

BRIEF ARTICLES

FROM DAMASCUS TO EDESSA
TRAVELOGUE OF A VISIT TO SYRIA AND
TURKEY

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Since ancient times, people have traveled to Syria from the West. Merchants have come to trade and geographers to survey the land, intellectuals have come to learn and pilgrims to visit holy sites. In March of 2008, our group of fifteen scholars from Northern Europe and the United States, expertly led by Inga-Lill and Samuel Rubenson (Lund University), followed in their footsteps to discover and experience the East.

We gathered at Copenhagen airport on a cold morning and embarked on a flight to Damascus, where we were met by our local guide and driver. As we passed through Damascus on this quiet Friday afternoon, we watched local families everywhere enjoy the warm spring weather, picnicking in the parks and olive groves that line the streets, and we even caught a glimpse of the city walls through which the Apostle Paul is said to have escaped (Acts 9:25; 2 Cor. 11:32–33).

Leaving the city behind, the bus slowly wound its way up into the mountains towards our first night's destination, the small town of Ma'aloula, some 60 km north of Damascus. This town, nestled in the foothills of the Anti-Lebanon mountains, is inhabited by a largely Christian population that prides itself on being the only remaining Aramaic-speaking community in Syria. In addition to its linguistic fame, Ma'aloula attracts visitors on account of an ancient church and a pilgrimage site associated with Thecla.



Photo 1: Ma'aloula

We awoke the next morning to a stunning view of the Anti-Lebanon mountain range and of the colorful village houses built right into the hillsides. Some of us attended the morning liturgy in the ancient church of St. Sergius. Later, the entire group returned to see the building in more detail. The church is named after the early Christian martyr-saints Sergius and Bacchus, said to have been soldiers at the Roman frontier who were executed during the reign of Diocletian after refusing to sacrifice to the pagan gods. The main cult center of Sergius in antiquity was Rusafa, a Roman garrison town located in the desert further to the north-east and identified as the place of his martyrdom. The church in Ma'aloula testifies to the popularity of Sergius' cult throughout the Syrian region.

The church of St. Sergius is of great antiquity and said to have survived earthquakes on account of its architectural design, which integrates horizontal layers of wood into the masonry structure. The object of greatest interest here is an altar with a marble top, shaped like a horse-shoe with a raised edge. This altar was apparently modeled upon pagan altars—the raised edges functioned to contain the blood of sacrificed animals—but unlike its pagan counterparts the altar top in St. Sergius lacks the typical opening which allowed the sacrificial blood to flow down. The local Christian who proudly showed us the church maintained that this unique altar must precede the Council of Nicaea in 325,

claiming that a Nicene prohibition of sacrifice resulted in flat altar tops; however, a review of the council canons can not sustain this claim. And while this altar certainly appears quite ancient and its shape rather unusual, it is not unique, for in the museum of Apamea is displayed a nearly identical piece (there labeled as a table top). Our Christian guide of St. Sergius concluded her tour with a recitation of the Lord's Prayer in her Aramaic mother tongue.

From the church of St. Sergius, we proceeded to the town's second major attraction, a shrine dedicated to Thecla. The path led through a deep gorge, dotted on both sides with caves and empty tombs. At the end of the gorge stand the church and monastery of St. Thecla. According to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Thecla escaped a group of pernicious suitors by taking refuge in a crack that miraculously opened up in the rock and immediately closed again after her. This church was built around the very cave believed to have been the site of this miracle. Thecla's tomb is venerated in a niche of the cave, and votive offerings give testimony to her healing power and to the local Christian devotion to this saint.



Photo 2: Monastery of St. Thecla

From Ma'aloula, we turned East into the Syrian desert towards Palmyra. Soon we left behind the olive groves and villages, and in front of our eyes extended the vast, beautiful steppe region, seemingly limitless, that for centuries marked the shifting frontier between Rome and Persia. The only vegetation consists of little tufts of dry grass here and there—enough, however to sustain the sheep and camels of the nomad tribes. After several hours we

stopped at the one and only modern oasis on the road to Palmyra, a restaurant called the Baghdad Cafe 66 after the 1988 movie of the same name. Here we rested, as travelers might have done ages ago, sitting down in the tent-like structure where a family of former Bedouins served a delicious lunch. In the late afternoon we reached the greatest oasis of the Syrian desert—and one of the most grandiose cities of antiquity—Palmyra. The oasis came into sight first: palm trees, olive groves, and lush gardens of fruit and vegetables, all surrounded by mud walls to keep out the roaming animals of the steppe. Then, all of a sudden, we found ourselves in front of the monumental gate to Zenobia's city. Beyond the gate extend long, colonnaded streets, baths, theatre and agora, temples, remains of residential neighborhoods, Roman military camps, and Christian churches: an entire city indeed, vaster than one imagines and much more magnificent. We explored the ruins until after the sun had set behind the valley of the tombs beyond the western wall. When night fell upon the desert, the terrace of the Hotel Zenobia (built right in the middle of the archaeological site!) offered us refreshments and a stunning view of the temple of Baal-Shamin.



