MARDİN
FROM TALES TO LEGENDS

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Introduction

Mesopotamia is among those few names in the world that almost everyone is familiar with. Think of a region that is the birthplace of many tools, philosophies, systems and religions. Think of a region that so much that it pioneered has been adopted throughout the world and has played such an important role in shaping everyday lives. Imagine a place which witnessed so much for the first time: first writing system, first state, first city, first water irrigation sysems, first law and many more. Mardin situated right at the centre of this incredibly rich region can therefore be seen as a fortunate city, blessed in history. It has Anatolia on one side and Mesopotamia on the other, an ancient region which transported so many innovations that had originated in the Middle East to the western world.

Despite the common assumption, the word Mesopotamia is not of Middle Eastern origin. It comes from the ancient Greek root words mesos (middle) and potamia (rivers) literally meaning "(land) between rivers." It is curious that although writing was introduced in the region almost 3000 years earlier than in Greece, the region's name is of Greek origin rather than a Middle Eastern language. In Syriac, Mesopotamia is called Beth Nahrin. Composed of the words beth (house, land) and nahrin (two rivers), it literally means "the land of/between two rivers." Based on this, it can be deduced that the region was named not by the Greek civilizations of the west but by the people of the region themselves. Similarly in Arabic, the term bilād al-rāfidayn which also means "the land of/between two rivers," is used to describe the aea. On the other hand, Kurds use the term Mezrabotan for Mesopotamia instead of the terms coined by their neighbours. Despite the argument advanced by the locals that Mezrabotan means "the land of Botans," it is more likely that it is an adaptation of the Greek word Mesopotamia into Kurdish. If so it is interesting that they named it not from the languages of their neighbours but from a distant language with which it has organic ties.

Its location between the two mighty rivers namely the Tigris and the Euphrates gives the region its name and life; the two are identified for the first time in Sumerian texts dating back to the 4th millennium BCE as the Idigna or Idigina or Diglat for the Tigris and the Purattu or Buranuna for the Euphrates. Both rivers are mentioned in virtually all sacred texts and for centuries they played an important

role in spreading or the globalisation of innovations. Rivers indeed were the major highways of ancient times that facilitated travel through difficult environments. They were particularly suitable for travel in regions which suffered for shortages of water and had featureless areas to cross; the simple attraction for travellers was simply to follow them to avoid getting lost. Their importance was such that those in possession, enabled trade and the sources of life giving water in semi-arid or arid regions to be controlled.

The Euphrates is Turkey's largest cross-border river. It has two main sources namely the Murat River from the area around Ağrı and the Karasu River from around Erzurum. The current of the Euphrates (2,800 kilometres in length) is very strong and prevented its use for transportation purposes in ancient times. In some texts it is written that the flow was curbed by a massive rock around the ancient Syrian city of Mari so that it became more suitable for transportation from that point onwards and was used as such. The same strong current resulted in a heavy loss of life throughout the centuries which resulted in many songs lamenting the sorrows it caused. The common practice of naming male children in the region after the river (Fırat in Turkish) is also probably associated with the strength of the flow. After its long journey in Turkey the river crosses first into Syria and then Iraq, its strength being augmented by many tributaries. In Baghdad, the Euphrates comes within 25 kilometres of the Tigris with which it confluences in southern Iraq. Together they form the Shatt al-Arab and flow into the Persian Gulf.

The Tigris River flows through Turkey for 523 kilometres of its total length of 1,900 kilometres. The name of its main channel is the Maden River which originates to the south of the Hazar Baba Mountain in Elazığ. It assumes the name Tigris at the point after the Kral Kızı Dam and is there fed by many tributaries such as the Anbar, Kuru, Pamuk, Hazro, Batman ve Garzan of the Diyarbakır basin. To the south of Siirt its tributary the Botan River after it passes through Cizre in Şırnak province, forms the border between Turkey and Syria. The Tigris joins with the Habur River and crosses into the Iraqi. Despite having many more tributaries, the strength of its current is much weaker than that of the Euphrates and so its slower and broader flow has made it more amenable to transportation. The river's name in Turkish is Dicle; it is commonly used as a name for girls, most probably inspired by its calmness and serenity.

Despite the meaning of the name, Mesopotamia is not limited to just the territory between the Tigris and the Euphrates. Geographically it covers a much broader area. The Tur Abdin Mountains that are part of the South-eastern Taurus constitute its northern border, Mardin and Midyat being located in this mountainous area. The deserts of the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf mark its southern border of Mesopotamia. The Zagros Mountains in the east and the Mediterranean shores in the west mark the other borders of this region.

Mesopotamia's greatest gift to humanity is agriculture or in the words of archaeologist Gordon Childe in the "Neolithic Revolution" a joint product with Anatolia. Before the Neolithic Revolution, people in the region like others in the rest of the world existed as hunter/gatherers being nomads in constant search of food. The best example dating from this period in Mardin is the Harebe Halele Palaeolithic site located four kilometres along the Mardin-Diyarbakır road and within the campus ground of the Mardin Artuklu University. Excavations date it to the Upper Palaeolithic period that is between 50,000 to 10,000 years ago. It is where Mardin's oldest cultural layers are found and is a 'must-see' attraction for those interested in this subject.

At this stage of human development, peoples' diet consisted only of the food they hunted and gathered. In order to improve their dietary sufficiency, people started to plant the gathered seeds in a controlled manner. As they engaged more and more in what was in effect agriculture, they started to overproduce benefiting from the increasing prolificacy of wheat whereby in time a sack of wheat seed producing at least another twenty sacks of wheat.

The domestication of various plants and the transition to agrarian-based lifestyle took place in northern Mesopotamia in the region referred to as the Fertile Crescent. The region includes today's Israel, Lebanon, western Syria and the region south of Antioch. Then it passes through the Amik Valley and follows the South-eastern Taurus mountain range. It also covers the areas of Gaziantep, Kilis, Adıyaman, Şanlıurfa, Mardin, Şırnak and the Zagros Mountains all the way down to Mosul in Iraq. The Fertile Crescent was the most suitable place for farming due to the fertility of the soil and abundant rainfall and these combined to bring about the Neolithic Revolution, in effect the largest revolution in history. It took place 12,000 years ago Northern Mesopotamia where Mardin is located. As people transitioned into sedentary lifestyle they began to build houses which later came to form villages with the earliest examples to be found in the region. Overproduction as a concomitant of agricultural activity occurred and this enabled the development of an economy and complex social relations in the area. Mardin an important cornerstone in the Fertile Crescent would have been to the fore in this revolution. That agriculture is still the main economic activity in the region, is perhaps a historical heritage.

After successfully domesticating various animals, humans became semi-nomadic which brought about the beginning of a different socio-economic process. People who had once had the luxury of moving from place to place in search of game, now went searching for food for the animals they had domesticated. Archaeological excavations carried out in parts of Anatolia and Mesopotamia show that the domestication of animals took place in this region. The first animal to be domesticated was the dog in or around 11,000 BCE followed by the pig around

10,000 BCE, the goat in 8.500 BCE, sheep in 8.000 BCE and cats and cattle around 7,000 BCE. While humans were now sedentary, their nomadic lifestyle was not altogether abandoned. In fact there were groups which adopted an agriculture-based economic system and yet still lived nomadically. It is still possible to see an example of this lifestyle with nomadic families who spend winters in the rural areas around the villages of Dara, Nusaybin and Midyat and summers in the high plateaus of Van, Bitlis and Ağrı. The change to wholly agriculture was partial. Organisation simply involved families still coming together to work their land rather than large work forces being organized. While villages continued to grow in size, this growth was not always a sign of development.

While all this was taking place in northern Mesopotamia, a second major revolution was under way in southern Mesopotamia an area not suitable for farming due to low rainfall. The nearby water sources of the Tigris and the Euphrates had to be more efficiently managed and water brought to the dry inlands via regional waterways and courses. Their construction necessitated the formation of an organized work force and religion a constant of the human condition also shared in this development of labour. During the Sumerian period, temple priests found the way of bringing the water of the valleys to inland areas by building canals and they organize people by using religion to realise their plans. Thus, a temple economy emerged. Large numbers were effectively organized around a single mission; they dug water channels and brought water to dry inland areas. In addition to a degree of political and economic power, the organization of people also required good management and calculation skills. Factors such as housing for workers and their families, food supply, assistance to families, portioning of the lands to be watered, keeping records of incomes and not least taxes to be collected, eventually made the invention of writing inevitable. In other words, drought and harsh environmental conditions brought people together and gave way to the emergence of new systems. With the invention of writing, a new revolutionary period began: the Urban Revolution. For the environmental factors cited above, the first cities were built not in northern Mesopotamia where villages had been earlier established, but in the dry south. Despite the existence of ancient village settlements in Mardin and its environs such as the settlement of Kerküştü in the south of the district of Derik and Cıhoşi Höyük 15 kilometres southwest of Kızıltepe (both dating back to around 5000 BCE) no traces of a city development have ever been found. By contrast in the south where cities flourished permitted the emergence of a working class and thereby social inequalities to develop and a religious class noticeably separate from the rest of the society to evolve. It was a society where tax systems were devised, regular armies formed and laws written.

These two developments namely the evolution of agriculture and the birth of cities, aptly show the importance of Mesopotamia in the history of humanity. Not only did the region introduce these two elements to the then civilised world, it also

gave modern society everything that flowed from these being developed.

With the invention of writing, humanity started to walk on a bright path instead of trying to find a way in the darkness with Sumerians being mysterious actors in this progress. It is thanks to their invention of writing that it is possible now to know and talk about them. In addition to writing Sumerians were the first to invent the lunar calendar, to define the constellations, develop a system of metrology and calculate the length of the year and an hour. Sumerians the great innovators of Mesopotamia, left their mark on religion as well through literature which includes great works like the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Great Flood and the Epic of Creation. Around 2400 BCE, the Akkadians a Semitic people, came to southern Mesopotamia and with the aid of a regular army (the first in recorded in history), the first empire in history emerged. It resulted in the already weakened Sumerians being destroyed in 2100 BCE and their removal from the pages of history. The new empire covered a vast tract of land in Mesopotamia and Anatolia. But the Sumerian culture continued to influence the region long after politically they ceased to exist; evidence of this and the region's rich history can be seen in the Mardin Museum. Among the archaeological relics on view are the world's earliest toy car from 4000 BCE and an excavated clay tablet recording the sale and title deed of a garden at Gırnavaz on the outskirts of Nusaybin? These two items are important in that they show the similarities between the ancient past and today.

The Babylonians established the first absolute monarchy and their king Hammurabi promulgated the first set of laws in history. The Assyrians one of the most important and largest political entities in Mesopotamia followed; they were responsible for introducing writing into Anatolia. It was their trade activities that led them to establish trading colonies around 2000 BCE that introduced the writing system to Anatolia some 1600 years after it had emerged in Mesopotamia. From here writing was globalized enabling inextricable links to be forged between Anatolia, Mesopotamia and the rest of the world.

In this historical process, Mardin and Tur Abdin were important centres. The Assyrians and other Mesopotamian tribes could not have moved northwards without first establishing control over northern Mesopotamia. In this process it is most probable that Mesopotamia was exposed to new innovations like writing much earlier than Anatolia. The Akkadians stone tablets serve as an example in this respect. Similar archaeological findings from Anatolia only date to the Middle Assyrian Period (1500 BCE). Mardin on the other hand positioned as it was in northern Mesopotamia was already at the centre of important political developments in 2000 BCE. And indeed, it is possible that the long lost capital of the Mitanni Kingdom of Washuganni one of the mysteries of Near Eastern archaeology, is situated somewhere within borders of the province of Mardin. It was believed that Gırnavaz was the location of the long lost capital until it was proved to be the

ancient settlement of Nabula. The long lost site remains to be discovered, perhaps waiting to be found in one of the hundreds of other höyük settlements in Mardin and its environs.

After the Assyrians, the region of Mardin came under Median, Babylonian, Parthian, Hellenistic and Roman rule. Its conquest was necessary to establish control in northern Mesopotamia thereby ensuring that every power from the east or from Anatolia with expansionist ambitions, sought to establish the region as a province in their respective empires;. The history of Nusaybin as Nisibis or Nashipina, Gırnavaz as Nabula, Dara as Anastasiapolis and in later periods Kızıltepe as Tigrano Kerta (the southern capital of the Kingdom of Tigran) illustrates the region's importance as a political centre in the ancient times. In more recent periods, the Artuqids chose Mardin as their capital availing of its well-protected fortress location which enabled control to be exercised over trade routes. As a result of its location at the heart of Mesopotamia as well as its close proximity to Anatolia, Mardin experienced repeated waves of invasions and bears the marks for all periods in history from the Palaeolithic age to the present day. It is like a summary of the history of mankind.

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From Anatolia to Mesopotamia: **Peoples and Faiths**

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Wherever one goes in Anatolia, he or she comes across a region with a distinct culture and a community that gives it life. The differences between the Black Sea and the Aegean or Mediterranean regions are not only geographical, they are determined to a large extent by the cultures of the regions' peoples. This coexistence in the same geographical space turns the region into a cultural oasis. In these lands, different groups continued with the tradition of previous waves of incoming peoples in its development rather than its destruction.

The consecutive appearance of the sun god in various Mesopotamian cultures serves as a fitting example in this respect. The sun god Utu of the Sumerians continued its existence as Shisha in the Aramaic culture and as Sheikh Shems in the Yazidi tradition. Cultures are like a sea made up of individual rain drops. What brings them to life is the coming together of hundreds and thousands of them. Mardin is one such oasis on the outer edge of Anatolia. Although three different monotheistic religions and a myriad of peoples such as Syriacs, Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Dom gypsies and Armenians currently live in Mardin, they carry within themselves the legacy of thousands of other peoples and cultures. A look into the story of these persons, who are the true architects of this historic city will unearth a deeper meaning that is hidden in its stone carvings. The aim in this small volume is not to tell the whole story of this vast ocean but to share a taste of its water enough to stimulate the appetite of readers to read more and maybe visit the province.

Syriacs

A widely accepted theory suggests that the Syriacs were a continuation of the Aramean people, a Semitic tribe that shared the same lineage as the Jews. All claim decent from the two sons of Prophet Noah, namely Ham and Shem. The term "Semitic" refers to the peoples of the region and their languages who are descended from Noah's son Shem. It is a point worth noting that the peoples of the region are more closely related to each other than they think given their common origins and languages.

