

## **Maa'loula..... The "Time Gate"**

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An important part of the whole human history was established around the three huge rocks in the East, West and middle of Maa'loula and which are called "Shenna" in "Aramaic" language. Such history interacted and dialogued through special nature, characterized by mountains, caves, vital environment and "human carriers" signified by the human being in Maa'loula. This human being produced what exceeded the static picture of the profound history, and developed into a reality that could be felt, interacted with and read through, by a clear and dynamic living history, that allows us to outstrip what we have been used to in terms of understanding and interpreting the static archeological theories related to the rocks, the writings and the scripts.

Such living interaction with history gives us the opportunity to open the "Time Gate" and walk through it moment by moment to discover the astonishing past, and listen to its wonderful stories that provoked more and more questions.

As an observer, one cannot help being perplexed, the moment you see, caves and grottos carefully and painstakingly carved with the human spirit and, placed high above the valley floors, are convents and churches strongly attached to their non-Christian past, and the serenity of the place that never changed, and where the pulse of life is clearly heard with every breeze and with the sun's ray or through a glance to the "Place".

It is Maaloula which is identified by its ancient location next to Saints Sergious and Bakhos convent, and which is called the upper town or "blota Ello" in the Aramaic language.

It was called Pencrapolos by the Saleucids and Scopuloasa, which means the "jolty and quarry" place, during the Roman and the Greek era. However, it is today a passage due to its location in between Al Badia and the Ghoota of Damascus. (1)

Maa'loula is connected to the two ends of "Time" for being a continuously living place and for being the witness on the different successive periods of time. It is the place where the first story of engineering and the Syrian Eagle (2) were established, and where the walls and icons were carved on the vibrant rocks. All of this, exists in what is known the Helios Temple (the cave of Father Joseph), which includes treasures, pronounced historic evidences and wall writings, revealing a place that is possibly the oldest Christian convent before the establishment and the spread of churches in Syria, during the fourth and the fifth century A.D.



The cave of Father Joseph

Adjacent to it, is the cave of the King's house, "Beth El malka" (in Aramaic), which is considered the oldest royal place in the East where writings in the name of Jesus and his victory on idolatry were found (3).

The huge stones that are 1.5X1.5X1.5 meters in the Bath of the Queen tell the story of the first dealing with the stone material, through the work of carving and building, to transfer water from Saint Takla convent to the bath.



"Beth El malka"

Two carved rocks called "Shera" exist in the place. The one, which is in the eastern part of town, is called the rock of the King and the Queen, "Shera Malka Malaktha" in Aramaic, and shows a framed rectangular picture directed to the south ( 2.25X1.5 meters) of a man and a woman holding each other hands and above which there is a semi-circle. The implicit meaning of this picture is transmitted by people in Maa'loula and establishing the following popular saying: "My wealth is in front of me and I am in front of my wealth" (4).



"Shera Malka Malaktha"

The second which is the rock of caves, "Shera khouo", is located in the western part of town, " Nheathil Maa'riba" to the left side of the road, leading to the convent of Saint Sergio's and Backhoes. Natural caves intersect, on this rock, with those carved by human being, above which and around, there is a group of graveyards that have different dimensions. The most important thing about these graveyards is that, unlike the known practice in having the graveyards on the ground or underneath, they are located directly above the living place (5).



"Shera khouo"

In a place close to the rock of caves exists the western rock that has a natural hole called the "Fort". It was designed by the people of the village for the protection of the women and children who sought refuge along with a man described to be the most skilled in shooting, and who was using a gun to defend them.

The siege of these people in the fort lasted for about eight months since the date of the event on 16/November 1925. To reach the cave, they climbed a ladder made by Antoine Milaneh and his friends for that purpose (6).



"the "Fort"

A few meters from the rock of caves and on the same road, there is another natural hole that served as a place for hanging criminals indicating the rule of law that prevailed at that time(7).

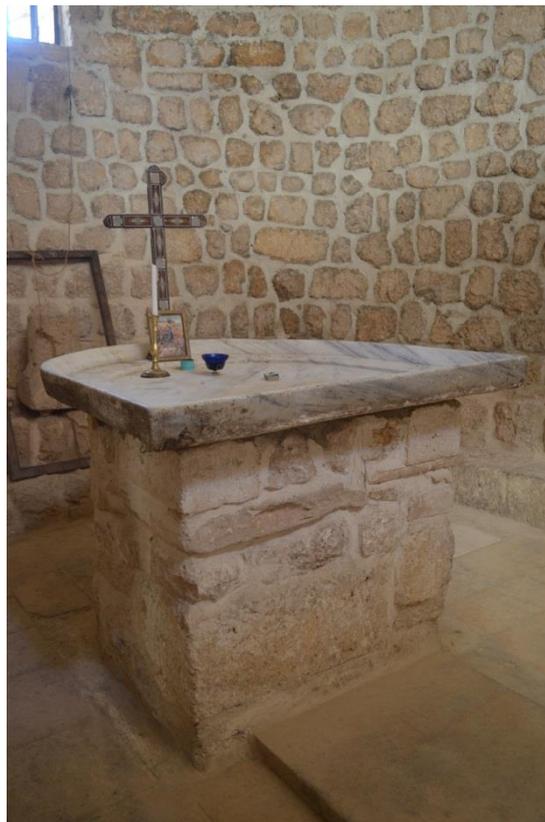
Saint Takla convent in Maa'loula, is considered the witness on the first step towards converting to Christianity where Saint Takla converted to Christianity by Apostle Paul. Based on the popular story, she suffered injustice in her father's house. And while she was trying to escape from her father, she found herself in front of a mountain incapable of escaping. She stopped and prayed to God to save her when the mountain suddenly split into two parts and allowed her to escape to a cave where she found water and drunk. Visitors go now to the same place and drink water too (8).