Photo 3: Palmyra, Monumental Gate



Photo 4: Palmyra, Tomb Towers

Palmyrene history, culture, and religion are discussed in many publications and need not be dwelled on here, but perhaps a few words on the Christian remains are in order. Two churches have been identified. The first of these is located just north of the main East-West colonnade, or *cardo*, about half way between the tetrapylon and Diocletian's camp. This church is of modest size, built in basilica style with an apse on the East side. Near the apse, there seem to have been wells, but it was unclear to us when they were constructed and what purpose they may have served.



Photo 5: Palmyra, Fragment of Church Building



Photo 6: Palmyra, Apse of Church

The second church is located a bit further to the northeast and much larger in size, perhaps indicating a later time of construction. This building likewise has basilica shape with the apse on the East side. The excavators dug a trial trench, and future archaeological research may bring to light further details of this (presumably Byzantine) edifice. There is a third building, just off the *cardo* to the north, that by some has been judged to be a Christian house of worship on account of its apse. However, the general layout of the

building did not to our group appear to support this conjecture. But since large sections of Palmyra still lie hidden underneath the rubble, it is not impossible that future excavations might bring to light more traces of its early Christian community.

The night was spent in a hotel near the oasis, and the morning light brought once again a surprising view: from the breakfast room on the hotel's upper floor we had a magnificent prospect of the ancient ruins, especially the gigantic Temple of Bel, and of the modern town. An early morning stroll through the oasis provided us insight into the agricultural techniques of growing food in the steppe, as well as into one of the preferred pastimes of the Palmyrenes: a large soccer field is situated within the grove of palm trees. We started our day with a visit to several of the many dozens of ancient tombs. The wealthy Palmyrene families buried their dead either in tomb towers, a type of funerary monument unique to the Euphrates region, or in hypogaea (underground tombs), or in tomb temples. The less affluent, we may surmise, buried their deceased in unmarked graves that have not left any traces. In many of the tomb towers and hypogaea, stunningly beautiful reliefs of the deceased decorate the *loculi*, the spaces in which the buried were placed. Time allowed us to visit only two of these tombs. The tomb tower of Yambliqu, dated by an inscription to the year 83 AD, was originally five stories high and provided space for about 200 interments. Today the visitor can still climb up to the fourth floor; however, the extraordinary funerary reliefs that once adorned the tombs have been removed to museums in Palmyra and Damascus. Next we visited the Hypogaeum of the Three Brothers, constructed in the second century, which offered space for more than three hundred of the family's deceased. Its interior is accessible through ancient stone doors and has the layout of an upside-down T. The section directly in front of the visitor is beautifully decorated with wall paintings, whereas the side chambers contain sarcophagi with marvelously carved family banquet scenes.



Photo 7: Palmyra,
Tomb Tower of Yambliqu



Photo 8: Palmyra, *Cella* of Temple of Bel

We then returned to the western part of Palmyra and explored its largest and most imposing monument, the Temple of Bel, which in its current form was dedicated in 32 AD. The vast temple enclosure, the *temenos*, measures approximately 205 by 210 meters and is surrounded by a massive wall 11 m high. Inside this wall there is a single row of columns on the entrance side to the west, and a double row of columns on the other three sides. One can easily imagine how the entire Palmyrene population might have gathered here for rituals and sacrifices. Clearly visible still is the tunnel through which the sacrificial animals were led into the *temenos*, the benches where the populace sat and watched, the washing basin for the priest, the altar and its elaborate underground tunnel system, and the remains of a hall where the sacrificed animal was consumed by priests and special guests. In order to attend such a ceremonial meal, guests were required to have “invitation cards,” little clay tokens now on display in the museum. The enormous temple *cella*, where only the priests were permitted to enter, still dominates the site. Its interior and exterior is beautifully decorated with relief carvings. In the northern niche of the *cella*, the ceiling relief is surrounded by a zodiac circle, reminiscent of synagogue decorations in late antiquity. At some point in time, the *cella* was used by Christians as a sanctuary, for remains of their wall paintings are still noticeable. Later, the site became a mosque, and once again it is the stone walls that witness to this usage with their Arabic inscriptions.

The Archeological Museum of Palmyra is not to be missed, for it displays many of the remarkable funerary reliefs, pagan altars,

coins, and other finds from Palmyra's past, including several mummies. Quite interesting are funerary representations of a woman holding a small child, anticipating the later Christian iconography of Mary and Jesus. The many Palmyrene inscriptions in the museum's collection are neither translated nor transliterated in the exhibition halls, but those interested in epigraphy—or simply in learning the names of those immortalized in stone—may consult a small publication by M. Gawlikowski, which can be obtained in the shop in the theatre of Palmyra. Before our departure, we had time for one last stroll through this most magnificent of ruined cities, down the colonnaded streets, past the restored theatre and the tetrapylon, to the temple of Allath and the watch tower of Diocletian's camp, whence one has an amazing view of the entire field of ruins, columns, and tumbled-down Palmyrene inscriptions.

In the afternoon we set out into the desert once more, traveling eastwards towards the Euphrates. In the distance, there were the flocks and dark tents of the Bedouins. When a large herd of camels came into view, the bus stopped and we paused to observe these animals that we do not usually have occasion to encounter in their natural habitat. The camels moved ever closer to us, as their nomad owners were shepherding them across the busy road towards different pastures. We greeted the passing Bedouins, whose lives differ so fundamentally from ours, and they welcomed us with the kind hospitality of the desert, offering us to taste their camel milk: it was warm, creamy, and delicious.