The Arameans began to migrate to the lands of Syria and northern Mesopotamia from 11th century BCE onwards and established many independent kingdoms in the region. However, the Aramean principalities were subjugated by the Assyrian Empire in the first quarter of the 1st millennium BCE. From this point onwards, the Arameans lived under foreign domination. Nevertheless,

they continued to exert influence on major kingdoms thanks to their advanced civilizational level and city culture. For example, the mighty Persian Empire used Aramaic for a certain time as the official language of correspondence and the Assyrians were greatly influenced by the Arameans in the field of arts.

The story of the conversion of the Syriacs to Christianity starts in Edessa (now Şanlıurfa) at the time of Christ. According to the legend, the King of Edessa (aka Şanlıurfa), Abgar Ukkama caught a skin disease and sought treatment for the condition. On hearing of a prophet in Jerusalem (who by chance was Jesus Christ) who had already cured many and worked miracles, the King invited Jesus to Edessa. Hoping that his disease would be cured, he promised Jesus that he could live in peace in his city. At the time, Jesus' fellow Jews were increasingly uneasy about his unorthodox teachings and his growing popularity. In reply, Jesus said that he personally could not come but he would dispatch one of his disciples to the King as he believed without even seeing him. Jesus' crucifixion intervened but to fulfil his promise, Thomas, the beloved of the twelve disciples, sent a student of Jesus named Thaddeus (Addai in Syriac) to the King. He was in fact one of the seventy students appointed by Jesus to spread his message. When Thaddeus successfully cured the King, he converted to Christianity along with many other citizens of Edessa and a church was built. Thaddeus went on to spread Jesus' teachings in the surrounding areas. Upon Thaddeus' death, his student Aggai succeeded him. During this period, Christianity spread to the area that today is known as Mardin and a church was built in Kefertut (now the village of Koçlu in Kızıltepe). So the history of Syriacs starts with a correspondence with Jesus and his disciple Thomas, and therefore is as old as Christianity itself.

The emergence of the Syriac Orthodox Church ensued. During the 4th century, there were heated debates known as Christological controversies about the divine and human natures of Jesus. Leaders met in a number of councils in order to settle the dispute and create uniform doctrines that would be binding for the entire Christian world. In the Council of Chalcedon (today Istanbul's Kadıköy district), the fourth such council that met in 451 CE; the Monophysite position which asserted that Jesus Christ had only divine nature was rejected. The doctrine of dyophysitism, which emphasized Jesus' dual nature both divine and human, was promulgated. Groups who refused to deny their monophysite beliefs eventually split from the main Church following the Council. These were the Syriacs, the Armenians and the Egyptian Copts. After the split, the Syriacs came under increasing pressure from Roman authorities who used dyophysitism as a political tool to enforce power. This was when monasteries which are found even in remote mountain caves, became extremely important for the Syriacs. They served as places of refuge for persecuted monks and bishops who had not abandoned their monophysite beliefs. These monasteries ensured the continuation of the Syriac tradition even under difficult conditions by acting as arteries between the people and the clergy.

From this period onwards, the area of Midyat and its surroundings, which had been called Kashyari by the Assyrians and Mons Masius by the Romans came to be known as Tur Abdin. The region's assumption of a Syriac name is indicative of the fact that the Syriacs shaped its face. The Syriacs, who had separated themselves already from mainstream Christianity, saw the mountainous region as a perfect place for seclusion away from major centres and dangers. By establishing many monasteries down through the centuries, it turned the area into one of the leading spiritual centres of eastern Christianity. In fact, Midyat and its surroundings became the heartland of the monastic tradition in the Eastern Church. The earliest records that refer to the region as Tur Abdin date back to the 6th century.

Another theory regarding the emergence of the name Tur Abdin refers to the 6th century during which a struggle raged between the Byzantine and the Sassanid empires. The Byzantines took many Zoroastrians and pagans hostage during military incursions into the Sassanid territory and brought them as slaves to the Tur Abdin region and hence its name "the Mountain of the Slaves". This theory is based on the following information garnered from the life story of Mor Yuhanon: [The Byzantines] took many Zoroastrians and pagans hostage and settled them in the area stretching from the Mount of Izla to Arson, from the village of Fanuc to Hasno, Savur and Mardin. After these hostages had been settled here, the mountains of the region came to be known as the 'Mountain of Slaves' since they were brought here as slaves. Consequently, from the period of Byzantine Emperor Justinianus (d. 565) onwards, the region was called the 'Mountain of Slaves' (Jabl Abdin or Tur Abdin).

The control of the Tur Abdin region passed to the Arabs following the Islamic conquests of the 7th century. By comparison with earlier periods in history, the Arabs were more tolerant of the Syriacs than other rulers. This contrasted with the calamity of the Mongolian invasion in the 13th century when the Tur Abdin community and many other Syriacs were massacred and monasteries destroyed..

Today, the Syriac population is estimated to be somewhere between 15,000 and 20,000 with most living in Istanbul. For ease of administration in Turkey, the Syriac church is organised into four regional archdioceses and patriarchate vicariates in Turkey. These are the Archbishopric of Istanbul and Ankara; the Patriarchate Vicariate of Mardin; the Patriarchate Vicariate of Tur Abdin; and lastly the Archbishopric of Adıyaman. Syriacs speak a dialect of Aramaic known as Turoyo.

Yazidis

Yazidis form a small religious community in Mardin and are often the most misjudged group in the region. Not only in the Middle East where their origins are, but also in the West, they were stigmatized for centuries as "devil worshippers," and as a result suffered persecution.

Yazidism is an amalgamation of various Mesopotamian religions and Zoroastrianism, which is among the oldest monotheistic religions in the world. Zoroastrianism was founded 3,500 years ago in ancient Persia by a religious philosopher named Zoroaster. While Yazidism is thought to have borrowed certain elements from Islam and Christianity, essentially it is based to a large extent on the Zoroastrian beliefs and traditions. It emerged as an established religion after a 300-year period in which it grew from its beginnings as a religious order founded by the 12th-century ascetic Islamic figure, Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir.

At the centre of the Yazidi belief is the Peacock Angel, otherwise known as the fallen angel Azazel or Satan. In the Yazidi tradition, the name Satan was given to archangel Azazel after his punishment by God. Yazidis do not wish to recall the event; the use of the word "Satan" is therefore forbidden. According to the story, God appointed seven angels to administer the creation of heaven and earth. The chief among them was Azazel, who had been created from the blaze of the purest fire. When God created Adam, the first man, he ordered his angels to bow before him. But Azazel refused, as it would mean ranking a product of creation equal to the Creator. Although Azazel knew that God would punish him for this, he still refused to obey. According to the Yazidi belief, Azazel's disobedience of God's order was not out of disrespect but rather of immense love for the Creator. In fact, his love was greater than the fear of punishment. Nevertheless, Azazel was sent into exile in hell. On the same day he also received the name "Satan" which the Yazidis refrain from using.

The loss of God's love evoked such anguish throughout the seven thousand years of his exile that Azazel continuously cried filling a jar each year with his tears. Finally, God unable to endure seeing further suffering, forgave and restored him to his former status. Out of joy Azazel (aka Satan) broke the jars, out flowed the tears, extinguished the fires of hell (the tears apparently being the only element in the universe capable of so doing) and on which the Yazidis base the belief why hell is no more and Azazel's importance as an intermediary between God and humanity.

Satan therefore is not synonymous with evil and is believed to have been forgiven by God and readmitted to His circle. The title of the Peacock Angel and the peacock symbol attached to him dates from a legend in the 12th century that God

appeared and conversed with the modern religion's founder Sheikh Adi ibn Musarif in the shape of a peacock.

Yazidis believe that they will continuously be reincarnated until their souls reach levels of purity to permit entry to heaven. Usually they pray three to five times a day with faces turned towards the sun. In their tradition, the sun is also a central figure and is represented by Sheikh Shems, one of the Seven Archangels whom they believe visits God three times a day to deliver Him believers' prayers and supplications. The centrality of the sun in the religion further becomes apparent through the practice whereby they kiss the spot each day where the first beams of the morning sun fall.

The Yazidi religion is based on an oral tradition that has been transmitted generation to generation through many centuries. It is believed to be a contributory factor giving rise to the widespread prejudice against and adverse perception of the Yazidis as a mysterious and secretive group. It was not until 1978, when two Yazidi intellectuals codified Yazidi religious teachings known as qewl and published them in a text, that we finally had access to the Yazidi oral tradition.

The Yazidi society is characterised by a strict caste system, within which there are two main groups called the "Disciples" and the "Clerics," with the Clerics then divided into seven subcategories. A mixed marriage with a non-Yazidi would not be countenanced.

Yazidis are ethnically Kurdish and apart from a small Arabic-speaking minority, all speak the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish. Today, there are Yazidi communities in the cities and villages of Mardin, Şanlıurfa and Batman in addition to major urban centres in Turkey. Unfortunately, most Yazidis left the region during the conflict-ridden decade of the 1980s and settled in Europe.

Kurds

Since ancient times, Kurds have inhabited the area which stretches from northwestern Iran, through northern Iraq and north-eastern Syria to the eastern parts of Anatolia. Today, they are the second largest ethnic group in Turkey with significant Kurdish populations in the Caucasus and Europe as a result of migration in recent decades.

In terms of population, Kurds are the largest group in Mardin. They are predominantly Sunni Muslims and belong to the Shafi'i sect of Islam and speak Kurmanji one of the four main dialects of Kurdish.

Kurds are considered to belong to the Iranian branch of Indo-European race. The first time they appear in the pages of history as such was around 400 BCE. It was the Greek historian and philosopher Xenophon, a student of Socrates, who mentioned

the name Kurd for the first time in his work Anabasis. Xenophon uses the term the "land of Kardu/Karhu" to describe the region where the armies of Cyrus the Younger, the Persian king who embarked on a military campaign to unseat his brother Artaxerxes II, passed as described in his account of the March of the Ten Thousands (i.e. the epic forced march of the Greeks back from Mesopotamia along the Tigris across Anatolia to found a city on the Black Sea coast). This area is thought to roughly correspond to the areas where the cities of Siirt and Şırnak are located.

Throughout their history, the Kurds endured different invasions. The Islamic conquest of the region in the 7th century was followed by the Mongol invasion of the 13th century and later by Tamerlane's conquests in the 14th century. Despite these consecutive rounds of devastation and foreign dominance, Kurdish dynasties such as the Marwanids of Mayyafariqin (now the Silvan district of Diyarbakır) were able to flourish in the 10th century. The most famous of the Kurdish dynasties, was that of the Ayyubids. They are known in history for their famous ruler Salah al-Din (aka Saladin and ruler of Egypt and Syria) who defeated the Crusaders in 1187 in the Battle of Hittin. The Ottoman Empire seized the Kurdish areas in the Battle of Çaldıran in northern Van in 1514. The Kurdish-inhabited region's importance resulted from its strategic position between two rival empires, namely the Ottoman Empire and the Safavids of Iran. The Kurdish tribes' assistance to the Ottomans against the Safavids was instrumental in bringing this region under Ottoman control. In the following decades, the Kurds' relationship with the central Ottoman government shifted periodically between autonomy and stricter central control.

Turks

Turks, one of the ethnic populations present in Mardin, are of Central Asian origin their language belonging to the Ural-Altaic language family. The first known Turkish state in history was the Hun Empire established in 220 BCE. Turks left an important mark on history throughout centuries, founded many empires and were influential on many cultures.

The Turks' arrival in Mardin occurred shortly after the Seljuq Turks' defeat of the Byzantine Empire at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071; it marked the beginning of the Turkification of Anatolia. After the decline of the Seljuqs many small Turkish principalities were established in Anatolia. One of these was the Artuqid dynasty which chose Mardin as its capital due to the city's structure as an impregnable natural fortress. Mardin, a small city until then, grew rapidly under the Artuqids. During this period, a significant Turkish population also started to form in the city. Following the passing of the Artuqids, the ownership of the city was contested by the principalities of Akkoyunlu and Karakoyunlu; it eventually

became part of the Ottoman Empire in 1517. However, the Artuqid influence lives on through its architecture, there being more Artuqid structures in Mardin than those of the Ottomans.

Although the Turks arrived in Mardin at a relatively later stage, they nevertheless left their unique mark on the city. To properly control and develop their conquests, the Ottoman regime was quick of the mark in counting its population. The first such in Mardin was conducted in 1518 relatively soon after the Ottoman conquest. The Mardin of then consisted of nine neighbourhoods and its population consisted of 48% Christians, 45% Muslims and 7% Shems and Jews.

Arabs

Arabs form the largest community in Mardin after Kurds. Although there is a tendency to label all Arabic-speaking peoples as Arabs, those in Mardin are actually divided into two groups, namely the Mihallemis and the Arabs. Like the Dom gypsies, little research has been undertaken to determine the origins of the Mardin Arabs. A widely accepted theory traces their origin to an Arab army of Memun, the son of the Abbasid ruler Harun Rashid at the end of the 8th century. Composed of both Arab and Turkish soldiers, it was stationed at one hundred military outposts along the Mardin-Cizre route. It is believed that the Arabs in the army belonged to the tribe of Beni Hilal from the city of Najd in the Arabian Peninsula, while the Turkish soldiers came from Baghdad where they had settled following their migration from Central Asia. The Arabs in Memun's army would have been of Semitic origin and the language belonged to the Semitic language family.

The origin of the Mihellemis is somewhat uncertain. A plausible thesis holds that they were originally Syriacs but converted to Islam during the 13th century as a result of increasing pressure on non-Muslim communities. Their origin is set much earlier at about 700 years before the Christian era in another thesis. According to this, the Mihellemis of Mardin simply belonged to the first Arab tribes who had set foot in this region. Yet another theory places them earlier, identifying the Mihellemis as the peoples described as the occupiers of "land of Ahlamur" in Assyrian sources. While not immediately obvious, it is argued that over time, the pronunciation of the word Ahlamur changed and finally became Mihallemi.

Mihellemis and Arabs live in the districts of Ömerli, Yeşilli, Kızıltepe, Savur, Nusaybin and Midyat as well as in the Mardin city centre.

Armenians

There are two theories regarding the arrival of the Armenians in the region; one suggests a migration wave of Thracian tribes in or around 1000 BCE, the other argues that the origin lies in a much earlier migration wave around 2000 BCE that also brought the Mitannis to the region. Whichever is true and maybe both are, what is certain is that Armenians have lived in this region for at least 2,000 years.

