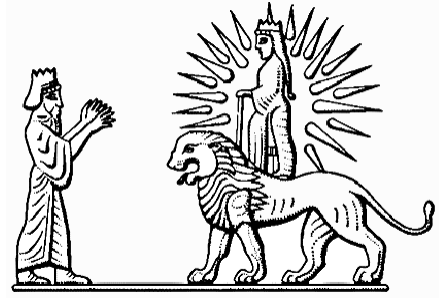


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HANAN CHARAF & ANIS CHAAYA Beirut

Syriac Cult Places in Wadi Qadisha in Lebanon

The Valley of Qadisha is a remote and inaccessible region in northern Lebanon. The valley is located at the foot of the Makmel mountain of the Mount Lebanon chain, to the west of the famous forest called “God Cedars Forest” mentioned in the Bible and which still stands with young growing trees. The Qadisha Valley combines two smaller valleys, or wadis, as they are called in Arabic: Wadi Qozhaya and Wadi Qannoubine. The Wadi Qozhaya is located to the north and the Wadi Qannoubine to the south, running parallel to each other in an east-west direction. They are separated by the mountain of Mar Elias. Wadi Qannoubine is the longest at approximately 15 km long.

Due to the difficult terrain, Wadi Qadisha was an ideal place for Christians seeking refuge from religious persecution from as early as the 7th c. A.D. It was these Christians who named this region “Qadisha,” which means “sacred” in Syriac, turning the valley into an important religious center. Some one hundred archaeological sites are known here and served a variety of purposes, which included secular, military or religious functions. It is the unique character of this valley that combines beautiful almost untouched landscape dotted by numerous cult places, which led UNESCO to classify the Valley of Qadisha on the World Heritage List as an “International Heritage Landscape” in 1998.¹

I. Archaeological Setting

Archaeological surveys, though incomplete and insufficient, have shown that this valley was inhabited early on during the Middle Bronze Age (2000-1550 BC).² It was then resettled later in Roman times (perhaps by those bandits mentioned in Strabo’s “Geography”). However, it was in the medieval period,

during a 400-year span of time from the 11th through the 15th c. AD, that Qadisha became densely inhabited.

The sites of this period can be classified into three main types: **religious caves** (which include rupestal chapels or churches, convents, and monasteries around which small villages developed in

¹ A. Chaaya, *Plan de gestion de la vallée de la Qadisha et de la forêt des Cèdres de Dieu – Liban*, Document n°: 3077, General Directorate of Antiquities, (1998).

² H. Abdul-Nour, et A. Ghaouche, “Mgharet Deir Mar Semaan (Aïto): des ossements et des questions,”

A. Panaino & G. Pettinato (eds.)
MELAMMU SYMPOSIA III (Milano 2002)
ISBN 88-8483-107-5

Liban Souterrain 3 (1991), 26-28;

H. Abdul-Nour; R. Geze, and O. Kallab, “Mgharet Mar Challita: multiples facettes d'une grotte mal connue,” *Spéléorient* 1 (1996), 40-45;

R. Geze, “Vestiges osseux et litiques de Mgharet Mar Challita,” *Spéléorient* 1 (1996), 46-50.

some cases), **military caves** (that is, fortresses or watchtowers/watch cavities),

and **dwelling caves** (where hermits and other people lived or camped out).

II. A Historical Review of the Valley

The Valley of Qadisha was an ideal refuge for Christians, especially for Jacobites and Maronites, who sought safety from persecution. The presence of Jacobites has been attested since the 5th c.,³ but it was during the 15th c. that they became very powerful in Mount Lebanon, especially in Qadisha. Many influential Jacobite priests were born in Mount Lebanon, among them Bishop Dioscurus and Patriarch Noah of Bqufa, who started converting the villagers of Qadisha to Syriac religion.⁴

Jacobites coexisted peacefully with Maronites with whom they shared the Valley of Qadisha. These two rites shared many saints and the same liturgy of the mass.⁵ But this situation changed in 1488 when Maronites, pushed by Catholic Franciscans, expelled Jacobites and their proteges, the Ethiopians, from Ehden in the Mount Lebanon. The Jacobites sought refuge in the Valley of Qadisha where they were under the protection of a regional governor who had converted to

Jacobism. However, during this time, attempts were made to improve communication between the groups, understand the differences between them, and restore relations. So in this period, we find the names of the patriarchs of Jacobites and Maronites being honored in the same time.⁶

But again in the beginning of the 16th c., Jacobites were expelled definitely this time from Qadisha.