In the evening we reached Deir Ezzur, a busy modern industrial city on the Euphrates. There was not much ancient history to discover here, but an enjoyable stroll through the streets and shops gave a feeling for life in an oriental city. A museum near the hotel contains a memorial to the victims of the terrible Armenian genocide at Deir Ezzur in the early twentieth century. At dinner time, we gathered at a restaurant on the banks of the Euphrates and finally set eyes on “the rolling waters that are charged with the history of the ancient world.”¹ Later we crossed over into Mesopotamia on a somewhat dilapidated foot bridge, the symbol of Deir Ezzur, gazing at the dark river beneath. Next morning we departed early for Dura Europos, approximately a ninety-minute bus ride to the south of Deir Ezzur. During the journey we had occasion to observe the quotidian life of the Syrian people: local residents farming their fields, the children in their blue uniforms going to school, business being done. The landscape became ever more desolate until suddenly we saw at the dusty horizon the ruined walls of one of early Christianity’s most famous sites, Dura Europos. The city, a Hellenistic foundation that served the Romans as frontier garrison town, sits atop the steep right bank of the Euphrates and is protected by natural gorges on the north and south sides. In the third century, attempting to strengthen the fortifications against attacking Sassanian troops, the inhabitants piled mud and debris against the city wall, but despite their efforts Dura fell to the troops of Shapur I in 256 and was not thereafter inhabited. When Ammianus Marcellinus accompanied Julian on his eastern campaign in 363, the location of this deserted town was still known.² Yet in later ages, Dura’s location was forgotten until archaeologists began to excavate in the early 20th century and discovered, *inter alia*, a Christian church underneath the dirt that once had served to fortify the crumbling walls against the approaching enemy.

We approached the city from the west, the only side that provides easy access, and entered through the Palmyra Gate. Even for those of us who had long been familiar from the literature with the city’s plan and major buildings, entering Dura came as a surprise. In front of us extended indeed the ruins of an entire ancient city, measuring at its widest points about 1.5 km in width and 1.2 km in length! Unlike Palmyra, Dura has no long

¹ G. Bell, *Amurath to Amurath* (London: Heinemann, 1911), 27.

² Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* 23.5.8, ed. W. Seyfarth, *Ammiani Marcellini rerum gestarum libri qui supersunt*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1978), 303.

colonnaded streets, for the city was built largely of mud-brick. What can be observed very well is the Hellenistic grid plan. Excavated buildings scattered throughout the entire town reveal remnants of civic and religious architecture: baths, agora, palaces, and religious buildings of many kinds, indicating the tolerance and religious diversity prevalent in this frontier city.

We first visited the remains of the Christian church. The wall paintings of the baptistery—which survived the centuries because they were covered by the rubble piled up to support the city walls—are now in storage at the Yale University Museum, but with the help of the pictures we brought, the architecture came alive. We walked past Roman baths on our way to the site of the synagogue, which, like the Christian building, stood adjacent to the city wall and hence was largely preserved. The wall paintings of the synagogue are now on display in the museum in Damascus. Dura's Jewish community must have been sizable and affluent, for their synagogue was quite large and beautifully decorated. We failed, unfortunately, to locate the site of the Mithraeum (whose wall paintings are also kept by the Yale University Museum but not currently on display), but we did visit some of the temples, another large Roman bath, the agora and the residential neighborhoods of ancient Dura. At the far end of town, the view opens up over the Euphrates, a mighty river here, and far beyond over the Mesopotamian plains. We climbed up into the New Citadel (dating from the 2nd century BC!) which fortified the city on the East side, and there we enjoyed the view over river and plains. A newly built museum near the citadel offers the visitor a survey of Dura's history and monuments.



Photo 9: Dura, Agora



Photo 10: Dura, View of Euphrates from Citadel

The bus then took us further south along the Euphrates, to the ancient city of Mari (now quite near the Iraqi border). Mari, dating

back to the third millennium BC, is a huge archaeological site. And despite almost a century of digging, only a small fraction of the area has been excavated. In Mari, numerous cuneiform tablets were discovered that contain invaluable information on ancient Near Eastern culture and history. The key site in Mari is the palace of Zimri-Lim, a mud-brick construction of several hundred rooms that served as the kingdom's administrative center. Esteem for the archaeologist's work immediately rose upon seeing Mari, for much expertise is required to distinguish an ancient mud-brick wall from the surrounding mud. The antiquity of the site becomes quite evident as one sees the entire, excavated palace being located deep beneath the ground level. We descended into its throne room, admired the temple sanctuary, noted the advanced water and sewage systems, and saw the "library" where the archive of 25,000 clay tablets was found. The man who lives with his family at the site showed us the area adjacent to the palace, where we found further traces of the water system and baths, and saw a newly excavated area which used to house the bakeries. The astonishing continuity between this most ancient civilization and the contemporary life of the Syrian people became apparent when our local guide informed us that the ovens from 2000 BC, which we saw excavated several meters below our feet, are essentially the same as his family still uses to bake the flat, Syrian bread!