Although there are almost none left in Mardin today, a considerable Armenian population existed in Mardin for centuries as there was in the rest of eastern Turkey. According to some sources, there were approximately 8,000 Armenians in central Mardin prior to the First World War; today, there are only five or six Armenian families living in central Mardin. Now due to their small number, Armenians in Mardin worship alongside Syriac and Catholic communities rotating the venue for religious ceremonies around their respective churches.
As with the Artuqids, Armenian influence lives on in the architecture of Mardin whose architects, stonemasons and muralists gave the city its distinctive and appealing appearance. Foremost among these was the chief architect Sarkis Lole, whose name was given to the street where Sakıp Sabancı Museum is located. Known as the "Mimar Sinan of Mardin," Sarkis Lole built most of the traditional Mardin houses as well as the city's administrative buildings. The old Post Office built in 1890 is a fine example of his skills.

Mardin was also home to noteworthy religious figures occupying important positions in the Armenian Church. Among them were Patriarch Andreas and Hachadur II: the latter served as the church patriarch from 1523 to 1544. His period in office followed on from that of his predecessor Sarkis III. In addition, Surp Agop, to whose dedication the hospital in Istanbul's Taksim-Elmadağı district was built in the 19th century, was from Nusaybin.

Shemsis

Mardin was home to Mesopotamia's longest standing pagan community as much as it was a centre for monotheistic religions. The Shemsis known disparagingly by their neighbours as "sun-worshippers" lived in Mardin for centuries, the name deriving from the Semitic word for sun (shemesh or shams). As with Egyptians, it is understandable that the Mesopotamians developed belief systems centred on the sun relying as they did on the life-giving role played by it in agriculture on which their livelihood depended. It explains in part why Shemsis would pray three times a day in front of a statue representing the sun.
Unlike Christians and Jews, the Ottomans did not recognize the Shemsis as a

"People of the Book" i.e. their beliefs were not codified in written record such as the Qur'an or the Bible. The Shemsis were therefore pressurized by Muslim as well as by Christian communities especially during the 18th and 19th centuries to convert to one of the monotheistic religions. According to some sources, they eventually converted to Christianity but it was nominal and so many continued to practice their own religion, albeit in secret. The pressure on Shemsis and their exclusion from the society are cited as reasons for their physical isolation from other communities. While various ethnic and religious groups lived side by side in Mardin, the Shemsis (as the Jews) lived in their own enclosed neighbourhood located on the southern perimeter of the city. Its name was derived from that of its residents and was known as Shemsiyye (today the neighbourhood of Babussor/Savurkapı). As late as 1837, there were 1,250 Shemsis living in 250 households in Mardin.

A history by Italian Giuseppe Campanile (1762-1835) raised the veil and provided valuable insight about the community's religious practices and daily life. He was one of two priests sent by the Vatican to the eastern region of the Ottoman Empire to carry out missionary activities; in 1818 he published a book about the region's history. It described how they (the Shemsis) would, as a matter of course, bow down three times daily at sunrise. They would gather together three times a year in a ceremony, in which they would make an idol in the shape of a lamb out of dough, cover its head with a piece of cloth and place it in a tin bowl. They would then kiss the idol and kneel before it in worship. As referred to above, the absence of "book" recording aspects of their beliefs and practised set them aside from mainstream religions and gave rise to suspicions and even fears about them. A factor contributing to this separation and separation was the fact that they believed according to Campanile, that sins clung to hair and, therefore they would cut the hair and beard of a deceased person. Moreover, they continued to share on ancient Greco-Roman practices of providing the deceased with golden coins to facilitate the soul's transition to the next world. In the case of the Shemsis, the coin was placed in the deceased's palm, in the case of the Romans and Greeks, coins would be placed over the eyes of the deceased as a payment for the ferryman who guided the dead across the river that separated the world of the living from that of the dead.

Campanile's work also included valuable information regarding the social dynamics between peoples in the region. He noted, for instance, the practice of forced confessions and baptisms by Christians. He also observed that in order to protect their way of life and separateness, Shemsis only married co-religionists and rejected proposals by non-Shemsi men to marry their women. He described the latter as being distinguished from others by their white overcoats and the whole community distinguished by the fact that they lived in dire poverty.

Given their difficult history, it is understandable that there are no Shemsis in Mardin today and one can only come across traces which they left behind. Their

presence since the dawn of time in Mardin is only recorded in beautiful examples of their art in motifs carved by the Shemsis at the entrances to many houses and the fact that many of these doors continue to face the sun.

Jews

Jews of eastern Turkey are amongst the least researched minority groups in the country, scholarly research having been mainly focused on those living in Istanbul, Izmir and Thrace. They have been absent from minority literature mostly because of a lack of sources and difficulty in accessing local Jewish records.

Their origins is attributable to a major event in Jewish history, namely the conquest of the Kingdom of Israel by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar and the subsequent large scale deportation in 586 BCE of its people or at least the 'cream' of its people to Babylon. Following their release from captivity by the Persian King Cyrus in 538, they dispersed with one group becoming the ancestors of the Jews of eastern Anatolia making their way first to Assyrian owned lands and later continuing on to upper Mesopotamia.

Jews are a Semitic people and Hebrew belongs to the family of Semitic languages. The word "Semite" was derived from the name Shem, one of the three sons of the prophet Noah.

In the 16th century, there was a Jewish neighbourhood called Yahudiyyan (known as Shehidiyye today in Mardin). At the end of the 19th century the Jewish population in Mardin, the sub-province of the Ottoman province of Diyarbakır, was 1,487. In the first census conducted by the Republic of Turkey in 1927, their number had dropped to 409. Today, the Jewish Fountain, locally called Ayn Yahud stands in Mardin's Old City where a Jewish cemetery and a little-known Jewish market situated at the northwestern end of the Revaklı Bazaar also remain. The existence of a place called the "Jewish Hill" in Nusaybin is indicative of a significant Jewish presence there, too; at times it exceeded that of Mardin. However, by the end of the 1970s, there were only a handful of Jewish families left in Nusaybin. The 300,000 Kurdish Jews currently living in the State of Israel mostly came from Mardin and the region of Bergan in Northern Iraq.

The Dom

Also known as Mitirp and Karachis, the Doms were region's gypsies and the least known of all the ethnic and religious groups in Mardin. The Doms defined themselves as sazbends, meaning musicians. They originated in India and their

community consisted of three tribes, namely Dom, Rom and Lom. When they left India, the Rom migrated to the west, the Lom to the north and the Dom to the south.

The Dom speak a language known as Domari. The fact that they have successfully maintained and continue to speak their own language should be regarded a social miracle. Although fluent in the dominant local languages - Kurdish, Arabic and Turkish - they have resisted linguistic assimilation. Considering the fact that the Dom has been inhabiting this region for approximately 2,000 years, the story of their language-maintenance takes on an added value. One reason for their non-assimilation may be due to their nomadic lifestyle.

Today, the Dom people are found mostly in the areas of Nusaybin, Dargeçit and Midyat. They continued to live nomadically until their recent transition to settled lifestyle in the rundown suburbs. They are famous for their mastery of the ribab, a three-stringed, kemancha-like musical instrument. In musicological literature, this instrument is also known as the Kurdish ribab. It is believed that they are the central players in keeping alive the tradition of troubadours (the dengbêj in Kurdish). It is thanks to them that many stories and legends have been transmitted through music to the present. The presence of this lost tribe of Anatolia in Mardin is a blessing for the city and a valuable addition to its cultural richness.

The peoples that we have briefly listed here form the identity of the city of Mardin, where each community adds to the other as much as it receives from them, and listens to the other as much as it speaks to them.

Nusaybin the City of Djinns:
Gırnavaz

Nusaybin the City of Djinns: **Gırnavaz**

The city of Nusaybin has a 7,000-year history and has been referred to by the same name for the last 4,000 years – an unusual survival given the social change that has occurred in the region over such a long period. The archaeological excavations conducted in Nusaybin show that settlement in the city began during the Halaf period (6100-5500 BCE) and the city assumed the name Nasibina during the Assyrian period (2500 BC to 605 BCE). In ancient times, it had two centres of settlement. One was Nisibis Höyük located in the south of Nusaybin and astride the present-day Turkish-Syrian border. It predates Gırnavaz, the second ancient settlement in Nusaybin. One can still see some Roman columns and ruins on the eastern side of the Nisibis Höyük border gate. Locals believe this area to be the main entrance to the School of Nisibis. Founded by Mor Jacob, the School of Nisibis was one of the most important centres of learning in Mesopotamia. These Roman columns have become synonymous with Nusaybin and turned into its symbol including that for the Municipality and for several local enterprises which incorporate them in designing business logos.

When the journey eastwards away from the Roman ruins is continued, one will come across a hill that is higher than the others and that stretches all the way down to the shores of the Jaghjagh River (Çağ Çağ). The Jaghjagh has two sources namely Kara Su (Black Water) and Beyaz Su (White Water). It runs for 25 kilometres before reaching Nusaybin. Thereafter it crosses through and into Syria. The Jaghjagh River valley is a popular excursion and picnic site for local people and functions as the region's source of fresh vegetables and fruit. It is like an oasis where people find relief from the heat of summer and enjoy the local production of walnuts, pomegranates, grapes and trout. The valley that is known as Newala Bunîsra (Bunisra Valley) by the local community is also home to an ancient fortress, a caravansary, and several archaeological settlements. Large portions of Nisibis Höyük are buried under the current buildings.

The second settlement centre, Gırnavaz, lies 5 kilometres north of Nisibis Höyük and in very close proximity to the current settlement area in Nusaybin (the central bus station is located one kilometre north of Gırnavaz). Lying on the foothills of the Tur Abdin Mountains, Gırnavaz is located right where the Jaghjagh Valley meets the plains. Archaeological excavations began in Gırnavaz in 1982 as the site was suspected to be Washuganni, the long lost capital of the Mitannis (1500 BCE–1300 BCE). 25 meters high and 250 meters in diameter, this small hill was first settled during the 4th millennium BCE. Many artefacts dating as far back as the 4th millennium BCE and from the Roman period were unearthed during the excavations. The most noticeable ones among these relics are the rulers' tombs from the period of Nineveh V in the 3rd millennium BCE and the cuneiform (stone) tablets from the late Assyrian period (9th century BCE). One such cuneiform tablet currently on display in the Mardin Museum is a bill of sale for a garden also serving as a deed to the property. The deed describes the garden and states that the garden

was sold along with the fruit from its trees. When visiting Gırnavaz, one can still see the orchards described in this ancient document.

There are many different theories as to the origin of the name Gırnavaz. According to one of them, during the time of the Abbasid Caliph Harun Rashid (8th century CE), a sharp-tongued poet named Abu Navaz was exiled in Nusaybin. The locals, who had grown fond of him, named the place where he lived in his honour. In turn, Abu Navaz is said to have expressed his love for Nusaybin in his poems with the following attributed to him:

Compliments Nusaybin never paid me

Although I was so in love with her

Should I ever receive my share of the world

All I want is Nusaybin to be my home

According to some other sources, the name Gırnavaz, which means "Navaz's Hill" in Kurdish was because it is where Abu Navaz was buried.

Djinns are closely associated with Nusaybin. Although the first data linking them dates back to period of Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century, it is known that the story of the djinns is much older. In ancient Mesopotamian and western pagan religions, djinns appear as non-human, bizarre creatures. Djinns' first appearance in the monotheistic religions is in the Torah, to reappear in other religions. The 17th verse of Surah an-Naml, chapter 27 in the Qur'an, mentions djinss as it describes Prophet Solomon's power over other worlds and animals: "And gathered for Solomon were his soldiers of the djinn and men and birds, and they were [marching] in rows." Based on this verse, it may be concluded that djinns found a place for themselves in established religions as they did in social life and practices.

The djinns' encounter with Prophet Muhammad is narrated in the following manner in the Qur'an:

Say, [O Muhammad], "It has been revealed to me that a group of the djinn listened and said, 'Indeed, we have heard an amazing Qur'an. It guides to the right course, and we have believed in it. And we will never associate with our Lord anyone.'" (Surah al-Jinn, 71: 1-2)

In another surah, it says:

And [mention, O Muhammad], when We directed to you a few of the djinn, listening to the Qur'an. And when they attended it, they said, "Listen quietly." And when it was concluded, they went back to their people as warners. They said, "O our people, indeed we have heard a [recited] Book revealed after Moses confirming

what was before it which guides to the truth and to a straight path. O our people, respond to the Messenger of Allah and believe in him; Allah will forgive for you your sins and protect you from a painful punishment." (Surah al-Ahqaf, 46: 29-31)

The djinns from Nusaybin appeared for the first time right at this point. In his quote from Muhammad bin Ka'b al-Kurazi, Ibn Hashim gives the detail about these djinns' encounter with Prophet Muhammad that they "were seven in number and from Nusaybin."

In another narrative, the Islamic scholar Alkame bin Kays asks Ibn Mesud, one of the first to convert to Islam, whether he was with Prophet Muhammad on the night known as the "Night of the Djinns." Ibn Mesud replied:

No. We lost him one day in Mecca. We could not find him, although we looked for him everywhere. We were worried that he might be assassinated or kidnapped by the djinns. At sunrise, he appeared from the direction of the Mount Hira. When we asked him about his whereabouts, he said, "The djinns came to me and I recited to them the Qur'an."

He continued:

The Prophet then took us to the spot where he had encountered the djinns. He showed us the traces they left and the remnants of the fire they had lit. The djinns had asked the Prophet that night what they were allowed to eat. The Prophet had answered that bones of animals slaughtered in a halal manner and camel manure were permissible for them. The Prophet then said to His companions, "These are the food of your djinn brothers."

According to tradition, three of these djinns were from Harran; and four of them were from Nusaybin. Their names were as follows: 1. Haya, 2. Hasa, 3. Mesa, 4. Shasir, 5. Nasir, 6. Ibyan or Inyat, 7. Ehkam or Ered. Many scholars of Islam agree that four of the djinns present on the "Night of the Djinns" were from city of Nasibin in the region of al-Jazeera. The name al-Jazeera was used after the 7th century by Arab geographers to describe northern Mesopotamia, which constituted the easternmost province of al-Jazeera, known as Diyār Rabī'a. One of the leading urban centres of Diyār Rabī'a was Nusaybin.

This is how Nusaybin came to be associated with the djinns. Neighbouring Gırnavaz is part of this story because the tomb of the prince of the djinns, Mir Osman, is believed to be here.

