

The History and Culture of the Village of Toula in northern Lebanon

The then Museum premises at Gordon (1 April 2010)

The Medieval and Early Modern Centre, University of Sydney (12 May 2011)

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[Slide] Map of Lebanon

Lebanon is known as the beginning of the trade routes of the Phoenicians which stretched throughout the Mediterranean and in later ages for the road system of the Romans, since the region was an important crossroads in the Roman Empire. Such trade routes and roads were crucial for the interconnections of the societies which developed them.

[Slide] View of Temple of Mercury-Bacchus Baalbek

The famous temple complex at Baalbek in the Bekaa Valley, which is not far from Toula, given that Lebanon is a relatively small country, was built in the Roman period in the 1st-3rd centuries AD, at a time when the classical orders of architecture had been in existence for many centuries after their development by the Greeks. I am showing you a view of one of the best preserved temples, the Temple of Mercury-Bacchus, the latter being the Roman god of wine, built in the Corinthian order with its leafed capitals, and

[Slide] View of Temple of Jupiter-Hadad Baalbek

the Temple of Jupiter-Hadad, the king of the gods in the Greco-Roman pantheon.

[Slide] View of details of temple of Mercury-Bacchus Baalbek

These are some of the beautiful details of the Temple of Bacchus.

The buildings are products of the classical tradition, what we call its receipt, that is, its development in later cultures.

[Slide] View of Church of St Assia

The village of Toula has at its centre the beautiful church of St Assia, the Maronite saint of the village. This stone church has elements of Romanesque and Gothic style.

[Slide] View of Toula

Situated in the Zgharta District northern Lebanon, Toula is a village whose inhabitants belong to the Maronite Catholic Church. The village is situated in a mountainous region of the country. It is known for its agricultural products which are a result of the fertile soil which surrounds it. Of particular note are the high quality grapes which are used to produce *arak*, the strong distilled alcoholic drink flavoured with aniseed. Characteristic of many countries in the eastern Mediterranean region, a similar drink is also made in Greece, where it is called *ouzo*.

The population of Toula which lives in Lebanon is approximately 1000 people.

[Slide] View of Toula in winter

Since the village is made relatively inaccessible by snow in the winter, the small resident population is increased in the summer by many people who return there during the vacation period.

[Slides] Views of Toula in winter

These images give you a good idea of the village in winter and the surrounding geography of the mountains. These beautiful photographs were taken by Fadi Nicolas Jilwan, an architect who comes from Toula.

Toula has generated migration to many countries during the course of the last hundred years, with notable concentrations in Australia, the United States of America, Canada and South America. The people who have come to Australia are part of the Lebanese community here which has made a significant impact on the country.

The Maronites, named after St Maron, the Syriac monk of the early 5th century AD, are members of the Lebanese Eastern Catholic Church. They are Eastern Christians who have always remained in communion with the Roman Catholic Church.

[Slide] Photo of painting of St Assia

St Assia, who is the patron saint of Toula, lived until AD 377. This was in about the time of the Roman Emperor Theodosius II 'the Great', who reigned AD 379-395. Christianity, which had been persecuted by the Roman Empire during the first centuries after the birth of Christ, had only relatively recently become the official religion of the Roman Empire from the reign of Constantine the Great, who was Roman emperor from 312-337. He tolerated Christianity from 312, was the first emperor to convert to Christianity and he moved the capital of the empire in 330 to Constantinople, present day Istanbul in Turkey.

The historical and cultural context in which St Assia lived was the Greek speaking eastern Roman Empire, whose culture was mainly Greek, but influenced by several centuries of Roman rule, and also had the influence of many near eastern cultures, such as, in the region of Lebanon, Phoenician and Aramaic.

His father Famtiros was close to the Emperor Theodosius. Theodosius is famous for founding the Roman Empire as a Christian Catholic state, that is, he made Arianism and other Christian heresies illegal, outlawed paganism and ended sacrifice, and established everywhere in the empire, which included Lebanon, the Christian religion in the form which has developed into the Roman Catholic Church.