Numerous Maronite monasteries and churches in the Qadisha Valley were initially built and used by Jacobites.

What follows are the most important Jacobite sites in Qadisha that are relevant to this paper.

A. The site of Mar Assia (Saint Assia)⁷

Mar Assia is located on the south side of the Qannoubine Valley, in an inacces-

³ Mention of Mount Lebanon in the manuscript B.M. 14542 dating from 509;

F. Baroudi, "Jacobites, Ethiopians and Mount Lebanon" (article in Arabic), *Liban Souterrain* 5 (1998), 75-160;

E. Honigmann, *Evêques et évêchés monophysites*, CSCO 127, 2, (1951).

⁴ F. Baroudi, "Jacobites, Ethiopians ..."

⁵ Manuscript Vat. Syr. CCCCXXIV.

⁶ Manuscript n°: 59 of the Library of Bkerké dating to 1501.

⁷ F. Baroudi, "Le contexte historique du site de Mar Assia, Hasroun" (article in Arabic), *Liban Souterrain* 5 (1998), 24-30;

H Abdul-Nour, N. Abdul-Nour et B. Jabbour-Gedeon, "L'ermitage rupestre de Mar Jirjis: des fresques inédites à motifs géométriques," *Spéléorient*

1, (1996), 81-84;

P. Abi Aoun, F. Baroudi, et P. Ghaouche, "Site de Mar Assia," *Liban Souterrain* 4, (1993), 2-12;

P. Abi Aoun, F. Baroudi et A. Maroun, "Monasteries in Qadisha Valley occupied by Ethiopian monks after being forced out of Ehden" (article in Arabic), *Liban Souterrain* 5, (1998), 17-23;

A. Badwi, "Ethiopian inscription in the Mar Assia church (Hasroun)" (article in Arabic), *Liban Souterrain* 5 (1998), 31-42;

A. Badwi, "Murals in the monasteries of Mar Assia, Mar Youhanna and Mar Gerges in Qadisha Valley related to both Ethiopians and Jacobites" (article in Arabic), *Liban Souterrain* 5 (1998), 43-50;

P. Jacob, "Etude analytique de l'inscription éthiopienne dans l'ermitage de Mar Assia (Mont-Liban, vallée de la Qadisha)," *Spéléorient* 1 (1996), 35-38;

sible spot that overhangs the whole valley. It consists of two caves: the first one is the church and the second one, a little higher up, shelters the hermitage. A fresh-water spring gushes forth from the first cave and abundantly supplies the entire neighborhood.

The spot is dedicated to Mar Assia⁸ (a name that derives from the Syriac word *Osyo* meaning a “medical doctor”). Mar Assia’s real name was Pantalaïmon, a doctor from Nicomedia in Asia Minor, who lived in the 4th c. and attended the poor for free after his conversion to Christianity. He was martyred in 303 A.D. Syriac, Maronite, Melkite and Ethiopian Christians worship Pantalaïmon. Even to this day, in the Valley of Qadisha, local people believe that the waters issuing from the cave have miraculous powers to cure children, especially those suffering from growth problems, carrying on the earlier tradition of the spring’s curative properties.

The church

The church consists of two contiguous chapels separated by a joint wall with an opening for communication between them. Each chapel has one nave with a broken barrel vault and a semi-domed apse facing east. The apse of the northern chapel and the eastern wall of the church are buried by stones from the collapse of the cliff, while the entrance is on the western side.