Gırnavaz is considered a centre of healing and a holy site by local peoples as well as residents of northern Syria and northern Iraq. As common with many shrines and burial places, special ceremonies are held on special days. It is associated with the treatment of mental illnesses. From ancient pagan religions to today, there has been a belief that mental illness was caused by evil spirits and so those who come to the Mir Osman's tomb believe that he will expel the djinns that

trouble them. Visits to the tomb take place on Wednesdays instead of Thursdays and Fridays as is the norm elsewhere in places of pilgrimage. It is visited also by Yazidis and Syriacs and the choice of Wednesday may be explained by it being the holy day in the Yazidi culture. The fact that the djinns are common in all religions and that Gırnavaz is a site revered by all, are examples of religious and cultural coexistence in Mardin and its environs.

Before ascending the hill, pilgrims can make a wish at the tomb of another djinn and tie a piece of cloth to the 'wish' tree there. The usual practice is to take an existing material from the tree and replace it with the new piece. This gives immunity to the bearer from djinns as it is believed that they will not approach a person who carries a piece of cloth from this tree. Before they start journeying up the hill, pilgrims leave their belongings at the tomb. On the hilltop one can see the extent to which carpets, rugs, blankets and pillows surround Mir Osman's tomb and the trees adorned with many pieces of cloth. Those who climb the hill are usually seeking cures for their illnesses or those of people accompanying them. While the afflicted person stays at the top of the hill, the others return. (If they wish, visitors can spend the night at the site.) The ritual conducted up the hill consists of placing six or seven pieces of rock on top of each other while making a wish. It is believed that if the small 'cairn' does not fall, the pilgrim's wish will come true. Such practice exists in many religions and sects such as Judaism and Alevism.

Some pilgrims simply pray and sleep here for a few hours. Some others first dance and sing around the tomb in order to please the djinns. After the dancing and singing, they pray and sleep for some hours. At the same time downhill, a kind of wet bread, which is called nane shiliki in Kurdish is baked, meals are cooked and distributed to all present. If an improvement occurs in the sick person's condition after the first visit to the tomb, the same cycle is repeated. If the person is completely cured, a prayer session is held and meals are distributed. In this way, the family expresses its gratitude and shows their willingness to help those others in need.

Gırnavaz and Nusaybin are places where myths similar to those of the djinns are still alive and important. It is possible to see many households in Nusaybin where rituals that are the continuations of seven or eight thousand year old traditions, are still conducted. Such rituals include for example the placing of wild goat horns at rooftops, pouring water on fire during prayer and making noise with canisters and sticks during lunar eclipses to chase away evil spirits who are believed to have taken the sun hostage. This is a ritual that has been observed since the time of the Sumerians. As such, Nusaybin is a reflection of Mesopotamia's history. Therefore, all those who come to Mardin should make sure to pass through Nusaybin, breathe its air and touch its soul.

From Temple to Church: **Anıtlı,** the Harbinger of the Miracle

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The arrival of the Arameans, the ancestors of today's Syriac people, in the Tur Abdin region dates back to the first quarter of the first millennium BCE. A noticeable feature of the Arameans was their absorption of the cultures they encountered and blending them with their own. This helped the Arameans become a respected socio-political force in the new lands in a relatively short time. The history and the memory of the region have survived thanks largely to the Syriacs' tradition of recording historical events in Mesopotamia spanning the past 3,000 years.

The first Syriacs arrived in the region approximately 1,000 years before they converted to Christianity. When those in the south faced persecution because of their new faith, they found refuge with their northern compatriots in the Tur Abdin region. As a result, the Tur Abdin emerged as the heartland of the Syriac people and a bastion for Christianity for centuries. The mountains of this region served as a new homeland where the Syriacs nurtured the new faith and introduced it to other peoples. The first Syriac churches as well those belonging to other Christian sects were built here and the region is associated with many traditions from the early Christian period. For example, the reliefs in the Roman necropolis area in the city of Dara are among the first examples of their kind. The building of the Deyrulzafaran Monastery on top of an ancient Aramean temple of the sun is another example. But, perhaps the most beautiful and meaningful example is found in the village of Anıtlı, also known by its old name Hah, in Midyat.

Anıtlı is 87 kilometres distant from the centre of Mardin and 22 kilometres from Midyat. It is home to the Cathedral of Mor Sobo and the Church of Virgin Mary, two unique structures in the Tur Abdin region. The story of the Church of Virgin Mary, the older of the two, dates back to the birth of Jesus Christ.

Palestine at the commencement of the first millennium CE was under the Roman Empire which controlled it by using a Jewish client king, Herod the Great, notorious for his brutality. One day, twelve wise men from the lands east to Jerusalem came to visit Herod asking "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" They had followed a star in the east and thus had come to worship him. Fearing that this baby boy would pose a threat to his rule, Herod summoned advisors and inquired about the whereabouts of the new-born. He then sent them to Bethlehem where the child was supposed to be saying, "Go and search diligently for the young child; and when you have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also." So, the twelve set out for Bethlehem with the star, which they had seen in the east heralding the birth of Jesus, going before them until it came and stood over where the baby lay. When the wise men entered, they saw the new-born and his mother Mary. Overcome with joy, they fell down and worshipped him. But

in a dream they had been warned not to return to Herod and so they returned home by a different way.

The link with the village of Anıtlı is established right at this point. According to the legend, on their way back from Bethlehem, one of the twelve built the Church of Virgin Mary upon orders to build a monastery in her honour which he had received from Mary herself. Another version of the story involves Mary giving the wise men a piece of cloth belonging to Jesus as a gift. When they arrived in Anıtlı/Hah, they decided to burn the gift, as they did not have the heart to tear it into pieces. According to some other sources, the wise men burned the cloth in order to share its ashes, because it was impossible to cut. The legend has it that when finally burned, twelve medallions appeared from the ashes. The twelve were so in awe of the miracle they had witnessed that they built the Church of Virgin Mary. To prove that the Church was indeed built by the wise men, the locals point to the wall of its southern façade fashioned from twelve blocks of stone forming the oldest remaining part of the structure. It is believed that each of the twelve contributed a block and thus the wall stands to this day. In the Syriac tradition, the place in Anıtlı/Hah where the miracle is believed to have taken place is still referred to as parpuso, meaning "in pieces."

Some doubts to the story arise through historians dating construction of the church to the first half of the 8th century but this might have replaced a previous building. Its importance lies essentially in that it connects the Syriac tradition to the birth of Christianity. Despite having been robbed in Anıtlı/Hah, the inveterate British traveller Gertrude Bell the Queen of the Desert and Shaper of Nations who visited the region at the turn of the 20th century, described the Church of Virgin Mary as the "pearl of Tur Abdin."

The dove figure above the cross-shaped relief behind the altar represents the soul of Jesus and is the only one of its kind in the region and indeed the world. The Church of Virgin Mary should be considered more as a temple dedicated to the Virgin Mary than a church. Its transformation took place only during the 7th or the 8th century. Therefore, it would be best to describe it as a "temple first, church later" structure. According to an ancient belief still held by many in the village, the church will never be destroyed as it was built for such an important reason and will therefore witness the end of the world.

This structure built in honour of Jesus' mother is an important place of worship for Syriacs. August 15th is the feast day of her assumption (into heaven) and known as the Feast of Shahro in the Syriac tradition and the day when spiritual feelings reach their climax. Every year, local Syriacs as well as those living in the diaspora gather in Anıtlı/Hah to participate in Church ceremonies. In advance, the congregation fasts for five days during which they abstain from eating meat. Locally grown fruit is brought by villagers to the concluding mass known as Kiddas, where prayers for abundance are offered. The faithful then break their fast with a 'meaty' meal.

The Cathedral of Mor Sobo the other important structure in the village, is the source of other valuable information on the history of the village. According to Syriac records, the village (Anıtlı/Hah) was initially a city large enough to be considered the centre of the Tur Abdin region and so the reason why the wise men chose it to break their journey.

The Cathedral was named after Mor Sobo a saint of Persian origin, there being in fact a significant major Persian influence in the region at the time. This was only natural since both Christianity and Islam had come into contact with Persia as they expanded to the north and the east. As a result, there were many important figures of Persian origin in the region who belonged to the Islamic or the Christian faiths. Mor Sobo was one such. Built in the early 6th century the Cathedral dedicated to him is considered to be the prototype of all the churches in the Tur Abdin region and one of the largest. It served for nine centuries as a metropolitan centre acting as such as a religious administrative unit and as a place of education through the monasteries it administered; its students were attracted from many areas of the Middle East. Today only part of the Cathedral remains intact. Most, unfortunately are in ruins. Additional funding will be required to continue with the archaeological excavation works that were conducted at the site by Mardin Museum in the past.

The Cathedral of Mor Sobo and the Church of Virgin Mary are among the structures that perfectly reflect the spirit of the Tur Abdin region. They resist the flow of time in all their beauty and are a must-see for all those visiting Mardin.

The Secret Saints of a Mountain: **Mor Augin the Second Messiah and Mor Jacob of Nusaybin**

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With the ending of persecution and its adoption as the state religion of the Roman Empire, the 4th century was a coming-of-age period for Christianity. However this liberation permitted disputes on dogma, liturgy and authority to flourish and attitudes to harden. Throughout this process, Syriac saints played a central role in the Eastern Province of the Empire in moulding Christianity into unique forms of worship and beliefs. One of their capitals was Nusaybin or Nisibis as known then, an ancient city which had been inhabited uninterruptedly for 5,000 years. It was the birthplace of many important Syriac figures including Saints Jacob and Ephrem. The pair both built churches and schools where monks who subsequently had important roles in spreading Christianity were trained. Critically, Nusaybin was a centre that shaped Christian history and tradition.

Rome conquered Nisibis in 166 CE and Emperor Diocletian more than a century later developed it as a centre of trade and a military base in Mesopotamia. However its previous history of being attacked, besieged and occupied did not end with it being Romanised. Sandwiched between the Roman and Sassanid Empires, it continued to be a strategic flash point in the four centuries-long struggle then being waged between the then two super powers of western Asia.

The city enjoyed a 40 year period of relative peace following a trade agreement which Diocletian concluded with the Sassanids in 297 CE. It was crucial for both parties as it allowed for the resumption of trade activities and the flow of raw materials. In this period of peace, Christianity found a fertile ground to flourish and endured the persecutions by Diocletian and his successor in the early years of the 4th century.

However, the Sassanids had not gone away and back they came with a vengeance, laying siege unsuccessfully to Nusaybin on no less than three occasions in 337, 346 and 350. Finally in 363 they succeeded in capturing it with the defeated Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate being killed and his body thrown outside the city walls. The Sassanid King Shapur II thereupon ordered the residents of Nisibis to evacuate the city giving them three days to do so and replaced them with 12,000 Persians. This was not unusual as almost every empire shunted populations between territories thereby ensuring that newly conquered lands were more effectively linked to the centre and served as bases for future conquests. The population of Nisibis remained entirely Sassanid until its conquest by the Arabs in 640.

During this turbulent period (326 CE), Mor Jacob known as the “Moses of Mesopotamia” founded the School of Nisibis in his birthplace. In some Syriac sources, it is considered as the world’s first university. However, it would be more modest and best to describe it as one of the world’s firsts since concrete evidence

to support this claim is lacking. Teachers at the School produced works on history, literature, philology and theology. They also translated Greek texts into Syriac and it was through these translations that local populations were first exposed to Greek thought, enough in itself to illustrate Nusaybin's importance. Moreover, a unique Syriac religious literature distinct from its Greek and Latin contemporaries was developed in the School and in the neighbouring establishment of Edessa (Şanlıurfa). That in Nisibis is thought to be an offshoot of the latter.

Mor Jacob was an ascetic monk who led a secluded life in the mountains of Nusaybin. At the insistence of the local faithful, he became the Bishop of Nusaybin on the death of the previous occupant of the seat. According to Syriac sources, he along with his contemporary Mor Augin worked miracles, healed many and converted thousands to Christianity. Mor Jacob, who was described by Mor Augin as a descendant of Jacob the brother of Jesus Christ, is also known as the first Christian to have searched for Noah's Ark. He believed that it had come to earth on Mount Judi in Mardin's neighbouring province Şırnak . In Surah Hud, the 11th chapter of the Qur'an, the whereabouts of Ark is described:

And it was said, "O earth, swallow your water, and O sky, withhold [your rain]." And the water subsided, and the matter was accomplished, and the ship came to rest on the [mountain of] Judiyy. And it was said, "Away with the wrongdoing people." (11:44)

On the other hand, the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament speaks of a different location:

And in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. (8:4)

Considering that the monks' search took place three centuries before the emergence of Islam and when the Qur'an was not as yet in existence, it is interesting that Mor Jacob chose to look for it in the location later suggested in the Qur'an. This is illustrative of the importance of oral tradition in the development of belief systems and their literature.

According to some church sources, Mor Jacob in his search for the Arc was led by an angel guiding him to its exact location. Somehow when there, he identified a piece of wood at the site as being from the Ark and brought it to his friend and contemporary Mor Augin believing that it would bring abundance to those who possessed it. Mor Augin, now quite old, made a cross from it and rather than bequeathing it to anybody, hid it in his monastery where it remained to this day.

Mor Jacob of Nusaybin also participated in the First Council of Nicea (now the district of Iznik in Bursa) a key event in the codification of Christian doctrine. It was convened in 325 CE bringing together for the first time representatives of the Christian world in an attempt to reach agreement on thorny theological issues

including that on the nature of Christ. His standing was also evidenced by the respect accorded him by Constantine I, the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity, who named him as one to whom the highest degree of honour should be given. This respect continued after his death and he was revered locally by both the Christian and Muslim populations of Nusaybin. Zayn al-Abidin, an important local Islamic figure, allegedly advised his visitors that: "Before coming to my court, you should pay a visit to Mor Jacob's tomb and say a prayer for his soul, for he is a true believer." The tomb is located at the church named after him in Nusaybin.

While speaking about Mor Jacob, a few words on his pupil Mor Ephrem, the greatest writer/poet in the eastern Christian tradition, are in order. He was born in 306 CE also in Nusaybin and was baptized by Mor Jacob himself. He served as a diocesan priest during the administration of four bishops. However, he was forced to leave Nusaybin when the city fell to the Sassanids and travelled to Edessa where in 373 CE he became ill and died while treating victims of the plague. He was a prolific composer of sacred music as is apparent from the four hundred or so of his works to have survived. Their popularity spread beyond the borders of Mesopotamia and are still heard throughout the Orthodox Syriac world.