Other saints and church fathers of this period came from families close to the imperial family. Many important saints in the eastern Mediterranean date from the Later Roman Empire, with other examples being St Basil and St George, both of whom were supposedly active in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, which is not far from Lebanon.

St Maron, the founder of the Maronite Catholic Church, was a contemporary of St Assia and came from the same cultural context. He was a friend of St John Chrysostom, the famous Bishop of Constantinople, who lived from c.347-407, and whose name means ‘the golden mouth’ on account of his distinguished oratory. Indeed, St Assia is said to have visited Constantinople to meet Theodosius.

We have an account of the life and works of St Assia. Soon after becoming a priest, he went to a monastery in Mt Sinai, a region which has been famous for centuries for its monasteries. These include St Catherine’s Monastery, from where the mid 4th century *Codex Sinaiticus* comes, one of the earliest Greek manuscripts of the Bible, most of which is in the British Library in London.

The story of his life has facts about his date, family and where he lived and worked, which may be accurate. The account of the miracles which he performed, living in a cave, praying and fasting, and trials by the enemies of the good is similar to the life of Jesus. They remind us of the temptation of Christ in the wilderness and the miracles which he performs are similar to those of Jesus.

He destroys a temple where animals are worshipped, which is parallel to the story of Jesus driving the money changers out of the Temple in Jerusalem. The ambassador of Persian king brings him rich gifts, which is similar to wise men from the east in Bible. Meeting students before his death and his final instructions to embrace the faith are like Jesus at the Last Supper.

His activities are described as taking place in the region of Lebanon, Palestine, Antioch, and Constantinople, which were centres of the eastern Roman Empire and the early church.

In antiquity and in other periods, historical events, lives and speeches are often described not as they actually happened or with the words which were actually spoken, but with stories, or in symbolic language, or in a literary style which conveys the inner significance of what happened or what was said. In that sense, combined with some actual facts of the event, they are a true account, and indeed a more profound presentation, of what happened, than a simple factual narrative. Indeed, so called 'factual' narratives are themselves either limited by the

facts available, and thus have not all the facts, or are only somebody's interpretation, based on their choice of facts and presentation of them.

The life of St Assia is intended to be a more profound presentation of what happened. It gives a different perspective of the life which is described than a 'factual narrative'. It is what is called *hagiography*, from Greek (*h*)*aġios* (ἅγιος, 'holy' or 'saint') and *graphē* (γραφή, 'writing'), meaning 'writing about saints'. The life of St Assia is thus representative of Christian hagiographies, especially of the Later Roman Empire, since it is focused on the life, and notably the miracles, of a man who has been *canonised*, that is, made into a saint.

A painting of him, of which this is a photograph, hangs above the altar in the church of St Assia in Toula. We are still researching the artistic style and date of this painting, but it could very well date from the 15th-18th century AD and may be of a style influenced by Italian art. We remember that the Venetians were influential in the Levant during the early part of this time and they thus brought Lebanon in contact with the important schools of Italian art of the Renaissance.

He has long been worshipped as a St Assia the Doctor for his curing of illnesses and disabilities. His name means 'doctor'. Christ similarly acted in this role.

St Assia is a significant figure far beyond Toula. There is an Assyrian Catholic Cathedral of Mar Assia in Halab, which is the older name for Aleppo, in Syria. A picture of him is displayed in this cathedral.

[Slides] Views of Church of St Assia

The beautiful stone church of the village which is dedicated to him. The style of the church incorporates the round Romanesque arch, which is found in Byzantine and western European architecture of the mediaeval period, and the pointed Gothic arch which is found in western Europe. The bell tower is of a style found in various parts of the eastern Mediterranean, such as in Greece. Indeed, in the region of Toula, there are other significant religious buildings of similar style

[Slide] St Anthony's Monastery

such as the famous monastery of St Anthony of Qozhaya, and is also influenced by these architectural styles.