- The South Chapel is 8m long by 4m wide and stands 3m high. It is built with ashlar stones and has a niche carved in the rock.

In the apse, covered by white plaster, an inscription in Guèze was found in 1990. Guèze was the language of the Ethiopians of the Kingdom of Axum from the 4th c. till the 10th c. and is still used as a liturgical language in the Ethiopian Church. Also appearing in the apse were the initials of Jesus Christ, with the J and C written in Syriac, as well as the Greek letters IC-XC, which denote Byzantine influence. A large cross with cross-shaped ends is painted in red. A parallel to this cross can be found in the Jacobite church of Mar Touma in Mossoul, Iraq.

- The North Chapel has almost entirely collapsed. The chapel is built with square stones with only the apse and part of the entrance is still remaining. The interior of the apse is plastered, once again with Ethiopian frescoes depicting a figure (perhaps St George). A Syriac inscription was found under the first layer of plaster, but due to its poor condition of preservation, is yet to be deciphered.

The hermitage

The hermitage is located in a cave 15m above the church. The cave is 20m long by 2 to 4m wide. Except for the wall entrance, which is built with square stones, the rest of the cave retains its natural shape. In the wall and on the floor were medieval pottery sherds dating to the 13th and 14th c.

Historical outline

We don’t know who first inhabited Mar Assia since no texts have been found

R. J. Mouawad, “The Ethiopian monks in Mount-Lebanon (XVth century),” *Liban Souterrain*, 5 (1998), 186-207.

⁸ Even though there are two Mar Assia in the Syriac

synaxeria: Assia the miraculous and Assia the medical doctor, the site of Mar Assia is dedicated to the latter one due to the ongoing beliefs of curative properties of the site.

from the time of the site's inception and no archaeological excavations have been carried out. What we can be certain about is the existence of Jacobites at Mar Assia in the 15th c. A.D. This is supported by Syriac inscriptions found in the apses of the chapels. Were they the ones who built the church and the monastery? The 15th c. date is based on historical texts, and provides us with the *terminus ante quem* date for the building of the church.

What is more exceptional, though, is a unique Ethiopian inscription dated to the same period of time. Ethiopians being in Mount Lebanon long ago, however, religious conflicts with the Maronites began around 1473-1474 A.D. and in 1488 they forced the Monophysite Ethiopians to seek refuge in the Qadisha Valley. In our view, the Jacobites welcomed the Ethiopians and shared with them their own cult place dedicated to a commonly worshipped saint, as the two different kind of inscriptions show; thus proving first direct intercultural exchanges between different peoples in Qadisha.

After the expulsion of the Monophysites from Qadisha, the Maronites took over the site in the 16th c. At present, the site is completely abandoned and left in ruins.

B. The site of Mar Aboun⁹

Mar Aboun is also located on the south side of the Qannoubine Valley. The site consists of one church and a hermitage located in two natural cavities. Accord-

ing to early historians, this place was dedicated to Saint John the Small ("Mar Youhanna al Qassir"), surnamed "Abana" (meaning "our father" in Syriac).

The church

The church is located in a cave some 25m deep and 15m wide. The church itself is half the size of the cave with wide walls measuring 1 to 3m thick! It is built of sandstone, which is quite common in the valley. The entrance stands in the north wall. The church has one nave with a broken barrel vault and a semi-domed apse flanked by two vaulted niches. Four niches stand in the western wall of the church. An impost of red bricks stretches along the church walls and the apse. A unique feature found in the Mar Aboun church is the presence of a sacristy (or Beth Shamsha in Syriac) near the apse. No other church has a sacristy in Qadisha.

The interior of the church, built with well-hewn square stones is architecturally harmonious, while the exterior is less well done. At this stage we can't say whether this difference is intentional or the result of two separate periods of construction. Only further study can enlighten us on this matter.