Mor Augin another highly regarded figure in the history of Christianity is renowned for his missionary zeal. Tradition has it that he was born in the Egyptian island of Clysma near the modern-day city of Suez. He was deeply spiritual and dedicated himself to the service of God. He led an unusual early life for a saint being a pearl diver by profession. He would collect valuable corals, then sell them and distribute the earnings to the needy as well of course to churches and monasteries. It is said that after twenty five years of spiritual growth, he was able to walk on water through the guidance of a star he had seen through spiritual inspiration. This skill is reputed to have been put to use when he walked across the Tigris River in the course of an expedition to Mount Judi where he also believed Noah's Ark to be located.

Quickly his fame spread beyond his homeland to the neighbouring regions but being a humble person, this unwanted attention and fame disturbed him. Consequently, he decided to remove himself to a place where he could be anonymous; so in pursuit of privacy he travelled to the monastery of Saint Pachomius entering dressed so simply that the monks failed to recognize him. However his goodness seemed impossible to suppress and once more he rose to prominence and when he once more departed, he left not alone but with seventy two priests. They followed him to Mesopotamia and together they eventually reached distant Nusaybin. By then numbers had swollen to a few hundred and there they stayed for seven days at the reedy shores of the Moshog River which must correspond to today's Beyaz Su or the Jaghjagh River. Locals of Nusaybin say that the Syrian cross-border city of Qamishlo/Kamishli derives its name from this reed bed (kamish means reed in Turkish).

In this area lived a man possessed of evil spirits. Mor Augin cured him miraculously and the news of this extraordinary event travelled quickly through the city. Pleased to have a miracle worker close by and who presumably would be on

call to resolve difficult medical cases, the city's residents pressed him to stay. Sadly for them, the invitation was not accepted and perhaps even more upsetting, off went the Saint that same night accompanied by the priests who had followed him from Egypt who by then numbered 350. They climbed Mount Izla to the east of the city and settled in a cave near the village of M'aare/Marin; it was to be their 'home' for the next thirty years.

The impetus to Mor Augin's missionary activities is attributed to divine inspiration. According to this story, an angel appeared and said "You and your followers make yourselves known to everyone and bring them the word about God and His angels." Inspired by this apparent divine intervention, the saint and his priests thus began travelling and preaching in every village as they went about in the name and teachings of Jesus Christ. Some are said to have reached as far as India in the course of these perambulations.

His and Mor Jacob's paths crossed at an episcopal council convened in Amid (Diyarbakır) and presided over by the now Patriarch of Antioch, Mor Jacob. He had been elected bishop of Nusaybin, an appointment which greatly pleased the local community whose reverence for him was great. It was during the time when based in the area of Nusaybin that he met Mor Jacob and from then onwards both worked together in performing miracles and healing the afflicted.

Mor Augin's fame also reached Emperor Constantine through a letter sent to him by the regional governor recounting the many miracles attributable to him and his life dedicated to the service of God. In reply, the Emperor wrote:

There are three people on earth, whom God sent to the four corners of the world. Receiving their light from Heaven, they brighten dark thoughts. They banish ugly passions and blurry ideas planted by the bad farmer from human thoughts. As they clean hearts, they plant there the beautiful seed of the teachings of Jesus Christ. These three seemingly weak miraculous men defeat well-known brave men. When they themselves are in need, they serve as sources of richness for others. Our Empire has known of these men for a long time: Anthony in the land of Egypt; Hilarion on the sea shores [Palestine]; and Mor Augin who came from Egypt and now enlightens your region. We ask them to pray to God for our wellbeing and for the protection of our Empire's borders so that we may enter the heavenly world with them on the day the mercy of Jesus Christ, the Sun of Truth, rises.

The Emperor's letter is important in that it aptly illustrates the importance of the then elderly saint who lived in the mountains of Nusaybin and who had dedicated himself to God.

As indicated previously, he is remembered for the many miracles he performed which included healing the sick. But perhaps the most impressive skill was his ability to walk on water. This was demonstrated on the occasion when having successfully completed his missionary work among the pagans of Mount Judi and searching for Noah's Ark, he started his journey back to home base. On

arrival in Bethzabday (now Şırnak 's Cizre district), there were no boats available to cross the Tigris. Undaunted by this seemingly insurmountable obstacle, he used the skill that he reputedly had acquired after twenty five years of spiritual growth and simply started to walk on water to finish his journey. When half way across, he saw that ten old men from among his disciples were following him on the river. Their faith in him was so complete that it permitted them also to follow in his footsteps and walk on water. This was a story not to be forgotten and it continued to be told for centuries in the Cizre region.

Mor Augin mentored many priests and other clergy who later became instrumental in shaping and spreading the Syriac Christian tradition. It included the ordination of 3,333 priests. These missionary activities later expanded by his students led to the Christianization of the Tur Abdin region. He is also credited with playing a central role in bringing Christianity to India. Due to such endeavours and countless miracles attributed to him, Mor Augin was regarded as the Second Messiah and as such was greatly revered in the Syriac Orthodox Church. He died on April 21st, 363 CE and was buried in the cave in which for so long he had lived at the monastery named after him. The spectacularly located monastery 20 kilometres to the east of Nusaybin possesses a mystical atmosphere which strongly impresses visitors to the degree that some experience spiritual awakenings.

As exemplified by the life stories of Mor Jacob and Mor Augin, Nusaybin, a small and unimportant border town today, was once home to many prominent figures who left their mark on Christianity. In every corner of this ancient land that is as old as history itself, you are greeted with the echoes of the past.

The Source of Remedy: **Shahmaran**

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In Mesopotamia and the broader area of the Near East, myths are a common heritage shared by all peoples of the region. They do not explain facts in their entirety leaving societies some room to interpret, adapt and embroider stories with each people and generation filling in the blanks according to their own social codes and structures. Had it not been the case, myths could not have survived as long as they have; they must be regarded as the collective product of all the peoples who have inhabited these lands.

Due to its geographical position, Mardin was often a part of this creative process or alternatively it was the place where myths were actually conceived. Its location at the centre of the Fertile Crescent, where people made the transition to sedentary lifestyle, turned the city into a cultural pool where all the region's songs, myths and legends accumulated.

With the invention of writing stimulated by the necessities of the settled lifestyle, folklore began to be more effectively transmitted from generation to generation. This process enabled myths to travel far and wide and penetrate other cultures. The story of the Great Flood is a good example of cultural sharing of a good story; it is told in almost every religion in the Near East and in all holy books albeit with slight differences in narrative. Cities like Mardin served as bridges in transporting religions, myths and gods from one region to the next and from one age to the next. In other words, being in Mardin means witnessing the transformation of Ishtar to Artemis and Aphrodite (the goddess of love), of Sin to Bendis (the moon goddess) and of Shamash to Helios (the sun god). It means seeing copper turn into bronze, stone into beads and marble into a statue.

Perhaps the best example of the region's shared memory is the story of Shahmaran, the part serpent, part human mythological creature. Featuring as "Yemlika" in the story of the Queen of Serpents in the One Thousand and One Nights, the saga of Shahmaran is a common theme that runs through all Mesopotamian cultures. There are many places that claim to be its original setting and the story is told in many different variations. However, no other city or culture has adopted the story of Shahmaran as totally as has Mardin. Virtually all in the city knows the story or at least his or her version of it.

The legend is linked to serpent symbolism that exhibits many different meanings in various cultures. There is the contrast between the highly dangerous reptile able to kill with a single drop of venom and its emergence as the universal

symbol for medicine - a symbol of evil and sin on the one hand contrasting with good on the other. The contradiction exists in many cultures from ancient Greece to Egypt. In Greek mythology, Asclepius the god of medicine has a serpent-entwined rod. The ancient Egyptian deity Apep (or Apophis) represents evil and darkness and is depicted as a serpent. In the Jewish tradition, the serpent takes on a negative meaning as it represents the devil. It is also considered a symbol of sexual lust and the original sin as evidenced by Satan appearing to Eve in the form of a serpent and persuading her to eat of the forbidden fruit. As Christianity and Islam share the story of Adam and Eve with Judaism, the serpent has similar meanings in these cultures. Various representations of snakes can also be found in Mardin with examples in Deyrulzafaran Monastery and Kasimiye Madrasa where both are associated with medicine. In the section of Deyrulzafaran Monastery which formerly functioned as classrooms for the study of medicine and today as a burial chamber, two serpent figures are seen pouring venom into a vase. It is told that these figures were used to explain the area's function. Similarly engraved above the classroom entrance doors on Mardin's Kasimiye Madrasa are snakes which closely resemble the symbol associated today with medicine. In Mardin, these serpent symbols also appear on painted glass amulets. Indeed, many Mardinians treat the snake embodiment Shahmaran symbol as an amulet and hang images in their homes and businesses in the belief that it will protect them from evil.

The story of Shahmaran has elements from Indian, Persian, Greek, Jewish and Arab cultures. The cult of serpent woman in Anatolian and Mesopotamian cultures also contributed to its development. The Islamic story of Ashab al-Kahf (Seven Sleepers) which is a variation of an earlier Christian story also shares similarities with Shahmaran. In this story, a group of young believers escape persecution and hide in a cave where they fall asleep for a long time. The story of Shahmaran is also said to have influenced several 13th century Turkish Anatolian epics such as Battalnâme and Saltuknâme. These epic tells the story of Sari Saltik who played an important role in the Turkification of Rumelia (Ottoman Balkan provinces). In these stories, the hero meets Shahmaran after he is thrown into a well.

The Camasbname or the Book of Jamasb also contains a variation of the myth. Although generally considered to be of Persian origin arising from name and geographical descriptions, it has in fact the Torah as its source with Islamic elements being later added. It tells the story of Jamasb, the son of prophet Daniel and the time he spent with Shahmaran. The main story line is as follows: Daniel knew all the secrets of the universe and anticipating his death recorded this knowledge in a book for his unborn son who was named Jamasb. Unfortunately Jamasb turned out not to be a successful student and was in fact a drop-out having to earn his living as a woodsman. Why a person who had the book of knowledge in his possession turned out to be a failure at school is not explained. In myths, logic

is often sacrificed in order to permit the story to develop. In other words, Jamasb had to become a woodsman so that he could be placed in the forests where he was to meet Shahmaran. The story continues with Jamasb and his friends sheltering in a cave from heavy rain where they found considerable amounts of honey in a crevice. Jamasb was lowered into it and collected the honey which was brought to the surface. Unfortunately for him, his erstwhile friends decided not to share the spoils with him and scarpered, leaving him below alone.
In despair, he noticed a beam of light piercing the wall of the cave and on following the light; he made his way through it and reached a place which was 'otherworldly'. It was the land of Shahmaran and he was brought to her. On learning all that had befallen him, she comforted him by saying that he would not be harmed further. In return, Shahmaran told him the story of Bulukiya (Belkiya in the version told in Mardin).

Things rested so and our hero Jamasb stayed with Shahmaran for a long long time but never stopped wishing to return to his own world. Finally Shahmaran relented and agreed to release him on the condition that he was not to tell a soul about herself and her home. Unfortunately Jamasb's release coincided with Kaykhusraw the ruler of the lands falling ill and most unluckily could only be cured by eating the flesh of the Shahmaran. Jamasb was pressurized to disclose the location of Shahmaran, resisted but eventually yielded and agreed. Armed with this information, Shahmaran was captured by means of magic and spells and killed. Thereafter, Kaykhusraw drank from the juice of her flesh and was healed and Jamasb who had betrayed her became famous because of the wisdom he had amassed by combining all he had learned from Shahmaran with that stored in the book which was the legacy of his father.

In Mardin and its environs where almost every household is adorned with a Shahmaran painting, the importance of Shahmaran is self-evident. All Mardinians know the story or a version of it by heart and there are even those who believe that the story actually took place in Mardin. Her image greets tourists everywhere in the bazaar being reproduced on jewellery, glass paintings and souvenirs and decorating the walls of restaurants, coffee houses and shops. As such, Shahmaran becomes the mythological character that is identified with Mardin. But the version of the Shahmaran story heard in Mardin is a little different. According to its Mardin version, Jamisab (or Jamisan) went hunting with his friends. During this long day of fruitless hunting they went into the depths of the forest, where they found a large well filled with honey rather than water. Delighted by this discovery, they filled their jars which fortuitously had with them with the valuable nectar. Jamisab was chosen for the task of collecting the remaining honey at the bottom of the well and so was lowered to bring it out. This he did but unfortunately for him, his erstwhile friends decided not to share the spoils with him and abandoned him below.
Jamisab waited helplessly for days until he heard voices coming from a hole in

the wall of what was now for him a prison. As he tried to make the hole larger to see what was on the other side hundreds of snakes suddenly filled the space, overpowered poor Jamisab and dragged him back through the hole and taken to the Queen of Serpents otherwise known as Shahmaran. Covered in many serpents, the Queen asked Jamisab whom she called "the son of Adam," what his business was in her home. He answered by telling her about his former friends' betrayal. While furious with him for being a participant in the theft of the honey that fed her serpents, she had respect for Adam and so did not harm him. Nevertheless, because of her mistrust of humans, she told Jamisab that he was to stay indefinitely with her and the serpents. Jamisab pleaded against this decision and sought continuously a release, all to no avail as she feared that he might reveal her location.

Years went by and Jamisab became more frustrated saying that he could no longer live in such a dark place with no human company. He had had enough and so begged Shahmaran either to kill or release him. Having pity, she relented promising to release him on the condition that he would neither disclose her location nor ever return. Immediately, he accepted the conditional discharge and so was not only released but provided with a handsome sum of gold and precious stones thinking that this would prevent him from being lured by promises of money to 'tell his story' and betray her location. So for a time after his release, Jamisab was well-to-do thanks to the gifts he had received but things did not last for ever. His situation changed when the king fell ill and lo-and-behold the king's senior medical advisors prescribed the flesh of the Shahmaran as the only remedy for the illness. The king cajoled him to disclose her location promising his daughter (in marriage) and his kingdom eventually as a reward. Sadly, Jamisab fell victim to pride and greed and eventually informed the King's entourage where to find her. He led the king's forces to the well where the king's sorcerers chanted and danced to entice Shahmaran to come forth. This she did without resistance and when caught, whispered into Jamisab's ear: "You have betrayed me like your friends betrayed you, oh the son of Adam! But do not forget that your king is also a son of Adam and will betray you and kill you when he is cured. Seemingly forgiving, she advised him that 'When you offer my flesh to him, cut a piece from my tail and eat it, flesh from there is not poisonous. Then cut some from my head which is poisonous. When the king eats it, he will die and you will become king." Jamisab was touched but also happy by Shahmaran's apparent selflessness but in the event also unbelievably gullible by the seeming acceptance by Shahmaran of his betrayal. Things rested so and so she was killed and butchered. On reaching the palace, the king (most likely a bit suspicious) asked Jamisab to eat the flesh of Shahmaran first. This he did and following Shahmaran's advice, ate a piece from her tail, and the king then ate a piece from her head. Neither the cautious approach of the king nor the scheming of Jamisab served much good as they both died! Shahmaran had taken a posthumous revenge on Jamisab and killed her own executioner.

