred. Noting the political implications of the trial, defense attorney Abdul Kadir Pekdemir said: "This is a very positive and important decision for Turkey. I believe it can only help our relations with Europe, to emphasize the direction we are going to encourage and strengthen freedom of thought among all our citizens." Abouna Yusuf merely said that justice prevailed and that he had expected this decision. He then resumed his pastoral duties. Even though I met him only briefly,

91. See the *Hürriyet* archives for October 6, 2000.

92. For the U.S. Congressional letter on Fr. Yusuf Akbulut to the government of the Republic of Turkey, see: <http://www.aina.org/releases/sezeralbright.htm>.

I can hardly imagine the soft-spoken and gentle priest publicly inciting hatred.⁹³

Though the acquittal of Abouna Yusuf was a tremendous boon for the dwindling Christian community of Diyarbakır, problems continue. During the night after Epiphany 2003, the Church of the Mother of God was broken into, looted, and vandalized. Many valuable and historical items were stolen such as a large eighteenth-century handwritten gospel, three seventeenth-century silver crosses, and an ancient icon of the Mother of God set over the tomb of Dionysius Bar Salibi. Around the same time, a road was constructed through the Syriac cemetery in Diyarbakır, the protests of the Christians going unheeded.⁹⁴ Yet, during our visit here in August 2005, the Church of the Mother of God appeared to be in excellent upkeep, with signs of much recent renovation. The Chaldaean church, however, was less well cared for. Nonetheless, the Christians in Diyarbakır have a precarious existence, and perhaps the community there will in time dwindle to nothing. I cannot help but admire the deep faith and conviction of such Syriac Orthodox Christians as Abouna Yusuf Akbulut in the face of such odds.

A Postscript: The Silence of Cappadocia

AFTER the official program ended and most of the participants departed for home, I traveled to Cappadocia to visit the ancient Christian sites there. As I toured various churches and monasteries carved out of rock in Cappadocia's other-worldly landscape, I felt within myself a growing

93. Turkey's refusal to acknowledge the Armenian genocide of 1915 continues to this day. At the time of writing this travelogue (September 2005), Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk had been indicted for his remarks about the genocide in a Swiss newspaper and was awaiting trial. But perhaps change is on the way. In both May and September 2005, the judicial branch of the government twice forbade an academic conference on the Armenian genocide from being held in Istanbul, but the organizers of the conference managed legally to circumvent the rulings of the court by moving the venue to a private university. The conference was finally held (despite vociferous protests) September 23–25, 2005, at Bilgi University in Istanbul—the first public discussion of the reality of Armenian genocide in the history of the Republic of Turkey. The charges against Orhan Pamuk were dropped on January 23, 2006.

94. See the report entitled "Church of the Mother of God, Diyarbakır, looted," from January 9, 2003, at <http://sor.cua.edu/SOCNews/>.

sense of sadness. What was bothering me? Many of the churches and monasteries had admission fees and caretakers who really knew nothing about their history or significance. At the entrance to each site there was often a gaggle of vendors hawking souvenirs. Yes, the tourism of the area bothered me. But there was something more. As they were no longer active, the churches and monasteries were in various states of disrepair. Nearly everywhere, the walls were filled with graffiti like “Ibrahim seviyor Yasemin” (“Ibrahim loves Yasemin”), and the frescoes of Christ, Mary, the Archangels, Apostles, Martyrs, Fathers, and other saints were disfigured. This was the work of Muslims, who hold the representation of the human form to be blasphemous; by disfiguring such depictions, especially by scratching out the eyes, they believe they effectively “kill” the figure and remove the blasphemy. It was disheartening to see thus destroyed what were still in many cases vibrant representational narrations of the life of Christ and depictions of the Mother of God and the other saints. The one advantage of the Christian sites of Cappadocia becoming tourist attractions is that they are saved from further disfigurement—but the damage has already been done.

Still, something else bothered me in Cappadocia. What saddened me most was the silence of Christian Cappadocia. Unlike Tur Abdin, there are no Christian communities in Cappadocia. I encountered no living tradition. At each church and monastery I visited, I met no local Christian, brimming with pride, who gave me a tour of the place. I learned no stories about when the church was founded, heard nothing of the local saints whose relics were housed and venerated in the church. No local Christians told me of the recent history of their communities in the twentieth century, and none expressed their hopes and fears for the future. I met no Christian children who were eagerly studying their heritage or even playing soccer in the safety of their churches’ courtyards. Christian Cappadocia was silent and dead, its past forgotten and without a future, reduced to being the receptacle of the sentiments of teenage lovers and a place to be checked off the list of droves of bus-delivered tourists.

The sadness I experienced in Cappadocia was made all the more poignant by the realization that the same could happen in Tur Abdin. Regardless of the current rejuvenation of Syriac Orthodox Christianity

in Tur Abdin, the situation remains precarious and could dramatically change with the election of a new government in Turkey. It is my prayer that Tur Abdin be spared the fate of Cappadocia. It is my hope that my account can in some small way raise awareness of the rich heritage of Syriac Christianity in Tur Abdin and inspire others to care deeply about its preservation for future generations. In the words of Mor Timotheus Samuel Aktaş, Abbot of Mor Gabriyel and Archbishop of Tur Abdin:

This region, which can boast of a long and glorious past, represents a matchless treasure to us. While our unique churches and monasteries add to the riches of Anatolia, they are also the common inheritance of Christians and, indeed, of all humanity. Therefore, it is our task to be stewards for the protection and preservation of this valuable inheritance. It is our wish . . . that silence and oblivion be transformed into publicity and efforts to prevent Tur Abdin from disappearing into a void as other regions of Mesopotamia have done.⁹⁵

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95. Cited by Hollerweger 9–10.