Photo 11: Mari, Palace of Zimri-Lim

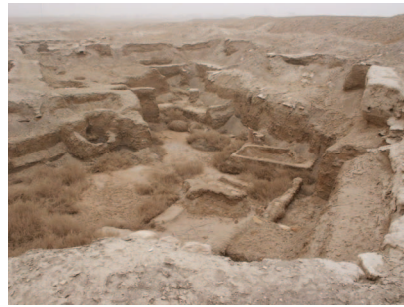


Photo 12: Mari

On the next day the bus crossed the Euphrates into Mesopotamia at Deir Ezzur. The road took us north through desert landscape to Raqqa—a city somewhat more isolated and less Westernized than Deir Ezzur—where we stopped to take a quick look at its monumental fortifications. A substantial part of Raqqa's city walls is still standing; their construction in Abbasid times was modeled upon the circular fortification of Baghdad. From Raqqa, we continued through northern Mesopotamia and reached the

Turkish border around noon time. Here a Turkish bus, driver, and guide awaited us, since the Syrian bus could not easily exit the country at one border station and re-enter at a different location. Unfortunately, an administrative problem suddenly arose: the recently rebuilt Turkish border station was at this time unable to issue visas to some of our party who were required to obtain them, and despite lengthy deliberations no solution was found other than to turn back. Much to the amusement of the truck drivers patiently waiting in long lines at the border, we hauled our luggage back to the Syrian frontier, boarded the Syrian bus, and embarked on a long and time-consuming detour to the next border station, far to the west. On the positive side, this diversion gave us occasion once more to cross the Euphrates and to pause for a while, sitting at the edge of its cool and clear waters, and to enjoy the view of the enormous river slowly winding its way between the gently sloped hills. We had now reached the northern part of the fertile crescent: the countryside here was much more lush, there were large olive groves, and the fields of almond trees were just beginning to bloom. As we passed through Aleppo on our way to the border crossing, dusk was already falling upon the land, but many more hours of driving lay before us. It was after midnight when we finally reached our destination: Edessa, known today as the Turkish city of Urfa.

The original itinerary had called for a visit to Harran *en route* to Edessa, and in order not to bypass this renowned city entirely, some of us got up early to take a quick tour of the site. As the bus took us from Edessa to Harran (also known as Carrhae), we contemplated history. Crassus was defeated in the Harran plain in 54 B.C., a fact the Romans never forgot. And Caracalla, after wintering in Edessa prior to his Persian campaign, was assassinated as he traveled toward Harran to honor the moon-god Sin.³ While Harran's pagan cults are ancient, the city also played from early on an important role in the Judeo-Christian tradition, for it is usually identified as the biblical town where Abraham dwelt. Owing to its place in the story of the biblical patriarchs, it became a favorite destination of religious tourism in late antiquity. In Islamic times Harran became associated with the Sabians, and it continued to be

³ Cassius Dio, *History* 79, ed. E. Cary, *Dio's Roman History*, vol. 9, LCL 177 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 348; *Historia Augusta, Vita Caracallae* 6.6, ed. D. Magie, *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, vol. 2, LCL (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 16–18; Herodian, *History* 4.13.3–5, ed. C. R. Whittaker, *Herodian*, vol. 1, LCL (London: Heinemann, 1969), 448–450.

a vibrant urban center until the Mongol conquests. But despite some recent excavations, most of Harran's rich and diverse history still lies hidden, buried beneath an enormous tell in the middle of the ancient city. Similarly concealed are the stories of many nearby towns and villages that lie beneath hundreds of mounds scattered across the Harran plain.

The modern Harran is a fairly small settlement around and on top of the field of ruins that must have been the ancient city. Only a small area of this vast site has been excavated. The top layer of the tell reveals a residential area dating from medieval Islamic times. Somewhat further to the north are the ruins of a large building, apparently a mosque. A survey of ancient Harran conducted in the 1950s marks a church in the city's northeastern section,⁴ but unaware of this publication and constrained by time, we did not venture into that part of town. Rather, our attention was drawn to the monumental palace at the southeastern wall. We explored its three stories of halls and chambers as well as its watch-tower, being careful not to fall through the large holes that had been cut in the floor to open up the view to rooms below. Besides the ancient city and the palace, the third attraction Harran has to offer are its traditional bee-hive houses, fashioned from mud today in much the same way as they were built ages ago. Such dwellings can be seen throughout the region but are particularly plentiful here. This building style is not only inexpensive and quick; it is also apparently quite suitable for the hot climate, since the raised roof keeps the interior relatively cool in the scorching summer heat. Time did not permit further exploration of the Harran region and its archaeological treasures, since we were expected back in Urfa by mid-morning.

⁴ S. Lloyd, W. Brice und C. J. Gadd, "Harran," *Anatolian Studies* 1 (1951), 77–111.



Photo 13: Harran, Ruins of Mosque

In antiquity, Edessa was called “the blessed city” on account of Jesus’ promise that it would forever remain unconquerable (*Doctrina Addai*), a title Edessa once again bears today: in 1983 it was granted the name change from Urfa to Sanliurfa (“glorious Urfa”) to honor it as a Muslim holy site. Here pilgrims from near and far venerate the cave in which Abraham is said to have been born, and legends pertaining to this patriarch abound. For instance, locals claim that Nimrud catapulted Abraham from the two columns on the citadel into a fire, which was miraculously changed into a pool of water just in time to have Abraham plunge in and be rescued. The fire’s coals, one is informed, were altered into fish. This legend is not new, however, for already more than a century ago Oswald Parry was told much the same story! And the fish that swarm in the pool of Edessa no doubt have been there for much longer still: they were judged to be very tasty by the fourth-century traveler Egeria. Sanliurfa is a devout Muslim city, and to the disappointment of the Christian pilgrim, hardly any traces now remain of Edessa’s long and illustrious past as a major center of Syriac Christianity. Some of the mosques incorporate columns that may originally have adorned Christian churches, but otherwise there is precious little evidence of the time of Ephrem or Jacob.