In the marketplaces of Mardin, artisans picture Shahmaran on copper and

glass ornaments and utensils, in the form of a woman above the waist complete with horns on her head and a serpent below the waist. Local tradition has it that the Shahmaran is depicted as a half human, half serpent creature so as to remind people of human weaknesses in yielding to betrayal and hypocrisy. Thus, it is perceived that the image of Shahmaran will evoke memories of betrayal committed in the mind of the viewer, the evil in the viewer's heart and the death it brings. Hopefully it will prompt the viewer to mend his or her ways. Thus the story of Shahmaran is told. It travels from land to land and is told in many languages. In both version of the story, Shahmaran is represented as a source of remedy and wisdom. Hence, the time Jamisab spends in the well with Shahmaran can be described as a process of purification and return to one's self. This process is also discernable in the story of Prophet Joseph. Christian mystics, Muslim dervishes and Buddhist priests all go through a similar process of self-purification and meditation in their retreats. By means of the inner peace attained during this process, they perceive the world differently. Jamisab's listening to the voices coming from the walls of the well and his attempt to tear it down may well be representative of the transition to another dimension. It should be emphasized that Shahmaran is after all the source of wisdom.

The perception of the serpent as a source of remedy and its association with life go back even further than the story of Shahmaran. In the epic of Gilgamesh, the serpent figure makes one of its earliest appeareances.

Thanks to the epic that carries his name, Gilgamesh, who was a king of Uruk, an ancient city in Sumer, is among the most renowned characters of the ancient world. The invention of writing in southern Mesopotamia meant that earliest written historical records were kept here. These cuneiform tablets mention that the city walls were built by Gilgamesh to protect his city as well as his quest for eternal life following the death of his close friend Enkidu. In a nutshell, the story of Gilgamesh's quest for immortality is as follows: Gilgamesh himself went to the priests at the temple and inquired of them about the source of immortality. "On the Island of Dilmun" replied the priests and indeed a not unheard of place for Sumerians; they believed that they had originally hailed from Dilmun and regarded it as their homeland. The priests also told Gilgamesh to find a king by the name of Utnapishtim, for he held the secret of eternal life and was immortal himself. After a long and difficult journey, Gilgamesh finally reached the shores of the Island of Dilmun, described as "the land where the sun rises." He was so tired from the journey that he immediately fell asleep. When he awoke, he found a loaf of bread by his side. He turned around and asked the woman in the room where he was and for how long he had been asleep. The woman told him where and advised him that he had been asleep for seven days and nights. Not believing her, the woman had to show Gilgamesh as proof, the six loaves of bread that stood right next to him. Apparently every morning a fresh loaf of bread was laid next to him in case he

awoke and felt hungry. On this somewhat weak evidence Gilgamesh believed her. There seems to be a similarity between the seven days during which Gilgamesh was asleep and Jamisab's time in the well with both representing a time of spiritual cleansing. The choice of number seven, a holy number in many cultures, may not be incidental, either.

While Gilghamesh and the woman were talking, a man who introduced himself as Utnapishtim entered the room. The story of the Great Flood appears here for the first time in history in Utnapishtim's account of his own life. He told Gilgamesh that he had been tasked with creating a giant ship to protect the seed of man from the oncoming flood. As a reward, the gods had given him and his wife immortality. Unfortunately for Gilghamesh, Utnapishtim told him that he could not pass this gift on to him for such could only come from the gods. But he could give him the plant of youth. This he offered and Gilgamesh readily accepted and began his return journey with it. On the way he stopped to fish and carelessly laid his sack which contained the precious plant of youth on the ground. When he returned, he saw a snake come from the sack and shedding its skin. It had eaten the plant and the skin it had shed was the proof of its rejuvenation effect. In this story, the snake once again appears as a symbol of rebirth and self-renewal.

Another story which stresses this particular aspect of the snake is found in the version of the Great Flood story as told in the Yazidi tradition. According to this story, the Ark hit a mountain, was holed and started to sink. While all the animals started to flee, a black serpent crawled into the hole and stopped the flooding, sacrificing itself in the process in order to save the Ark. In this story, the serpent is once again credited with ensuring the continuation of life.

As the story of Shahmaran shows, no matter what its place of origin and time may be, every story, myth and legend belongs to the people who keep it alive.

Two Venerable Names in Islam:
Salman the Persian and Zayn al-Abidin

Two Venerable Names in Islam: **Salman the Persian and Zayn al-Abidin**

Cities that are located at the crossroads of trade routes and important cultural centres often serve as grounds where major social interplays take place. These cities both influence and are influenced in return by those who pass through. The impact of these interactions is felt at many levels, sometimes individually or sometimes communally. These interactions introduce new figures to the region whose importance becomes apparent in retrospect. Shrines are built to honour them. Even if they only pass through a region, they still leave a deep mark on it. An example can be found in Prophet Abraham who was born in Urfa. Although he neither spent his life there nor died in the city, his name is still closely associated with it. Another example are the holy Islamic relics that are preserved in Mardin such as the hair from Prophet Muhammad's beard and his footprint, a fact that most people are unaware of believing that the only beard relic is that in the Topkapı Museum in Istanbul. The central figure of the story Salman the Persian is yet another example. Although his name remains largely unknown even to most inhabitants of Mardin, he is an important character worthy of recognition. Salman was a leading follower of Prophet Muhammad and it was he who introduced the idea of the defensive trench that was so decisive at the Battle of the Trench outside Medina in 627 CE. Prophet Muhammad considered him as part of his household (Ahl al-Bayt).

As the name more than suggests, Salman was of Persian origin; his name prior to conversion to Islam being Mabe. Although the date of birth is unknown, sources indicate it to be five to ten years later than that of Muhammad in 571. His father's name was Luzehshan; his grandfather Behnuzan was a Persian ruler. Salman was born in the town of Jay in Isfahan Province. Like in many other Indo-Aryan/European societies, ancient Iran also had a caste system. His father belonged to the privileged dihqan class and served as the town's administrator. Education was important for the father and he sent his son to be educated by Zoroastrian clerics known as Mobad, the religion of the ancient Persian ruling class being Zoroastrianism. At the centre of the faith (also known as Mazdaism and Magianism) was the supreme god Ahura Mazda together with a collection of sacred texts known as Zend Avesta. Sun and fire were the most sacred elements in the religion and indeed Salman was employed tending the holy fire in the innermost sanctum of a Zoroastrian temple.

His father was extremely protective and hardly let him outside the house fearing that he might get into trouble. However this did not seem to have been successful as once when he was sent by his father to a remote area of their lands to attend to a task, Salman, who had never been exposed to other religions, saw a church and witnessed its congregation at prayer within. This event was a turning point in his life as heretofore in his sheltered life, he had assumed everyone to be a Zoroastrian and so was deeply influenced by the encounter with the new religion.

Having lost track of time while watching the congregation, he was late setting out for home. His worried father had already had men searching and so Salman was quickly found and safely returned home to a worried father who scolded and forbade him from leaving the house again.

Things rested so but in time Salman's attraction to Christianity was so great that it led him to conclude that he could no longer continue with his own faith and live according to its rules. As a result he sent word to the people he had met at the church and escaped from home with their help. He joined a convoy en route to Damascus where once in the city he met with the city's bishop and explained: "I want to convert to this faith, serve its church, learn its teachings and worship with you." The bishop acceded to the request and Salman stayed at this church for a long time. But when he saw that the bishop was close to death, he asked him where he should go next and was directed to a church in Mosul to where he took himself following his mentor's death.

As it transpired, this was another turning point in his life and in fact such departures became the symbol of Salman's life-long search after truth. In every place he went, he purified his soul more and more.

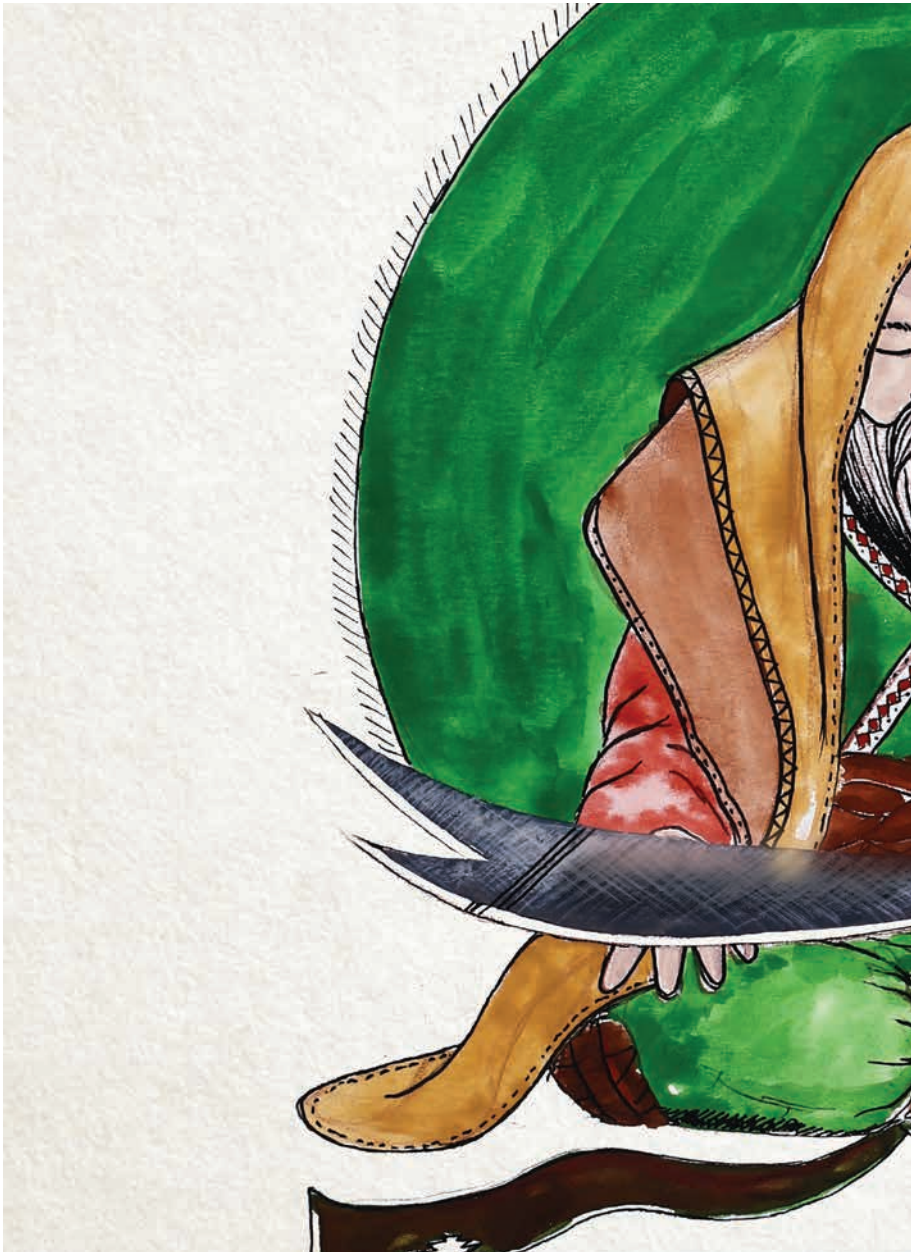
In Mosul, Salman discovered that the man, to whom the bishop had sent him, was also a dedicated man of religion; he learned from this man greatly but unfortunately before long, this man became ill and on his death bed told Salman who sought his advice: "My son, I do not know of anyone who follows our path except my friend in Nusaybin. After me, you should go to him." Thus, he arrived in Mardin. From Nusaybin where he dedicated himself to the study of religion and science, Salman made his way next to the Church of Amorium (in today's Afyonkarahisar in western Turkey). Upon the advice of his teacher from Amorium who also died, Salman set off for Mecca. However, on the way he was sold into slavery and bought by a Jewish merchant. He was eventually freed when he met Prophet Muhammad in Mecca and became the first Persian convert to Islam. The Prophet who esteemed him greatly bequeathed on him the title Selmânu'l-Hayr (Salman the Good) and thereupon he dedicated himself to Islam and became a highly revered Islamic figure. When asked about his ancestry and tribe, he is said have to answered "Islam ibn Islam" (Islam the son of Islam). Some sources describe him as the Prophet's barber which has led to the common acceptance of him as the profession's patriarch. The following poem is a good example of their regard for him by members of his profession:

Blessed be the God, who gave us a state

Selmân-i Pâk is our patriarch

The Prophet's barber

Come and have a shave, don't be a fool




-Zulfikar-

Every morning we open our business with a prayer

Selmân-i Pâk is our patriarch, our master

The location of his home in Nusaybin is known locally as the 'Chamber of Salman'. Among Nusaybin's elderly there is a common belief that Salman carried on his back the stones used in the construction of the Selmân-i Pâk Mosque. This is probably the reason for the high esteem of local people for the mosque and his place of residence. Unfortunately, the belief in Salman's physical role in building the mosque cannot be true, for he was a Christian during his stay in Nusaybin and not yet a Muslim. A more likely residence for Salman in Nusaybin is therefore the Church of Mor Jacob, one of the leading centres of education in Mesopotamia during the Roman period. After all, his teacher in Mosul had sent him to a church. It is possible that he might have lived elsewhere during his time in Nusaybin, most likely in the area of the aforementioned Selmân-i Pâk Mosque given that in later years, local people honoured him by building the mosque in this location

The facts about Salman's life, his Zoroastrian beginnings and later conversions to first Christianity and then to Islam (he was also exposed to Judaism during his time as a slave), show us that he was a seeker of truth throughout his life. During the quest, he wholeheartedly dedicated himself to each and every religion he belonged to.