"Saint Takla"

From the western rock, Saint Sergio's and backhoes convent overlooks the current town.

This convent was built on the ruins of the idolatry temple of God "Apolon" which was known by its altar that is the oldest altar in the world. It has a distinguished feature related to its hollowed shape with a closed exit, indicating that the sacrifice is a "real one" but bloodless and confidential. All altars went through the same shape before reaching their current shape. However, the northern altar is dedicated to Virgin Mary and the southern one is dedicated to Saint Michle "Head of Angels".



" Sergio's & backhoes Altar "

One of the most famous icons in the convent, is the one that has two drawings; one on the top representing "Jesus crucifixion", and the second, below, representing the "Last Supper", showing a semi-circle table similar to the main altar in the convent (9).

The first interaction of human beings with this place, goes back to the scientifically confirmed period of the "Neanderthals" (150-250 thousand years), who resisted and continued living until it was possible to authenticate and secure the findings about Maa'loula, that go back to 30,000 years before Christ, in the museum of Deir Attiyeh.

Then, the "Homo Sapiens" who lived between, 7000-10,000 before Christ (10), appeared and went through long-established transition and transformation periods,

of which the "Aramaic Language" was the most important one, and which was carried on by the vibrant Maa'loula Person.

This period is considered the real incubator for the human knowledge of the first Man, the first Character (Aleph) summarizes the drawing of the Bull, the first "Word", the first "Sentence" and the first "Text", that collected all the agricultural, industrial, commercial and grazing knowledge.

This human and cultural knowledge, and what it embraced in terms of living values, clarified the mystery that experts failed to understand, due to their ignorance of the basic keys of this knowledge and which explained many of its mysterious puzzles.

The Aramaic language in Maa'loula is living evidence that explains, for instance, the names of many cities, towns, villages and words used in the East. Tora Bora, is an example of an Aramaic word that means the "bald mountain", and Moro Hobo which means "God is love". This language clarified also the mystery in the Qoranic text that perplexed many religious scholars who considered it unexplainable, but was easily explained by the Aramaic language. The Characters "Aleph, Lam, Mim", for example, represent three words in the Aramaic language which are "Emar", "Lee", "Mario" and mean "God Told Me"(11).

The western Aramaic language prevailed in the Middle East for a period of 1000 years before Christ. It is the language that Jesus Christ and his Apostles spoke. It is also the language that was used by the Maa'loula bishop Aftikhos, who participated in the first Church Ecumenical meeting in the year 325 A.D., and in which he formed creed law recited by Christians in the world (12).

Based on this, the spoken Aramaic language is considered a living guide, presenting a significant ancient Syrian civilization that is closely associated with the previous Syrian eras and the contemporary Aramaic language. The slang language in Maa'loula reserved a linguistic form that is strictly linked to its linguistic roots, through the pronunciation and the vocabulary. In addition to being an intellectual, theological, philosophical language, due to its richness and flexibility, it was able to keep its purity and stay away from the effect of the Greek language for a long time. Exactly the same as the pronunciations in the Akkadian, Canaanite and the great Aramaic and Arabic language (13).

Humanity owes Maa'loula a lot of the existing human achievement, that is present in its surrounding environment and in the tone of the voice of people from Maa'loula.

Its history is alive through its resources, and in what is left from its spoken past. Clarification to all mysteries, art, writing, poetical musical and spoken culture, are all found in it.

After what had happened to Maaloula, anything said about it now should not be in the context of a media review, political advantage, or depiction and remorse. It should be said in the context of an international collective responsibility for the reservation of what has been left of a civilization that was able to withstand all historical difficulties, and which, if disappeared, will probably lead to the loss of the richest part of the culture of the Mankind.

#### References:

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- 3- Athnasio, Previous reference, page307.
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- 6- According to the alive memory in Maa' loula, Mosa Franssis.
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- 8- Athnasio, Previous reference, page308.
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- 10- Nassralla Elias, maa'loula descriptive study, second print 2006, page 75-76.
- 11- Meeting with Jorje rezkallah, Aramaic language teacher, in the Aramaic institute, maa'loula.
- 12- Nassralla Elias, Previous reference, page108,109,110.
- 13- Dr. Uness, Eyad & Dr. Khalailah Ebraheem, monthly report about maa'loula, museums and ruins directorate sept 2014, page 20.

## **About the Project**

### **Syrian Antiquities documentation Project Starting from Horan**

It is a project that launched in 2008. It aims to document archaeological sites in Syria, especially unknown ones which have a historical importance, in order to identify sites, communicate them visually and deliver them to the largest possible number of people. That happened through the calendar issued by Bosra and Horran parish of the Melkite Catholics.

Overseeing the documentary field work (Volunteer team):

Issa Muhanna - Oversees the documentary field work

Mona Muhanna -Translator

Ahmad Hassan & Munaf Hassan - Photographer (from 2008 – to 2012)

Miray Khanouf - Photographer (2014 – 2015)

This project has documented more than 20 sites in 86 pages. Many of the sites which documented were damaged partly or totally during the Syrian Crisis for instance:

King bed girl in Bosra. Hamman, Altaaf, Sahar, Al-Zabeera & Zabayer etc.

That bad event granted the project a new value for having visual documents about these damaged sites.

Mr. Bashar Jaafari, Syria's permanent representative, presented the issuance 2015 of 15 members of the Security Council. As for the importance of work in the transport of live picture of what happened in Syria.