

Tur Abdin - a Homeland of Ancient Syro-Aramaean Culture

by Prof. Sebastian Brock

Tur Abdin features in written sources as early as the thirteenth century BC. To the kings of Assyria it was a region to be conquered and despoiled: thus, in 879 BC Ashurnasipal II proudly proclaimed "I have subdued Matiate (=Midyat) and its villages; I took much spoil from there, and laid upon them tribute and heavy taxes" - a fate that Tur Abdin has suffered all too many times in its subsequent history. The Assyriand and Babylonian also single out for specific mention "the wine of Izalla", that is of Izlo, as the southern edge of the mountainous plateau of Tur Abdin, overlooking the Mesopotamian plain, is often known in old sources. The fame of this wine, clearly regarded as being of very high quality, also seems to have been known to the prophet Ezekiel, who, in his prophecy against Tyre, speaks of "casks of wine from Izlo" (Ezekiel 27:19; the Hebrew text has the otherwise unknown "Uzal", in all likelihood a corruption of "Izal").

It is these same slopes of Izlo that, in the fourth century A.D., St Jacob, bishop of nearby Nisibis, and his deacon St Ephrem, must have trodden on many on occasion. It was here too, that there sprung up in the course of the fifth and sixth centuries many famous monasteries, many of whose buildings still stand, and some of which continued to serve as monasteries well into the present century: this was the case with the monastery of Mor Awgin who, according to tradition, was the founder of monasticism in Mesopotamia, and with the Monastery of Mor Abraham, originally established by the East Syriac monastic reformer of the sixth century, Mor Abraham of Kashkar.

It was thanks to the blossoming of monasteries all over the plateau in the ensuing centuries that Tur Abdin has sometimes been accorded the title of "the Mount Athos of the East" by European writers.

Accordingly today, for many people Tur Abdin is renowned primarily for its numerous ancient churches and monasteries, some of which still in function, despite the vicissitudes and ravages of time (not least in the present century). For the Syrian Orthodox Church, however, it is much more than this, for Tur Abdin is above all a heartland of Syriac Tradition which reaches back to the early centuries of the Christian Church. Whatever the correct original etymology of its name, Tur Abdin is quintessentially "the mountain of the servants of God", the home of numerous local saints, after whom many of the monasteries and churches that have sprung up and flourished at one period or another over the course of sixteen centuries have been named.

These saints of Tur Abdin include some colourful figures: several were stylites, and the column of one of these can still be seen in the village of Habsus (Habsenas), while others were distinctly practical people, like the entrepreneur bishop Simeon of the Olives (Shem'un d-Zayte) who died in 734: thanks to his large-scale olive cultivation the numerous churches in the entire region of Tur Abdin were provided with oil for their lamps; it was he, too, who provided an endowment for the Monastery of Mor Gabriel from the proceeds of some hidden treasure that his nephew David had discovered in a remote cave. Others are remembered for their miraculous healings: thus the ruined monastery of St Theodotos (who died in 698), situated above the village of Qelleth, is still visited by sufferers from migraine.

But although it is the architecture of churches like Mor Yakubb the Recluse at Salah, and that of the Virgin at Hah that perhaps catch the eye of the visitor most today, it is also important to remember that the history of Tur Abdin is rich in many other aspects of culture. The survival of a magnificent illuminated Gospel lectionary manuscript, written for the church of Hah in 1227, is an indication of the high level of scribal activity in the region during this century which witnessed what one author has termed a 'renaissance' for the Syrian Orthodox Church. Likewise, Tur Abdin can boast a large number of authors writing in Classical Syriac, though regrettably their works remain largely unpublished and so can only be read in manuscripts. Among the few authors whose writings have been printed are Mas'ud and Addai, both belonging to the fifteenth century; Mas'ud was the author of a long theological poem entitled "The Spiritual Ship", and he may be the same person as the Mas'ud who was one of the independent patriarchs of Tur Abdin, during the period of schism with the canonical patriarchal line, centred on Deir ez Za'faran. The priest Addai, who was just one of several notable authors from Bsorino (Basabrina), is remembered with gratitude by historians today for his continuation of Bar Hebraeus' ecclesiastical history up to his own day, some two centuries later. As a representative of the many other authors whose writings remain virtually unknown one might take Basilius Shem'un, maphrian of Tur Abdin, who died a martyr's death in 1740: of his extensive writings, in both prose and poetry, only a few samples have so far been made available (in an anthology published from the monastery of St Ephrem, in Holland, by Mor Julius Cicek); amongst these is a poem in Kurdish language but written in Syriac script.

Another little-known aspect of the cultural role of Tur Abdin lies in the transmission of texts: over the course of centuries and continuing right up to the present day, innumerable scribes have been at work in the churches and monasteries of Tur Abdin, copying out Syriac liturgical and literary texts. It was perhaps some of these monastic scribes that many works on the spiritual life by some of the great East Syriac monastic writers, such as Isaac of Niniveh and John the Elder (Yuhanun Sobo), came to be read and appreciated in Syrian Orthodox circles as well; here one might speculate that this happened at the time when some of the monasteries on Izlo, which had originally been East Syriac foundations, eventually passed into Syrian Orthodox hands.

Many scribes of manuscripts have recorded their names and date of writing at the end of the manuscripts they were copying. Sometimes a scribe would also add some verses to celebrate the completion of his task; one of these couplets reads as follows:

Just as the sailor rejoices
now that his ship has reached
harbour,
so does the scribe rejoice
at the very last line that he writes.

This couplet happens to have a long and intriguing history, for similar couplets are attested in both Greek and Latin: in Greek the earliest example dates from 898, and in Latin from 669, but it is a Syriac manuscript that provides us with the earliest example, dated December 543. It is a pleasing example of continuity that the couplet can still be found at the end of several of the publications by Mor Julius Cicek, formerly abbot of Mor Gabriel Monastery in Tur Abdin, but now metropolitan of Central Europe.

Though sadly depleted by largescale emigration, Tur Abdin nevertheless remains very much a spiritual focal-point, not only for Syrian Orthodox Tradition, but also for the whole of Christian Tradition, not least since it is here, in the Monastery of Mor Gabriel, that a liturgical

language, very close to the dialect of Aramaic that Christ will have spoken, is most lovingly and successfully nurtured - definitely not as a museum piece, but very much as part of a venerable and living Tradition which has enriched, and continues to enrich, the entire Christian tradition.

Source: Hans Hollerweger: Lebendiges Kulturerbe TURABDIN. Wo die Sprache Jesu gesprochen wird, Linz 1999, p. 22-23