Another historical figure associated with Nusaybin is Zayn al-Abidin. Generally, people confuse the name with that of Imam Zayn al-Abidin, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law Ali. The reason for this confusion is because there is a mosque or rather a külliye (an Islamic complex of buildings) in Nusaybin by this name. The person in question and whose tomb is there is also Ahl al-Bayt and carries the same name as Zayn al-Abidin, the son of Hussein ibn Ali.

The literal meaning of Ahl al-Bayt in Arabic is "people of the house" or "family of the house." It is used to describe the family of Prophet Muhammad. Like in the rest of the Islamic world, the descendants of the Prophet through his daughter Fatimah and son-in-law Ali are called sayyid in Mardin and its environs. Fatimah and Ali had two sons Hasan and Hussein both of whom were killed as a result of power struggles. Zayn al-Abidin was Hussein's son and the fourth Shi'ite imam after his father, his uncle Hasan and grandfather Ali. The Zayn al-Abidin of the story and his sister Site were Prophet Muhammad's thirteenth generation great grandchildren. The mosque that carries his name in Nusaybin was built during 1158 CE when the Artuqid dynasty ruled the region. First built as a mosque, the building expanded in size over time and became a külliye; it is the oldest in Mardin.

The mosque's minaret seems to have been copied from the Shahidiyye Madrasa in Mardin. When it was first built during the 13th century, it and its accompanying mosque lacked a minaret. Then in 1914, the leading architect of the

time of Armenian origin Sarkis Lole built one at no charge completing it without the use of scaffolding. The minaret, covered with ornate ornamentation, is unlike in style all others in Mardin.

The mosque is located to the south of the minaret with the tombs of Zayn al-Abidin and his sister right next to it on the western side. At the southern tip of the tombs, there are madrasa cells that were added to the complex at a later stage without damaging its original appearance. There is a graveyard to the south of the complex with the Church of Mor Jacob and an archaeological excavation site located to its east. The area has been restored recently by the Directorate General of Foundations which has helped the complex regain to a large extent its former glory by ridding it of concrete additions.

The records of the religious foundation, which belonged to the Külliye of Zayn al-Abidin, provide valuable information regarding 12th-century Nusaybin. Two conclusions can be drawn from these. Firstly, foundations were highly important and wealthy as a result of the financial assistance provided. Secondly, Nusaybin was a cosmopolitan city populated with people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

The complex continues to be regarded by local residents as a sacred place which draws many pilgrims daily. Women who are unable to have children visit the tomb of Sitti while those who have just started a new job visit that of Zayn al-Abidin seeking good fortune. Warm and friendly relations between the Külliye and the Church of Mor Jacob as exemplified by Zayn al-Abidin's exhortation to those who wished to visit him to first go to Mor Jacob's grave and pray for him, continues into the present age.

The fact that two very important and highly respected Islamic figures lived in Nusaybin amply illustrates the city's deep-rooted heritage. Similarly, Mardin is home to many important Islamic relics and sites. Among the examples of Mardin's Islamic heritage and which serve as proof of Mardin's importance in the history of Islam are the tomb of Prophet Muhammad's messenger Sheikh Çabuk after whom a local mosque is named, the footprint of the Prophet in the madrasa built by Kutbettin Ilgazi for his mother Sitti Radviye and the hair from the beard of Muhammad in the Ulu Mosque.

Nusaybin as a site of colourful multiculturalism where Yazidis, Christians and Muslims live side by side is a place much like Mardin where tolerance pervades. Similar experiences in Mardin where the ringing of church bells alongside the Muslim call to prayer is heard, visitors will understand its cultural richness where it is seen that a church and a mosque share the same grounds. What makes life more meaningful is when the diversity represented by others is not denied but accepted instead. If Anatolia is a cultural mosaic, this land is where different cultures are inextricably woven together as in a water marbling pattern. Mardin is not a place where one colour remains untainted by the other; on the contrary, Mardin is where they mix and result in new colours emerging.

The Village of Kıllıt:
Three Sects, Three Churches and a Mosque

The Village of Kıllıt: **Three Sects, Three Churches and a Mosque**

Savur dating from approximately a thousand years before Mardin and with whom its fate has been linked for centuries, quite resembles it in appearance. Perched on a commanding defensive position at the head of several valleys, it was the scene of several military engagements down the centuries. During their military incursions into northern Mesopotamia and Anatolia, the Assyrians recorded the names of many places they passed through in the Kashyari Mountains including two important cities by the name of Matiyatu (Midyat) and Sharu (Savur). Roman sources refer to the same region as Sauras.

The district is dominated by the remains of a three-thousand-year-old fortress which is smaller in scale than that in Mardin and occupies an advantageous position overlooking the valleys. Written sources show that Mardin was a small outpost during the 3rd century CE and started to assume the characteristics of a fort city only after the 5th century CE. This is why Mardin, unlike many others in the region, was not mentioned in historical sources documenting the details of the Roman-Sassanid conflict. Its altitude and water sources allowed it to hide and emerge unscathed from long periods of siege.

The earlier settlement of Savur before Mardin can be partly explained by it being surrounded by fertile valleys and its easy access to water. This surely had an impact on the growth of the city but does not tell the whole story. Trade was the important factor that contributed greatly to its development. Valleys and river basins were the roads of ancient times. While small rivers acted as secondary arterial roads, large rivers such as the Tigris and the Euphrates functioned like today's highways. The valleys that Savur overlooks were such secondary arterial roads. In fact, people would follow them in order to get to the ridgeway which would eventually set them off in the direction towards the Tigris and Amedu (today's Diyarbakır). From there, it was possible to venture off anywhere in Anatolia.

The valley between Savur and Mardin also constitutes the Mardin-Midyat highway. Savur, which was able to sustain its population for centuries thanks to this road, started to lose its importance following the creation of a direct Mardin-Midyat road; large scale migration from the area ensued. The district which was once the region's largest provider of vegetables, fruit and timber even hiring seasonal workers from outside to meet the demand, is currently going through what can be described as the quietest period in its history. The old trade routes that ran through Savur meant wealth and progress not only for the town but also for other places on the way. One of the best examples of this is the village of Kıllıt, located 7 kilometres to the east of Savur and also known as Dereiçi. Situated in the mountainous interior, Kıllıt stood out with its multiculturalism. Different ethnic and religious groups including Syriacs, Muslims, Turks, Arabs, Kurds and Armenians as well as different sects and offshoots of the same religion, lived harmoniously in

Kıllıt. In this respect, it served as a unique example of religious coexistence.

In the small Syriac village of Kıllıt, three Christian churches, namely Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant have places of worship - cultural richness which normally is to be found only in major urban centres. Savur began to be Christianized in the first century CE and Christian activity in the region reached its zenith during the 4th century. A seat of episcopacy was established here in the mid-4th century, its first occupant being Mor Krafus who was killed when the Sassanid King Shapur II conquered Nisibis (today's Nusaybin). He was the teacher of Mor Shmuel who built the Mor Gabriel Monastery. Following his death, the Syriac Orthodox Church of Mor Yuhanon Dilimiyo was established in the village in 370 CE.

Mor Yuhanon was born in the city of Haditha in today's Iraq. Its importance at the time as a bustling Christian centre will be clearer to visitors once they visit the Church of Forty Martyrs (Kırklar Kilisesi) in the centre of Mardin and hear its previous name. Mor Yuhanon began his religious training at a very early age at the Dahle Monastery. It is said that he converted many pagans in the region to Christianity and worked countless miracles during his career as a priest. The Church of Mor Yuhanon was restored in 2006 and remains as the only church in the village open to worship.

There are two more monasteries in the village of Kıllıt that were named after Persian saints who had played an important role in the development of Syriac monastic tradition, namely those of Mor Abay and Mor Dimat. The frequent references to Persian saints in relation to the development of churches and in whose honour monasteries were built in the Tur Abdin region, serve as an example of the interaction between societies in Christianity's formative years.

The Monastery of Mor Abay was one of the largest religious structures in the region. Mor Abay to whom this monastery was dedicated and whose real name was Mir Shobur, was of Persian origin; his father served as a general in the Sassanid army. Mir is a very common name among the Iranians and the Kurds of the region; it means prince and usually precedes another name as seen in the example here. Nisibis was a city of high strategic importance during the early Christian period. As referred to earlier, the Sassanids laid a siege to it on several occasions until capturing it from the Byzantines. One of these sieges was led by Mir Shobur's father who had taken him along to accompany him during his military campaign. When they reached the city of Dara, Mir Shobur went hunting with his friends. They came all the way to Kıllıt where they met a Syriac priest named Mor Abay who so impressed them that they decided to convert to Christianity and be baptized there and then. Mir Shobur also assumed the name of the priest who had greatly influenced him i.e. he was henceforth known as Mor Abay but not for long. Upon hearing the news of the conversion, his father sent troops to Savur and massacred five thousand including his own son. Perhaps because of guilt, the father became gravely ill and the intervention of the dead Mir Shobur otherwise known as Mor Abay was necessary. In fact he appeared to his mother in a dream telling her: "Take my father to where I died. Smear on his body the soil to which my blood spilled. He

will be cured." And indeed that was what happened; he was healed once the strange instructions were carried out. He thereupon converted to Christianity, sold all his earthly belongings and with the proceeds built a monastery in Kıllıt dedicated to his son. He stayed in this monastery until his death in 352 CE. Mor Abay is revered as a saint in the Antiochan Syriac Orthodox Church tradition. His feast day is celebrated on 1st October. The monastery functioned as the metropolitan centre of the Savur region between the 15th and 18th centuries. The remains seen today in the fields to the north of the village are those of the monastery.

A second monastery in the village is dedicated to yet another Persian saint called Mor Dimet. Locals refer to it as the "rheumatism monastery" believing visiting it to be effective in the treatment of the condition. A third monastery within the village was that of Mor Teuduto. Dating from the end of the 7th century, it was known as the "headache monastery." In the light of the rudimentary knowledge of sickness and medicine at the time, it is understandable why the association of illness with sin and religion with cleansing was prevalent throughout the region and the efficacy of visits to Mor Dimet and Mor Teuduto monasteries in curing afflictions. This belief continues in some form with pilgrimages of or for the sick being undertaken to Gırnavaz and other sacred sites.

A chapter on Savur would not be complete without mentioning Mushe (Moses) of Mardin, an important Syriac figure who was born in the village of Qaluq near Savur. He played a significant role in spearheading research on Syriac culture in Europe and in printing the first edition of the Bible in the Syriac language. The son of a priest named Ishaq from Beth Nahrin (the Syriac name for Mesopotamia) he was sent in 1549 to Rome by the patriarch Ignatius Abdullah to investigate the possibility of printing the New Testament in Syriac. He succeeded in his mission and a thousand copies of the New Testament were printed in 1555 - one hundred years following the printing of the the Gutenberg Bible - the first book in Europe –. Mushe took half of the copies to distribute in the east and thus made it possible for the Syriacs to read the Bible in the vernacular. He stayed in Europe until 1562 and returned there later to be appointed professor of Syriac at the College of Neophytes in Rome in 1581. In this way, he initiated research in Europe on Syriac culture and language.

Although the three stone churches in Kıllıt are mostly deserted today, they are nevertheless worth seeing. Until the 1980s, the village had more than 300 school-age children. However, it is to a large degree now deserted as the local community emigrated to the West, especially to European countries. As a result, there are now more than 20,000 émigrés living abroad who can claim to be of Kıllıt origin. As the Syriac population in the village continued to decline, Muslim families filled their places and built a mosque.

In Mardin, local saints, sheikhs or wise men went beyond the borders of their city and contributed their share to the region's collective history. The region of Tur Abdin is a place where small villages give birth to heroes.


MARDÍN
DARA

Biological Wars in the Archaic Age:
The Birth of Dara

Biological Wars in the Archaic Age: **The Birth of Dara**

In every historical commentary on northern Mesopotamia, the name of Nisibis (modern-day Nusaybin) arises. A major city, its control meant control of the region and as such it suffered, as its conquest was a priority for every emerging power which aimed at dominance in the area. Its defences however were strong and it was no easy task to capture it. Even the Assyrians, the superpower of the ancient age, could achieve this only after a series of failed attempts. Its high walls, fertile soil and protected sources to water were the principal factors enabling it to resist invading armies and guaranteed its survival at times of siege. It was the scene of one of history's longest and bitterest rivalries. First the Parthians versus Romans and thereafter the Sassanids versus Romans fought each other over the city. Each regarded the conquest of this strategically city as a stepping stone for their expansionist empires, it being key to control over communications and trade in the region.

In the 4th century, the Sassanid King Shapur II laid siege yet again to Nisibis but on this occasion a new approach was experimented with. It involved poisoning the river flowing through the city then known as the Mygdonia and today the Jaghjagh. When this failed, the river was dammed and the power of flood water released when the besiegers opened the barrier created a breach in the city walls. However, perhaps anticipating this eventuality, the Nisibians, reportedly with the help of Mor Jacob and his students, had built an inner defensive wall thus frustrating the attackers.

Another story relating to this incident involved an early example of biological warfare. In this account, the city walls were brought down fortuitously by heavy rain. But the Sassanids still faced the obstacle of the second wall built by the Nisibians and again Mor Jacob was involved in saving the city by use of a secret weapon which was used to good effect. This involved the release of swarms of angry bees and flies onto the besiegers who were forced to retreat as they were unable protect and therefore control their animals from the ensuing insect attacks.

Nusaybin was also the location for another form of biological warfare. Recorded by Muslim geographers Yâkût el-Hamevî and Zekeriyya Kazvinî in the 13th century, it concerned the origin of the dangerous scorpions found in Nisibis. According to these sources, the Sassanid King Chosroes I whose attempts at conquering the city had failed, introduced fresh thinking on how it could be done. It involved using scorpions from a village called Tayranshah in the region of Shahrizar (present-day northern Iraq) which was famous or rather infamous for their aggression and potency. A consignment was delivered to the besiegers and when loaded on to catapults, the scorpions were slung into the city. The Nisibians, apparently unable to withstand this novel attack, opened the gates allowing the

Sassanids to take the city unopposed. This may well have been the first time in the region's history that biological weapons were fashioned and used.

The association of Nusaybin with scorpions continued down the centuries and Nusaybin today continues to suffer from them attributing their arrival to the fall of the city in the 4th century. Indeed over the centuries, travellers and geographers planning to visit the region were warned first and foremost of their danger.

While Dara, the city of kings, predates the arrival of the Romans, its importance emerged as a direct outcome of this aforementioned war over Nisibis. Following their defeat in Nisibis, the Romans retreated to the west understanding that if they failed to recover rapidly from its fall, they would lose all their territory up to the city of Edessa. Consequently Emperor Anastasius ordered that the old settlement of Dara at the entrance of the Qordis Valley be strengthened and turned into a fortress city.