[Slides] Interior of Church

This is a view of the interior of the church of St Assia, and you can see the painting of the saint above the altar and the pointed arches.

On the last Sunday of September, the village holds an annual Summer Festival in his honour.

[Slide] View of the *hrissi dsoutti*

At the festival, which is many centuries old, members of the village celebrate with an outdoor party, where the traditional meat dish of the village, called *hrissi*, is cooked and eaten, *arak*,

the drink made from grapes and flavoured with aniseed, is drunk, and there is dancing and ringing of the bells of the church of Saint Assia.

Members of the village describe the preparation of *hrissi* as follows.

[Slide] View of the *hrissi dsoutti*

At the beginning of the day, the members of the village collect wood suitable for burning from the neighbouring forest. At the same time, other members of the village position metal bases, which have a large opening at the front, upon which sits a *dissit*. This is a large metal pot, whose diameter at the top is about 70 cm and has sides which taper upwards and two large handles under the rim. The wood is placed inside the metal stands and is lit. After being filled with water, the *dissit* is placed on top of the metal stand.

A person chosen from outside the village because of their special skills, assisted by others from the village, comes to slaughter the same number of lambs as there are *dissits* and to clean the lambs in preparation for boiling. Each lamb is then cut into four or five large pieces and placed in the *dissit* to boil. While the meat is boiling, fat and other residues from the meat come to the surface and are removed through a filtering process. The meat is left to simmer for over four to five hours, before wheat is added, together with pepper, salt and other herbs, such as cinnamon.

[Slide] View of the *hrissi dsoutti* night

The *hrissi* is left all day and night, for over 14 hours, to boil and finally to simmer, to about 3.00 am in the early morning. At this time, when the ingredients are soft and meshed together, mixing of the ingredients further is carried out by large wooden stirrers. It is then served hot on plates to all members of the village.

[Slide] View of the *hrissi dsoutti*

From about 3.00 am until about 10.00 am, people from the village eat *hrissi* and distribute it to their homes using smaller domestic pots. Many visitors to the village, usually from overseas, also take some *hrissi* away with them.

The slaughtering of the lambs is done in remembrance of and thanksgiving to God and Mar Assia (Saint Assia), the patron saint of Toula. Many of the villages in the Zgharta District, including the greater village of Zgharta, celebrate their patron saints in a similar manner through thanksgiving and the preparation of *hrissi*.

An article will be published shortly in an Australian arts magazine about the village, the festival of St Assia, and objects in the museum, such as the *jirren el kibbi* bowl for preparation of the Lebanese food of meat and cereal.

[Slide] *Jirren el kibbi* 1st half 20th century AD, bowl, marble, h: 18.5 cm x diameter 31 cm, and mallet, wood.

An object in the museum, which is also important for food preparation, that is, of the meat dish *kibbi nayyeh*, is the *jirren el kibbi*. Dating from the first half of the 20th century AD, but presumably of a traditional shape dating back many centuries, the bowl is made of red marble and has an octagonal outer edge on the top, a roughly finished rounded body and a flat base. The rim of the bowl itself is flat and has a round inner edge and the cavity of the bowl is hemispherical with a smooth inner surface. The mallet, which is used to pound the meat and the wheat in the bowl, is made of lathe turned wood. The *kibbi nayyeh* bowl is made from a hard non-porous rock slab, which is flattened at the bottom and, by a long and hard process, a

round cavity is hand-cut. This cavity allows the pounding of ground meat against the hard stone of the *jirren*. Many residences in Toula have owned and kept a traditional *kibbi nayyeh* bowl.