The most spectacular place in the entire city no doubt was—and still is—the park-like region in the southwest, sheltered by the citadel mount and watered by a river and springs. Its unusual

abundance of water made Edessa a highly desirable place to live. On the other hand, the rushing rivers brought danger as well. Even on a sunny spring morning one can easily envision how, if waters were rising, destruction might follow, as happened in 201 AD when a flood destroyed a Christian church according to the *Chronicle of Edessa*. Between the fish pool and another pond now stands Abraham's mosque. In former times, this urban island was occupied by a church, the dedication of which an anonymous poet praised in the famous *Soghita on the Church of Edessa*:

For truly it is a wonder that its smallness is like the
wide world,
Not in size but in type; like the sea, waters surround it.

Behold! Its ceiling is stretched out like the sky, without
columns (it is) arched and simple,
It is decorated with golden mosaic, as the firmament
(is) with shining stars.⁵



Photo 14: Edessa, Mosque and Pond

⁵ *Soghita on the Church of Edessa* 4–5. After a flood destroyed the Great Church of Edessa in 525, it was rebuilt, and it is this new construction that the poet praises. Ed. and tr. K. E. McVey, “The Domed Church as Microcosm: Literary Roots of an Architectural Symbol,” *DOP* 37 (1983), 91–121; tr. here quoted from p. 95 (slightly altered).

In earlier centuries, this was most likely the location of King Abgar's palace, destroyed in the disastrous flood of 201 AD, which also damaged a Christian church. Today, the pools and parks of this locale at the foot of the citadel offer a quiet, shady space for relaxation. We climbed the impressive citadel mount which towers high above the town. From here, one has a splendid view of the entire area and can easily make out the original bed of the Daisan river. The famous columns with an inscription dedicated to Queen Shalimat stand tall and mysterious, still keeping the secret of their original function. We also visited Edessa's Archeological Museum in which artifacts from prehistoric through Islamic times are on display. The museum garden is particularly impressive, with its vast collection of funerary reliefs, pagan altars and stelae, inscriptions in Syriac and Greek, and a beautiful baptismal font from Harran. Of the celebrated mosaics, only three are displayed here—a hunting mosaic, a geometric mosaic, and a family scene—the latter two in a piteous, unrestored state.

We left Edessa and turned west towards the Euphrates once again. The modern road crosses quite near the ancient town of Zeugma (Birek), now submerged by the waters of the Euphrates dammed up into a large lake. Prior to the completion of the Birecik dam, an international team of archaeologists undertook salvage excavations to rescue as much as possible of the ancient site. Their efforts were richly rewarded, for they discovered numerous amazing mosaics that once decorated the floors of Roman villas in this affluent town. These mosaics have been carefully restored and are now exhibited in the Gaziantep Museum. The mosaics often depict themes from mythology or literature and exhibit an astonishing craftsmanship; it has been suggested that Zeugma was the location of a school of mosaicists. One of the most famous mosaics from the collection, and the one that has come to symbolize Zeugma, is only a small fragment, showing in amazing detail the beautiful face of a person variably identified as a gypsy girl, Maenad, or Alexander the Great. In addition to this marvelous collection, the museum contains many relief sculptures and funerary monuments from the region, as well as artifacts from antiquity and medieval times. From Gaziantep we traveled southwards back into Syria and reached Aleppo late in the evening.



Photo 15: Ganziantep, Mosaic

To the West of Aleppo lies one of eastern Christianity's most famous and celebrated pilgrimage destinations, Qalat Siman, the enormous church built at the very site of the column of St. Simeon the Stylite. The stylite's story is well known, and we reminded ourselves of it as we ascended the steep, ancient path towards the hill-top complex of buildings. An impressive propylaeum stands at the beginning of this *via sacra*, and another one marks the entrance to the actual pilgrimage site. As we climbed up, we noted the remains of many buildings, including another small church that once served to accommodate the visitors. In between the ruins the local people farmed their fields, and a donkey grazed peacefully in a beautiful house abandoned centuries ago. The morning was bright and warm, and after many days in the arid steppe regions, we rejoiced over the colorful spring flowers scattered over the hillsides.



