

## **Re: Destruction of Dayr Mar Elian ssh-Sharqi, Qaryatayn, Syria by IS in August 2015**

Between 1997 and 2004 I divided my time equally between Syria and the UK and from 2004 until 2010 I spent all academic vacation periods continuing my work there and visiting friends, so it is a country that I know extremely well. In 2001, as I finished my PhD studies I was asked by Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio SJ to undertake the excavation of the monastery of Mar Elian in the town of Qaryatayn. At that time I was a volunteer living and working with the Community of Al Khalil at Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi near Nebek and Paolo was head of the Community. The diocesan bishop had been impressed by the Community's regeneration of an ancient monastery and its growing importance in Syria as a place of meeting for young Syrians, as well as foreign tourists and because of the wide engagement of the monks and nuns with the socially dispossessed and their commitment to Christian-Islamic dialogue. He therefore requested that Fr. Jacques Mourad of the Community of al-Khalil move to Qaryatayn to become parish priest for the local Syrian Catholic population and that the monastic community formulate a plan to regenerate the ancient monastery.

As my PhD at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London had been on the archaeology of the early Church in Syria, I was asked to move to Qaryatayn with Jacques and assess the monument with a view to applying for excavation permits. The archaeological project that I founded then ran to 2005 and is published online at [http://architectureandasceticism.exeter.ac.uk/items/browse?collection=1&sort\\_field=Dublin+Core%2CTitle](http://architectureandasceticism.exeter.ac.uk/items/browse?collection=1&sort_field=Dublin+Core%2CTitle)

The reason I am writing today is that between 2001 and 2010 I spent substantial periods of time, amounting in all to several years of my life, living in Qaryatayn and witnessing the importance of the monastery to the local population. When I moved there in 2001 the town had a population of around 25,000 people of whom around 20% were believed to be Christian. The majority of Christians were Syrian Orthodox and the remainder were Syrian Catholic. Due to its remoteness - lying roughly in the centre of a triangle between Damascus, Homs and Palmyra - Qaryatayn was a poor and undeveloped settlement that existed solely due to the presence of an oasis. However, a lack of rain since the 1990's saw the large body of open water that had once sustained the town reduced to a pond. On my last visit (2010) the water had entirely dried up and now the settlement relies on artesian wells, so is steadily draining the water table. This leads me on to my first point - the oasis was bordered by a substantial tell that I was told by Dr Michel al-Maqdissi, Head of Excavations at the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) was the site of a city that had ruled the region in the Middle Bronze Age. This tell had not yet been excavated, but it was expected that it could reveal a great deal of knowledge about the culture of Syria in the period immediately before the rise of the culture based at Qatna (Mishrife near Homs). In 2012 a friend sent me small, poor quality photographs taken on a cheap camera phone by a relative. The pictures were dated 26th May 2012 and showed substantial damage to the tell, looking as if it had been attacked by an earthmover. My friend's relative had been walking in that area when he noised the destruction and, with only an old phone, documented what he could. When he returned the next day with a proper camera to document the damage, the site had been completely levelled and the antiquities revealed by the disturbance and shown in his pictures (including a potentially significant Roman era Greek inscription) had been completely levelled and the tell destroyed. Please see <http://architectureandasceticism.exeter.ac.uk/items/show/482> for pictures of the tell before the war and <http://architectureandasceticism.exeter.ac.uk/items/show/317> are the photographs documenting the destruction.

This was a blow to the Qurwani, who are aware of the proud history of their town and can all boast long genealogies linking themselves to the region. One elderly *badawi* told me that his family were incomers, having arrived from al-Basireh on the road to Palmyra in the C17th. He described the ancestral *khan* in Basireh in such great depth that I found the ruin of the building when I next stopped off there on my way to Palmyra. Not only was he correct about the ancient monuments in the desert, but he described the interior of the monastery of Mar Elian in the 1920's during his childhood. All his information as to the location of the kitchen, priest's store of wine and so on was later confirmed by our excavations.

The Qurwani are particularly proud of a tradition that the name of the town comes from the Syriac "*Quryo Tartain*" or "Two Villages" as they tell a story that the two tribes who lived in the two villages were early adherents of Christianity. When Islam arrived in the region several hundred years later the tribes met and made a pact; one tribe would remain Christian and the other would convert to the new faith. They agreed that whichever faith became dominant, those in the majority would protect their neighbours. The Qurwani maintain that this is why they have a long history of peaceful co-existence and why Christianity has survived for over one and a half thousand years in the town.