A ruined two-storied building lies in front of the church. A cave can be seen from the lower level. A bread oven (*tannour*) was discovered, suggesting that this building could have been a dwelling. We don't know if it was contemporary

⁹ H. Abdul-Nour, et A. Ghaouche, "Mgharet Mar Aboun: l'église dans la caverne," *Spéléorient* 1 (1996), 14-20;

P. Abi Aoun, F. Baroudi, et P. Ghaouche, "Site de Mar Aboun," *Liban Souterrain* 4 (1993), 20-25 ;

P. Abi Aoun, F. Baroudi, et A. Maroun, "Mar Aboun monastery and the Mar Sarkis hermitage in Qadisha

Valley" (article in Arabic), *Liban Souterrain* 5 (1998), 211-218;

F. Baroudi, "Note à propos du reclus Elichaa dans l'ermitage de Mar Sarkis - Monastère de Mar Aboun" (article in Arabic), *Liban Souterrain* 5 (1998), 219-229.

with the church. Here again, only archaeological excavations will be able to properly determine its date and function.

The Monastery

The monastery occupies a cave near the church. The interior was left in its natural shape but covered with plaster. A single wall built of limestone different from that of the church closes off the entrance to the cave. An arch over the door is engraved with signs of the cross.

Historical outline of the site

The first mention of Mar Aboun dates to the 12th c. A.D. when the historian, Patriarch Estephan Doueihi, reported that “this monastery was the director of all hermitages in the region of Bcharré ...”¹⁰ Other chroniclers believe that Mar Aboun was a religious center for the Jacobites and drew such popular religious devotion that it threatened the superiority of the Maronite Monastery of Qannoubine. After the expulsion of the Jacobites from Qadisha, the site of Mar Aboun was left abandoned until 1668 when a French Capucin father, Father François de Chasteuil, was given the site to live in. This was part of an attempt on part of the Maronites to erase any proof of existence of the Jacobites in the Qadisha Valley. The Maronites even integrated Mar Aboun, in their synaxeria in 1584 A.D.

Nowadays, the church of Mar Aboun serves as a sheep-fold.

C. The site of Mar Sarkis¹¹

Mar Sarkis is located in the wadi cliff south of Mar Aboun, and consists of a church and a hermitage.

The church

The church is located in a natural cave 20m² in size. The entrance to the south consists of a wall made from rough square stones. A semi-domed apse coated with plaster on its inner face is also visible. As with Mar Aboun, there is an impost of red bricks around the walls of the church. What’s different from Mar Aboun, though, is that the natural rock forms the ceiling in the Mar Sarkis church. Two carved niches stand at the end of a natural corridor in the cave and may have sheltered cult statues.

The hermitage

The hermitage is located in a cave to the south of the church. Inside this cave are two superimposed cavities that form the hermitage. The lower cave has a built and plastered niche that is badly destroyed, and the hermitage is half broken down to floor level. Although the cause of this collapse is due to natural causes, the local people have another version still vivid in their memories. According to historical sources, the hermitage was once inhabited by the hermit Elisha al-Hadathi in 1393 A.D. This pious man was killed when a part of the cliff col-

¹⁰ E. Al-Doueihi, *History of Times*, Beirut (1951), 208.

¹¹ H. Abdul-Nour, et F. Mehanna, “Mar Sarkis (Ouadi Qannoubine-Mar Aboun): vestiges d’ermitage rupestre et grotte-chapelle,” *Spéléorient* 1 (1996), 21-

26 ;

P. Abi Aoun, F. Baroudi, et A. Maroun, “Mar Aboun monastery and the Mar Sarkis ...” 216-218;

F. Baroudi, “Note à propos du reclus Elichaa ...”

lapsed. This event was consequently viewed as a sign of God's wrath on the hermit, because he had earlier induced the Maronite patriarch Daoud to follow "heretic" (i.e. Jacobite) practices.