Photo 16: Church of St. Simeon



Photo 17: Detail of Column Capital

Our visit to the site of Qalat Siman took us first to the enormous octagonal baptistery and its adjacent church. The interior of both church and baptistery is spacious and beautifully designed. Steps lead into and out of the baptismal font, located on the east side of the octagonal baptistery. The font is well preserved; even a section of its mosaic floor is still intact. From the baptistery we proceeded towards the enormous Church of St. Simeon, a cruciform structure built around the central octagon that surrounds the remains of the stylite's pillar. The intricate craftsmanship and enormous size of the church, built in only a few decades shortly after the saint's death in the middle of the fifth century, are certainly impressive. The well-preserved structures of monastery, crypt, and chapels surrounding the church testify to the vibrancy of St. Simeon's cult. Whereas the ancients came to admire, some modern visitors have been less enthusiastic about the stylite's calling. Having one evening climbed upon the pillar's base, Gertrude Bell pondered:

There was no moon; the piers and arches stood in ruined and shadowy splendour.... I sat and thought how perverse a trick Fortune had played that night on the grim saint. She had given for a night his throne of bitter dreams to one whose dreams were rosy with a deep content that he would have been the first to condemn. So musing I caught the eye of a great star that had climbed up above the broken line of the arcade, and we agreed together that it was better to journey over earth and sky than to sit upon a column all your days.⁶

Not far from Qalat Siman stands the very well-preserved church of Mushabbak, now isolated and empty on a hilltop, with

⁶ G. Bell, *Syria: The Desert and the Sown* (London: Heinemann, 1907, reprint New York: Arno Press, 1973), 276.

no traces of a town nearby. The interior design is highly unusual: all the columns have capitals in different styles! This church once must have accommodated a significant Christian population, and the relief on the lintel of the west door, which shows trees and a small depiction of the stylite, hints that the building may have served as a way-station for pilgrims journeying to the famous site of Simeon.



Photo 18: Church of Mushabbak

After returning to Aleppo we visited its museum, which houses, together with the National Museum in Damascus, the majority of finds from ancient sites in Syria. We admired some of the cuneiform tablets from Mari and the celebrated statue of a water goddess, likewise found in Mari. Afterwards, there was opportunity to explore the old city and the suqs, and to glance at the imposing citadel. By chance we even happened upon a soap factory and were shown by the workers the production process of the famous Aleppo soap. Having completed this fascinating tour, we wandered through Aleppo's Christian quarters and saw some of the modern churches.



Photo 19: Soap Factory in Aleppo

To the west of Aleppo, for a stretch of several miles, the modern street runs alongside the ancient Roman road that connected Antioch with Aleppo and all the East. We alighted from the bus, and children immediately came to greet us, presenting us with freshly picked wild flowers. For a while we strolled on this historic thoroughfare—one of the largest extant segments of the Roman road system—following in the footsteps of Julian and his troops. The road once was significantly lower than the surface level of the land to ensure its stability, but soil erosion has resulted in it now sitting perhaps 30 cm above the ground. The bus then took us to the region of the so-called Dead Cities, a vast area of towns and villages that flourished between the second and sixth centuries on account of their olive production, but were later abandoned because of shifting politics and declining agriculture. These towns were not generally re-inhabited, nor was their building material re-used, and so they stand today much as they did in antiquity, rewarding the visitor with an abundance of magnificent ruins. The many Christian sites here were surveyed and mapped in the early twentieth century by George Tchalenko, whose learned tomes still provide the most comprehensive treatment of their architecture.

Above the ancient town of Baqirha still towers the temple of Zeus Bomos. The Thundering Zeus did justice to his name upon our arrival, for immediately a strong wind picked up and dark storm clouds began to gather. No sooner had we arrived in the town itself, than rain, hail, thunder and lightning descended upon

us, making it entirely impossible to survey the ruins in detail. If it were not for some tumbled-down stones and walls, Baqirha could have been inhabited but recently, for streets and houses, olive presses and churches are well preserved. Our attention focused on a small church, perhaps once part of a monastic complex, whose large bema can be clearly discerned even under weeds and bushes. Greek inscriptions and pretty carvings of many kinds adorn the stone lintels of this building complex. A baptistery of square floor plan stands virtually intact adjacent to the church, and at the far end of town there is another, larger basilica church.



Photo 20: Baqirha, Baptistery



Photo 21: Baqirha, Detail of Carving

The weather was slightly more agreeable in Qirqbize, the site of an early fourth-century house church. Christians here made a church from the *triclinium* of an ancient villa, that in all else resembles the neighboring residences, by modifying the walls, adding a bema, and constructing a side chamber to serve as baptistery. Reliefs and carved stones are heaped up in the ancient sanctuary, and an oil reliquary lies toppled over on its side; however, with some imagination one can envision the community at prayer, their chants, liturgies, and homilies.

Our last stop in the Dead Cities was the famous and magnificent basilica of Qalb Lozeh, built in the middle of the fifth century and today situated in a small Druze village. We admired the church's delightful and spacious architecture, its finely carved ornamentations, and its sizeable bema that takes up virtually the entire width of the central aisle. The congregation, one can surmise, must have filled up the side aisles. The central apse of Qalb Lozeh has three windows on the east side and protrudes beyond the lines of the main church building, as is the case with many of these Syriac churches. Its exterior is beautifully decorated with columns, capitals, and finely crafted moldings. Even in the pouring rain this jewel of churches shines brightly.