Which brings me to Mar Elian. The Christians believe that the Byzantine sarcophagus house in the monastery belonged to a C4th holy man from Mesopotamia who was the teacher of the greatest writer of the Syriac language - St. Ephrem the Syrian. They say that he died returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and asked his acolytes to place his body on an ox cart and bury him where the oxen stopped. The legend claims the oxen reached Qaryatayn and refused to move, despite all goading, and eventually the followers of Mar Elian buried him there. His origins in Mesopotamia account for his Arabic name, but in Syriac he is called "Mar Julyano Sobo" or St. Julian the Old - which is why he is sometimes called Mar Elian esh-Sheikh. However, the Muslims call the figure buried in the sarcophagus Sheikh Ahmed Khouri, which intriguingly seems to suggest that their sheikh has a link to the Christian priesthood... A kufic inscription over the entrance to the monastery in the name of the C15th ruler Emir Sayf ed-Dawleh promised protection to all who prayed at the tomb, giving tangible evidence that the site had been sacred to both Christians and the local Sunni population at least five hundred years. In all my time in Qaryatayn the sarcophagus was draped with a green satin cloth as the local Christians were happy for their saint to also be venerated by their Muslim neighbours as a great sheikh. Every year on 9th September *Eid Mar Elian* would draw thousands of worshippers to the site to pray at the tomb and attend an outdoor mass. The crowd would be addressed by the local bishop, but also the mufti of Qaryatayn and both would talk about their variant forms of belief in who Mar Elian was, and why he was important. The day would always end with all participants eating *mansaf* and dancing the *dabkeh*.

In May 2015 Fr. Jacques and a deacon from Aleppo were kidnapped by IS from the monastery and a month later the town was overrun by IS. The Christians were rounded up and taken to a compound near Palmyra and put under pressure to convert. Given their resistance and refusal to co-operate without a priest (the Syrian Orthodox priest was away from Qaryatayn on the day it was attacked and therefore evaded capture) Jacques and Deacon Boutros were taken to near Palmyra from their prison cell in Raqqa and told to convert the Christians to Islam. Every single Christian rejected conversion, but what they didn't know was that back in Qaryatayn the Muslims of the town had withdrawn all co-operation with IS until their Christian neighbours were returned to them. After their return to the town, in August 2015 Dayr Mar Elian was razed by earth mover and the sarcophagus was smashed

and the relics of the saint were scattered. Around this time IS also destroyed the Syrian Orthodox and Muslim town cemeteries that lay side-by-side beside the road out of the town to the north. The Syrian Catholic graves largely survived because they happened to be interred within a nondescript concrete enclosure that was not obviously a burial place. A propaganda film of the destruction of the monastery has circulated widely online and therefore the destruction of the monastery can be firmly ascribed to IS.

Jacques and most of the Christians of Qaryatayn were rescued under cover of darkness over a period of months by Muslim friends, who drove convoy across the desert at night to the outskirts of Homs and safety. However, I have heard testimony first hand from Jacques and one of the Qurwani (now safely in Europe) as to how these events have affected the town. It has left an enduring bond of friendship between the two religious communities, but they are psychologically traumatised by the loss of their beloved shrine (the monastery was also home to several hundred internally displaced Syrians from Homs - almost entirely Muslims - at the time it was destroyed, thus destroying their refuge). For the local Sunni and Syrian Orthodox population there is a deep trauma associated with the loss of their family tombs, which were visited regularly throughout the year and which bore the signs of regular maintenance by the extended family. This is undoubtedly not only a crime against the tangible heritage of the region, but the long-term effects on the local population remain to be explored. Much of the communal identity revolved around recollection of a shared past that transcended confessional identity and, although the rescue of the Christians of Qaryatayn continues this narrative, only time will tell how the local population negotiate their future without the unifying element of a shared place of worship.

I am happy for my testimony to be made public and please do not hesitate to contact me should you require any further information or would like me to pass on contact details for Jacques and some of the Qurwani.

Best wishes,

Emma Loosley

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