Historical sources record that assistance in the form of money and gold was sent by Anastasius to the Bishop of Amid (Diyarbakır) under whose jurisdiction Dara was placed, as payments to strengthen houses and allotments. All necessary measures were taken for a speedy construction process including granting the church a free hand in using the budget money set aside for the city's construction.

As recorded in imperial archives, the strengthening of the city was thereby achieved rapidly thanks to the involvement of Church. The Sassanid King Kavadh did not attempt to hamper its construction as its defence walls were already high enough to protect the emerging city. These were 4 kilometres in length and between 8 to 12 metres in height with 28 towers strategically placed. A city complete with colossal cisterns, palace, church grounds, marketplace, public bath, roads and bridges and other military structures was now in existence in northern Mesopotamia. Although built in haste, aesthetics and design were not compromised. The column capitals and other architectural features on display in the Mardin Museum are examples of the city's fine taste and the skill of its architects. Many of these structures still stand today and are continued to be used by locals. It was renamed as Anastasiapolis (the City of Anastasius) in honour of the Emperor.

The rebuilding of Dara continued under Emperor Justinian I who completed projects begun in Anastasius' reign and indeed, could well have initiated as many building projects in Dara as were begun under his predecessor. In 530, the First Persian War broke out between the Romans and the Sassanids. The primary source of information on this war comes from the historian Zachariah of Mytilene and the Roman scholar Procopius. Procopius himself was a first-hand witness to the war as he was the secretary of the then Roman Emperor Belisarius. According to Zachariah, the Sassanid King Kavadh and his army camped near Ammodius-Amuda (today the Syrian city Amuda located to the south of Dara), and the Roman general Belisarius positioned his forces on the plains outside Dara. After several bloody engagements, the Sassanid advancement on the city was stopped and the threat to the city was lifted for a time until the Sassanid King Khusro made

another attempt to take Dara. His determination was evidenced by the fact that he had brought a massive army composed of 23,000 cavalrymen, 40,000 infantry and 120,000 peasants. As with most records of military strength at the time, these figures are probably wildly exaggerated, keeping 180,000 people and their animals not to mention camp followers supplied in the field for even a short period would have been an enormous undertaking. However, it was probably large but obviously not large enough in a pre-gunpowder era to take a well-fortified and large a city such as Dara. While his generals succeeded in conquering fortresses in the surrounding area, besieging Dara itself was another matter.

During this siege, an interesting war technique was attempted. Having arrived at the foot of the city walls, the King called for rock cutters and ordered them to cut the main block situated in the northeast. Unable to cut through it, the workers first lit a fire on the rock and then poured vinegar on it in order to get it to crack, a technique maybe learned from accounts of its use by Hannibal in crossing the Alps . The Sassanids tried many other stratagems. For example, they diverted the sources of the river in order to cut the water supplies. As these various attempts illustrate, every possible technique and innovative idea were put into use. Nevertheless, the siege lasted for a total of six months as each attempt failed miserably. When the Sassanid king realized that the attacks were not succeeding, he suggested a deal which would involve the Romans buying him off for raising the siege and withdrawing. This was regarded by the Romans as weakness and they refused the offer. Infuriated by the seeming arrogance of the Romans, the King resumed the assault on the walls with Sassanid soldiers being successful in making their way into the city by extending tree logs over the city walls. This forced the defenders to flee towards the upper city which corresponds to the upper parts of the Big Cistern and the eastern section of the present village where the assembly room is located. This was still a strong position with a commanding view and eventually the Sassanids raided the siege and withdrew. But not for long, in 573 they were back and the Sassanids finally conquered the city but only to lose it again to the Romans 18 years later. In 604, the Sassanid army was at the gates of Dara once again and following an 18-month siege, they succeeded in reconquering it. But so too did the military form of ping-pong with control passing to the Roman Emperor Heraclius in 620. Eventually with the Romans and Sassanids fighting each other to exhaustion, the conquering Arab armies swept through the region, soundly defeating both sides and taking control of Dara and levelling its walls in 641. Thereafter, it slipped out of world history and became the sleepy village set in monumental archaeological setting which it is today.

Dara is northern Mesopotamia's Ephesus in hiding. Although archaeological excavations led by the Mardin Museum have been undertaken in the area since 1985, only five per cent of the ancient city has been unearthed. The fact that people continue to live in its ruins and that many of its decorated building blocks have been incorporated into present day houses and gardens adds to the tourists' interest in the site. The necropolis area with its rock-cut burial chambers in the west of the city bears a strong resemblance to Cappadocia. The reliefs in the main church and in the burial chamber are representations of many eastern myths.

Situated at the entrance to the Qordis Valley on the southern foothills of the Tur Abdin Mountains, 30 kilometres southeast of Mardin and 9 kilometres east of Nusaybin, Dara has become a major ‘must-see’ tourism attraction in South East Turkey.


BERLIN
BAGDAD

The Berlin-Baghdad Railway

The Berlin-Baghdad Railway

The construction of the Berlin-Baghdad Railway was among the most talked of accomplishments of the sultanate of Abdulhamid II who ruled the sprawling Ottoman Empire from 1876 to 1909. It was a period characterized by a growing Western influence in the Middle East and subsequent attempts by local societies to accommodate or counter Western challenges. In a world of changing ideas, new thoughts influenced by the Western ideas of nationalism were being spread by graduates of Western-style schools in the Ottoman Empire, Egypt and various Arab lands, while the Islamist thinkers were debating whether Western modernity could even be compatible with Islam. In terms of economic relations, the Middle East was not only a major market for the West, it was also the factor that shaped the balance of power in Europe. The degree of its presence in the Middle East determined at the end of the day how powerful each European actor was vis-à-vis opponents.

Yet despite modernisation, the frenzy of railway building which spread throughout the developed world in the last half of the 19th century (and the resulting benefits), effectively passed Ottoman Turkey by. There were a few railways developed, however. Companies from Britain and France were the first and from 1888 onwards short links from coastal cities along the Aegean or Marmara to points in Anatolia and a strategic railway from Aleppo through Western Syria toward Jerusalem and Medina – the Hijaz line, were built. The idea of linking the capital with the Baghdad and onward to the Gulf with a connection to the Hijaz line was a dream for some years both for the Ottoman administration and railway builders. However, it was seen as a major and costly challenge which could not be funded by the heavily indebted central government.

Germany was favoured to finance and build it in early example BOT (build, operate and transfer) system of providing public transport services. It was the emerging land power in Europe, but unlike Britain, France and Russia, was perceived not to have designs on the Empire. Favouring Germany would also help in strengthening the Empire's position against further encroachment from neighbours.

Given the very poor conditions of roads in Turkey at the time, the appeal of the proposed railway to the Ottoman regime was partly economic in that it would help in the development of remote areas and improve trade. But the main advantage perceived was military in that it would permit rapid deployment of men and material to support local garrisons in its Middle East possessions. In the face of Russian opposition to building a rail line along the Black Sea, it could also facilitate troop movements to Eastern Turkey to face any possible threat and also seen as a means of exploiting the recently discovered highly productive oil fields around Mosul.

And all this was being offered by the Germans at little or no cost. Germany at the end of the 19th century was emerging as a super industrial power yet felt threatened by an alliance between Russia to its east and France to its west and the dominance of Britain the great colonial and maritime power.

The attraction to imperial Germany was that it would have a direct link with Baghdad and beyond to Basra thereby weakening British control of the seas and especially its perceived stranglehold of transport between the Far East and Europe. Strategically, the link to a port on the Gulf would threaten British interests in the Indian sub-continent. It was also estimated that it would shorten travel time by at least three days on journeys through the Suez Canal. It could provide a direct or alternative link for Germany with its recently acquired coastal colonies in East and Southwest Africa (today's Tanzania and Namibia). It was also a component in the Kaiser's charm offensive to woo Turkey into an alliance with the German and the Austro-Hungarian Empires and stir up discontent in the large Muslim communities in British and French possessions or protectorates.

The idea of the Berlin-Baghdad Railway was born as a result of these calculations, a half mad and half heroic undertaking to link the two cities over 3,000 kilometres apart over a hostile environment and sparsely populated area. It was to be a win/win undertaking but turned out to be a costly disaster which delivered few if any of the original promises. By the time it was completed, the world had changed and few of the purposes advanced to justify its construction were valid. Gone even were the two imperial powers that were a party to it. Sadly, its main body now marks for several hundred kilometres the border between Turkey and Syria.

The concession for the railway was granted at the end of 1899 when the German Deutsche Bank purchased the rights to develop it in Ottoman controlled territories. Following initial surveys, the German-controlled Baghdad Railway company began work in 1903 but the going proved difficult. It was dogged by many political, financial and physical difficulties which even the advanced German engineers found difficult to overcome. By 1912 it had not yet reached Adana and by 1914 on the entry of Turkey into the First World War was not yet linked up with the Hijaz line, a key strategic justification for the undertaking. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire following the War and the mandating by the League of Nations of Syria and Iraq to France and Britain respectively delayed further completion until the last years of 1930s. Finally forty years after its commencement, the first train left Istanbul for Baghdad in 1940. So within living memory, it is still possible to talk to a few people in Mardin who actually witnessed the construction of the railway. Services over the length of the line continued up to the end of the century when normal operations were suspended due to war and civil unrest in the former mandated territories. Now over seventy years on instead of Berlin-Baghdad railway, there remains a fragile link between Berlin and Mardin with only occasional freight operations over its length. The irony of it being now that missing section on the Berlin-Baghdad line has now been made good with the construction of the Marmara sub Bosphorus Rail Tunnel. Finally, it is possible to operate though rail services from Nusaybin to Berlin and even onwards to London.

The rail line as it is in Turkish Mesopotamia offers an unusual travel opportunity, the likes of which exist only in a handful of places in the world in that it forms an international border. The Turkish-Syrian border was established by the Treaty of Ankara agreed between France and Turkey in 1921 and for convenience it was based largely on the line of the Berlin-Baghdad Railway and drawn with scant regard to social sensitivities.

The section of the line within the province of Mardin was the last sections to have been completed and could not have been much used. It ran through a relatively unpopulated area of which half on the Syrian side was cut off by the same border. The first station inside Mardin is at Akdoğan, a border village with Syria in the southwest edge of the Kızıltepe District. The next stop after Akdoğan is the town of Şenyurt, currently known as the Şenyurt neighbourhood. Located 13 kilometres south of the centre of the Kızıltepe district, Şenyurt is also a border village. Positioned right across from it on the Syrian side is the city of Derbesiye. The fact that there is a small border crossing in Şenyurt shows that there used to be a commercial and social interaction between these two places.

A branch line leads from a point 5 kilometres south of Şenyurt and towards Mardin to end in a village before the climb up to New Mardin called appropriately "the Station". There was more than one reason for the building of this spur. Old maps show plans for it to be extended to Diyarbakır to link up with lines being by then developed in central Anatolia. German engineers also appreciated the strategic importance of Mardin city to be used by them as a suitable base due to its natural protective structure and a source of raw materials and fuel for the main rail network.

The Germans in fact established a headquarters Mardin in Alexander Atamyan Mansion located about 50 meters east of the Republic Square. Subsequently following their departure, it served as a hospital for the treatment of trachoma, an infectious eye disease which must have been widespread at the time.

With the arrival of the Germans, the texture of the city also started to change. Although it is not known when exactly the expansion works on the First Street began, a photograph dating to 1917 indicates that it was completed by then. The original First Street proved to be too narrow for modern vehicles being employed on developments associated with the building of the new railway and proposed extensions beyond. So it was re-constructed by German engineers and involved expanding the width of the existing narrow passageway which inevitably involved the demolition of many buildings. The street remains today the only motorable route through the old city and key to its economic life.

The German engineers were also involved in the construction of a light railway or tramway in Mardin, which was associated with the construction of the broad gauge line. It ran from the outskirts of the mountain located in the southwest of the Governor's present official residence in the new city in the direction of Diyarbakır highway as far as the district of Mazıdağı. In the other direction, it descended to the quarry and the limestone processing plant at the entrance of Mardin

to link with main railway line at the Station (Istasyon). It was used to transport timber and charcoal and the line followed the Mazıdağı-Diyarbakır road. Remnants can be found in the valley located to the west of the government-developed TOKİ buildings in Mardin New City leading to the Istasyon on the head of the spur leading to the main line at Şenyurt.

Toruntepe which is the next stop on the line east of Şenyurt served mostly as a military supply point and thereafter Serçehan on the Turkish-Syrian border and the last station before Nusaybin. Known as Sargeton/Sargethon in ancient sources, the current-day village of Serçehan was built on top of an ancient fortress, the remnants of which can still be seen. (Confusingly as with many locations in the province, it has also two names; locals also use the name Durakbaşı in Turkish and Kesra in Kurdish). Its importance for the Berlin-Baghdad Railway was as a consolidation centre for necessary raw materials. The station is only a few kilometres away from the then surrounding forests and the mountains and so had easy access to supplies of wood and charcoal. The demand was great but resulted in major environmental damage through massive deforestation. In the difficult economic conditions of war and post-war years, local suppliers had scant regard to its ecological impact on local resources. It was reputed that some local landowners and community leaders became so rich through dealing in charcoal that they were able to afford to ride using silver stirrups.

Nusaybin is 14 kilometres eastwards from Serçehan and where the last station of the Berlin-Baghdad Railway within Turkey's borders is located. In the past, the railway would pass from the north of the city, load and unload at the station in the northeast of the city and continue into Syria via the city of Qamishlo/Kamishli. Still evident is an old structure known by local people as the "German Bridge." Never been rehabilitated or repaired, it has been in use since originally being built. The railway line was in operation until very recently for the transportation of both people and goods. However, the current unrest in Syria allows for low-scale transportation of goods only.

And so in Nusaybin, the great railway venture ends with no fanfare and little sadness or regret by the local population. Their local transportation needs are being met by ever higher incidence of car ownership and the development of intercity high speed bus services and terminals. Their long distance travel needs are now met by low cost air travel services readily available for all in the province. Some reports talk of government developing an advanced rail network; the vision sees Mardin linked to Istanbul by high speed trains. This may come about, but it is difficult to see how it will be able to compete on speed, convenience, comfort and price with road and air services. But as with the plans for the original line, there may be strategic or other than economic reasons that justify seeing bullet style trains speeding into Mardin or Nusaybin.

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