Photo 22: Qalb Lozeh, Apse



Photo 23: Qalb Lozeh, Exterior of Apse

As our journey continued towards the coastal city of Ugarit, we traveled far back in time. The mighty city-state of Ugarit flourished in the middle of the second millennium B.C., but the site had been inhabited for millennia prior. Ugarit traded with Cyprus, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. Like Mari, Ugarit was identified only in the twentieth century; here, too, hundreds of cuneiform tablets have been discovered, revolutionizing the study of Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History. In Ugarit, a cuneiform alphabet of 30 characters was invented, and among the many tablets found was a very small one that just lists these letters. Ugarit was constructed from stone, and hence the city's residential, administrative, and religious architecture is extremely well preserved. From the palace complex with its archives, large halls, and even a pool for recreation, we proceeded into the residential quarters. The layout of Ugarit is easily discernible, and so we walked the ancient streets and visited houses built thousands of years ago. Most fascinating were the burial chambers: in Ugarit, unlike in Roman towns, the dead were not laid to rest outside the city walls but in spacious subterranean chambers in the residential quarters, covered up with large stone slabs. We descended from what might have been the living room of a well-off Ugaritic family into the partially uncovered, pitch-dark underground burial chamber where their deceased had rested. Good thing we had a flashlight ready! The space beneath is very well constructed and in an excellent state of preservation. Niches in

the walls served to supply the dead with what they might need in the afterworld. After exploring several of the numerous tomb chambers, we proceeded to the temple district where the ruins of a Temple of Baal and a Temple of Dagan await the visitor. Mount Casius, in Ugaritic myth considered the residence of Baal, rises magnificently in the distance. Mount Casius, “a hill clothed in woods from which one can get one’s first sight of the sun at the second cock-crow,” was still considered a sacred place in Roman times, for Hadrian ascended it at night to offer sacrifice, as did Julian when he passed by.⁷



Photo 24: Ugarit, Mt. Casius



Photo 25: Ugarit, Tomb

From Ugarit we traveled inland across a steep mountain range, bypassing crusader castles, and in the early afternoon reached Apamea in the fertile and beautiful Orontes valley. Apamea was one of Seleucus’ four major foundations (alongside Antioch, Laodicea, and Seleucia) and was named after his wife Apamea. It fell to the Romans after Pompey’s conquest in 64 B.C. Apamea was home to influential philosophers: Numenius was born here, and in the third century Iamblichus set up his Neoplatonist school. Christianity established itself probably in the fourth century, and

⁷ Hadrian’s sacrifice is recorded in *Historia Augusta, Vita Hadriani* 14.3, ed. Magie, vol. 1, 44. Julian’s visit is mentioned by Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* 22.14.4, ed. Seyfarth, vol. 1, 281. The description is quoted from Ammianus 22.14, tr. W. Hamilton, *Ammianus Marcellinus, The Later Roman Empire (A.D. 354–378)* (London: Penguin, 1986), 250.

important architectural and artistic remains of the Christian presence can still be seen. Before walking down the marvelous colonnaded streets of Apamea, we stopped at the Archaeological Museum, located in the barrel-vaulted halls of an old khan. The exhibition space is drafty and dimly lit, and little effort has been made to restore or adequately to house the marvelous mosaics found in Apamea and its vicinity. Beautifully crafted, these mosaics show animal and hunting scenes, mythological figures, and Socrates with his philosopher-friends, but there are also mosaics with dedicatory inscriptions that presumably once adorned the floors of churches, geometric patterns with crosses, and an astonishing depiction of Adam, seated on a throne like Christus pantocrator, surrounded by the animals. Some of the mosaics found at Apamea are too large to be exhibited in the building and must await better times, stored in fragments in one of the museum's wings.

Apamea is dominated by the long, colonnaded *cardo* that extends for several kilometers from east to west; adjacent to it are the ruins of a bath, the agora, temples, shops, and other buildings. Several churches are marked on our plan, but as it was already late in the afternoon, we could only visit the remains of the city's cathedral. In Apamea, as often on our tour, we seemed to be the only visitors at the site. Local children came to greet us and asked to have their pictures taken. Other youngsters were occupied with shepherding their unruly flock through the ruins, until a guard raced up on his motorcycle and yelled at them, presumably telling them to get lost. We stayed in this captivating Roman city until the shadows of the tall columns fell long across the ancient road, and a cool evening wind blew.



Photo 26: Apamea

Next morning, we saw Hama, famous for its wooden water wheels that creak and crank as they slowly lift up the water of the Orontes into aqueducts to provide the city with this precious resource. As we strolled through the alleyways, we peered into a shop where men were at work repairing the wooden planks of a water wheel. This technology is very ancient, as is vividly illustrated by a mosaic depiction from Roman times of one such wheel, on display in the museum. The museum of Hama houses many treasures from antiquity, including an astonishing large mosaic of seven women playing seven different instruments, a Mithraic wall painting, and a basalt relief depicting a stylite climbing up his column—presumably Simeon or one of his many imitators.



Photo 27: Hama, Water Wheel

The bus then took us into the desert once more to visit Deir Mar Mousa, a monastery precariously perched on a hilltop overlooking the desert plain and hills. The monastery is named after Mar Mousa al-Habashi, who is said to have dwelled in this region around the year 500. As we ascended the steep path to the monastery, we noticed numerous caves and caverns cut into the sides of the gorge. These perhaps indicate the existence of an ancient lavra; today they still serve the men and women of the monastic community as places of withdrawal for meditation and prayer. The monastery of Mar Mousa flourished in medieval times, providing lodging to pilgrims. The contemporary community, recently re-founded under the leadership of the Jesuit priest Paolo dall'Oglio, still offers welcome to pilgrims and travelers. Moreover, the members of Deir Mar Mousa seek to build spiritual bridges to the neighboring communities.