D. The site of Mar Girgis¹² (Saint George)

The site of Mar Girgis is located in Wadi Hulat below the village of Hadshit, on the north side of the Qannoubine Valley. It consists of two chapels. One is dedicated to Saint George and the other to Saint Challita. The patriarch Doueyhi said that this place was used, among others, by Ethiopians in 1488 A.D. after they were expelled by the Maronites from Ehden (in the Mount Lebanon).

The chapel of Mar Challita

The chapel of Mar Challita sits in a cave. It has a semi-domed apse oriented to the east and flanked by niches. An impost runs halfway along the apse's wall. This is the same arrangement as in the Mar Aboun and Mar Assia churches, and could indicate that the three chapels were built contemporaneously.

The chapel of Mar Girgis

About 23m above the chapel of Mar Challita lies the chapel of Mar Girgis,

which consists of an apse carved in the rock and oriented exactly like the Mar Challita's apse. A plastered altar stands in the middle of the apse. In 1991, frescoes were discovered under the plaster of the apse. The motifs of these frescoes are entirely geometric, with no anthropomorphic figures depicted. Parallels to these motifs were found in the Zaafarane region in Turkey, a Jacobite high place.¹³ This is the first time that abstract motifs were found in the Qadisha Valley, and some think that this could indicate a possible survival of an iconoclastic community in this remote area. This is a point, however, that must be studied in further detail.

E. The monastery of Mar Youhanna¹⁴ (Saint John)

This monastery is located above Mar Girgis in a natural cave. It consists of a church and a room. The church has two parts: an entrance and the nave. The entrance has two beautiful arches running parallel to the nave and built with square stones. The nave and the apse are both entirely cut in the rock. The northeast wall is decorated with frescoes, and a Cyriacus cross¹⁵ (used by Syrians and Armenians) can also be seen. The style of these frescoes is related to the Ethiopian-style, which could be evidence for the coexistence of Ethiopians in Mar Youhanna along with the Jacobites who controlled this monastery until the end of

¹² H. Abdul-Nour, N. Abdul-Nour et B. Jabbour-Gedeon, "L'ermitage rupestre de Mar Jirjis: ..." ; F. Baroudi, P. Khawaja, P. Ghaouche A. Maroun et R. Sawaya, "Site de Mar Girgis," *Liban Souterrain* 4 (1993), 13-16.

¹³ A. Badwi, "Murals in the monasteries of Mar Assia, ...," 45.

¹⁴ N. Abdul-Nour, M. Kadifa et F. Mehanna,

"L'ermitage de Youhanna (Hadshit): sur les traces des Ethiopiens," *Spéléorient* 1 (1996), 39-40; P. Abi Aoun; F. Baroudi, et C. Ghazal, "Site de Mar Youhanna," *Liban Souterrain* 4 (1993), 17-19.

¹⁵ A. Badwi, "Murals in the monasteries of Mar Assia, ...," 44-45;

P. Abi Aoun, F. Baroudi et A. Maroun, "Monastères dans la vallée de la Qadisha occupés ..."

the 16th c. A.D.

In the room was found a looted tomb. Among the scattered objects on the floor was found a cassock with a collar and made of a striped textile called the "Ataba," a garment typical of the Mameluke period (15th c.). Historians say that Mar Youhanna belonged to the Jacobite group until 1488 A.D.

F. The church of Mart Shmuni¹⁶

The church of Mart Shmuni is located below the village of Hadshit in Wadi Hulat near the monastery of Deir es-Salib. It is dedicated to Saint Shmuni (Solomonis in Greek), Mother of the Maccabees, and one of the most popular figures in the Syriac churches.

In its original stage, the church consisted of a cavity in the rock. This was perhaps a funerary chamber for the remains of human bones that can still be found in a recess at the back of the cave. At a later stage, yet to be dated, a double apse was added to the cave separated from it by two arches. The reason for this extension could be that the initial cave acquired its sanctify from the remains of a monk, with the church built later by his devoted followers. Two naves extend the two apses. This plan of two contiguous apses is well known in Lebanon, and we also encounter it in Deir es-Salib.