Photo 28: Deir Mar Mousa

As we arrived at Deir Mar Mousa on this splendid Sunday, many guests had already found their way hither to celebrate a baptism during the morning liturgy. The terrace was full of joyful people: the French family and friends of the newly baptized, the women and men of the community, and visitors from near and far. We were invited for a meal, and afterwards there was occasion to see the monastic library, consisting of several rooms seemingly cut into the rock, linked by tunnel-like passages. We then met with Fr. Paolo while seated in the carpeted (and chair-less) church, listening to his story and gazing at the renowned wall paintings of Deir Mar Mousa. Many of these have been restored to their original vivid colors; they depict various saints (including Mar Mousa, Simeon the Stylite, and saints on horseback), the Annunciation, and the Last Judgment. As daylight faded, we departed from the solitary monastery and journeyed towards Syria's bustling capital.

Damascus is Syria's largest and most cosmopolitan city, and for the next two days we explored its ancient bazaars, medieval buildings, and antique treasures. We began our tour in the National Museum, which houses the most important finds from throughout Syria, illustrating the history of the region from prehistoric through medieval Islamic times. Walking through the exhibition halls, we re-lived the various stages of our journey, encountering artifacts from many of the sites we had visited. Most impressive are those rooms of the museum which reconstruct entire ancient chambers. The Palmyrene hypogaeum of Yarhai (dating from 108 AD) is

completely rebuilt here, with its dozens of sculpture portraits of the deceased men and women, and a beautifully decorated sarcophagus. Another room reconstructs the Dura Europos synagogue; its well-preserved wall paintings instantly transport the visitor back to the ancient world. The National Museum, like almost every museum we saw, contains an amazing collection of Roman mosaics. Another wing of the museum is dedicated to artifacts from Ugarit, including the small, ancient Ugaritic alphabet tablet. The extensive museum gardens display statues and mosaics, tomb stones and amphorae, pagan altars and Christian oil reliquaries.



Photo 29: Damascus, National Museum



Photo 30: Damascus, National Museum

On the next day, we traced Damascus' earliest Christian history. At the south-east city wall is a church dedicated to St. Paul's vision on his road to Damascus (though the gate adjacent to the church is unlikely to have been the one through which Paul entered). A modern sculpture in the church yard commemorates the biblical event. The Church of Ananias, a windowless subterranean chapel in the Christian quarter, commemorates Ananias' meeting with Paul (Acts 9:10–19) and is a large tourist

attraction. The Straight Street mentioned in Acts 9:11 is easily recognizable even today, for indeed it is the only street running straight through the old city of Damascus! Damascus' long Christian history comes alive with a visit to the extensive Christian part of town and its multitude of churches belonging to various Orthodox, Oriental, and Western traditions. And although the historical traces of John of Damascus can not be recovered, the memory of this great patristic writer is kept alive by both a church and a street named after him.

Our stay in Damascus also included an opportunity to see the recently founded Danish Institute, an independent cultural institution dedicated to supporting research and the arts. The Institute is located in a beautifully restored medieval house. The façade of the building, as is often the case, is modest and somewhat bland, but the interior offers an inviting courtyard with fountain, exquisite stone inlay decorations, and several meeting rooms with fine medieval Islamic wood paneling. The director informed us about the Institute's work. He also imparted some details concerning the restoration of the building, during which the upper section of a Roman arch was discovered in a wall. Medieval buildings in Damascus, we were reminded, were constructed upon many previous layers.



Photo 31: Damascus, Courtyard of Danish Institute

No visit to Syria's capital is complete without a tour of the eighth-century Umayyad mosque, built upon a site where once stood a monumental Temple of Jupiter, of which there are not insignificant remains. Prior to the construction of the mosque, this area was occupied by a church dedicated to St. John, but its only remnant is a Greek inscription from the Septuagint over the south portal. In the mosque's spacious courtyard, children were at play and adults sat together and talked. Inside the mosque, the Muslim faithful venerate a shrine said to contain the head of John the Baptist.

The Umayyad mosque is situated in the heart of the old city, and thus we concluded our visit to Syria by strolling once more through the suqs, this quintessential element of Near Eastern urban life. Unusual scents waft through the alleys, people bargain and negotiate, and spices and food unknown to the westerner attract one's curiosity. In a highly practical fashion, the suqs are organized by merchandise. There is one area where traders offer the beautiful damask fabric named after this city, another one with ordinary household goods, and even a street for horses' bridles. Interspersed with the shops there are old khans and Muslim palaces. And after a stop for one more cup of Syrian tea, it was time to depart.

Syria is a country with a vastly diverse, beautiful countryside and an almost unimaginably long history. It has been inhabited since the dawn of human civilization, and has seen empires come and go. Cities once bustling with activity have disappeared under dust and dirt, and their partial excavations allow us glimpses into their former magnificence. Other towns, however, have been settled continuously for millennia, and layer has been built upon layer. What makes this region unique is that it allows a visitor to view a cross section of human history: prehistoric settlements, ancient Near Eastern cities, Roman houses and temples, early Christian churches, Islamic architecture, crusader castles, and modern edifices. And what made this trip a truly enjoyable experience was the companionship of our international group and the genuine welcome the Syrian people extended to us wherever we went.

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