The walls of the cave and the apses were plastered and covered with paintings. But smoke from the candles had so blackened the design that very little could have been made out. What's more

serious is that these paintings were rapidly deteriorating.

In the cave, we found the Anastasis, Christ's Descent into Limbo. The entire scheme of decoration appeared to have been carried out on only one layer of plaster. Christ was painted in a frontal position, which is rare, but can also be found in the Anastasis in a Syriac gospel from Midyat, near Mardin in Turkey, and dated to 1226 A.D.

The northern apse had two layers of plaster decorated with three nimbed saints cut at the nose by a recently built cement altar. The local people of modern times who built this altar then scraped out the figures and covered the whole apse in white plaster, an unfortunate act that has caused an irretrievable loss of invaluable evidence from the past. The southern apse had scattered remains of red paint, but the decoration in this apse was probably not finished, since the plaster was relatively intact and showed no traces of paint. All over, the paintings of Mart Shmuni betrayed a distinctive style and iconography related to a Byzantine decorative tradition found in Syria during the 13th c. A.D. The style of painting is similar to that of Syriac miniatures from the first half of the 13th c. from Eastern Turkey, which is a mixture of Western (Greek) and Eastern (Semitic – or perhaps even Arabic) features.

Besides the frescoes, some illegible inscriptions were also written in Estrangelo. They were also scraped and are definitely lost.

¹⁶ F. Baroudi, "Jacobites, Ethiopians ..."; E. C. Dodd, "Notes on the wall paintings of Mart

Shmuni," *Archéologie du Levant, Recueil R. Saidah*, CMO 12-9 (1982), 451-462.

G. The Monastery of Deir es-Salib¹⁷ (The Monastery of the Cross)

The Monastery is located below the village of Hadshit in Wadi Hulat. The Monastery of Deir es-Salib was a well known place for all hermits of varying beliefs. The Patriarch-Historian E. Doueyhi noted that this was a Jacobite cult place till the end of the 15th c. A.D.

The monastery is lodged in a natural cave approximately 20m wide and 16m deep. In the cliff, below this cave, we find four small cavities where Anchorites used to live. At the entrance of the cave stands a water cistern.

Like Mart Shmuni, the Deir es-Salib church has two contiguous semi-circular apses oriented to the east. Two arches divide the internal space of the church creating two naves. The entrance of the church consists of a monumental semi-circular arch.

The basements of the walls, the arches and the pillars are all made of stone, while the rest of the chapel is made of

mud. The walls are pierced in their upper level by small holes used to insert the wooden beams of the ceiling.

The inside of the church is decorated with frescoes. At the entrance are the remains of an icon. On both sides of the doorway are Arabic inscriptions talking about a hermit.

An illegible Syriac inscription is painted on the central pillar of the church. The two apses are decorated by Roman-style painted human figures damaged by vandals. This testifies to a direct Crusader influence in the religious art of this part of the Near East. These frescoes, therefore, are probably to be dated to the 13th c. A.D.

What's peculiar in this church is that inscriptions written in three languages were found: Arabic, Syriac and Greek. One must ask whether the hermits of different theological beliefs lived together, followed one another, or dislodged each other. Until now, we don't have an answer to this question due to a lack of sufficient data.

Conclusion

These were some of the best-known Jacobite sites in the Valley of Qadisha. Many are yet to be discovered since, as we have seen, Qadisha was a high place of Jacobism in the 13th through the 15th c. A.D.

Today the Jacobite sites are left in ruins

and still considered by the people of Qadisha, mainly Maronite, as "heretical" places to be avoided. There are no available global studies on these sites. Therefore many aspects of Jacobism in this part of the Levant is unknown and yet to be studied.

¹⁷ F. Baroudi, P. Khawaja et A. Maroun, "Les grottes-ermitages de la vallée de Hadshit," *Liban Souterrain* 2 (1989), 15-25;

Y. Sader o.a.m., "Les peintures de Deir es-Salib à Hadshit: étude iconographique," *Liban Souterrain* 2 (1989), 26-30.