Kibbi nayyeh or raw *kibbi* is a well known Lebanese dish, made of minced raw lamb or beef mixed with spices and fine *bulgur*. Various species of wheat are used to make the cereal food *bulgur*, but usually *durum* wheat. Green peppers and green onions, and mint leaves and olive oil accompany *kibbi nayyeh* at a meal. It is eaten with pita bread and occasionally with a sauce of garlic, olive oil and lemon juice. A glass of *arak* is usually served with *kibbi nayyeh*.

Conflicts between Christians and Muslims were part of the history of Toula in the mediaeval and early modern period, as they have been in Lebanon and the Middle East up to the present. In 1488, a group of Muslims came to the area to resolve existing conflicts. A battle, known as the Battle of Marjet Toula, took place between, on one side, the people of Ehden and Maronite families who were sympathetic with them and, on the other, the Muslims of Al-Dinnieh headed by the Raad family in a place called Marjet Toula outside the village. The Muslims of Al-Dinnieh and their supporters were defeated in the battle. This battle was thus a turning point in the history of the village, because the outcome meant that it became a Maronite village, which it remains until the present.

[Slide] book Michael Farah, *Lebanese Poets*. 23.8 cm x 16.7 cm

The museum also collects published material which is related to the academic, cultural and other achievements of members of the village. An example is the book by Michael Farah

entitled *Lebanese Poets*. Reflecting the high level of education and professional positions in every area of the community held by members of the village both in Lebanon and in the countries to which the members of the village have migrated, one of the most prominent and well known men who ever lived and worked in Toula was the poet Michael Farah. Born in 1927, he showed interest in reading and self education. Michael grew up attached to his village Toula and his love for Toula can be found in his poems, where he praises its nature, climate and people. Michael established in Tripoli, the second largest city in Lebanon situated on the Mediterranean Sea, the largest book shop and library in north Lebanon. Michael's life was cut short, when he was killed in 1975 during the Lebanese civil war.

Poetry, composed and recited in Arab villages, is of course an important part of their cultural life, dating back to the mediaeval period.

The museum is fortunate to have a number of objects on loan from the members of the village. These objects are significant indicators of the history and culture of the village, both today and in the preceding centuries, and are valued heirlooms of the people who have lent them. I have already shown you some and others are:

[Slide] glass jug

[Slide] Coffee pot and cup

[Slide] Father of Sakis Shalla

The not so distant past of Toula produced historical figures such as the father of Sakis Shalla, here shown in military dress in a photograph dated about a century ago. Such figures would

of course have been a significant part of life in the village and surrounding region in the mediaeval and early modern periods.

[Slide] Ruins

The history and culture of Toula is characteristic of Lebanon itself. The country has a rich history which is very influential on world history, being in an important geographical position in the eastern Mediterranean, which was significant in ancient near eastern, Greek, Roman, mediaeval and modern historical periods. It explains why ruins of earlier civilisations are found in the region of Toula.

Lebanon was the homeland of the Phoenicians, the ancient seafaring people of the Mediterranean, who invented the alphabet, upon which our alphabet is based. The name of the Phoenicians means 'purple' because of the dye which they traded, and from it is derived the Latin word 'Punic' for their descendents the Carthaginians. Thus, like the Phoenicians before them, members of the village have migrated overseas to many countries, such as Australia, built new communities and influenced the places in which they settled.

[Slide] Tree

Cedars of Lebanon are famous from the Bible, and this is the region where great monotheistic religions, which have influenced world history, have developed, such as the Christian church of which the Maronite Church is a significant part. The centre of village life is marked by church, the festival and this lovely tree. Such trees are often the central feature of villages in the region, and would have been characteristic in these villages going back to the mediaeval and early modern periods.

We are in the process of writing the website for the museum which will be placed online shortly. It is a permanent exhibition, entitled *Toula: the humble village, setting new horizons in new times*, and it comprises twelve sections highlighting the achievements of the village, which are academic, agriculture, art, business, culture, education, family, history, migration, public service, religion and other special achievements.

This evening, I have brought Toula to you and in turn I have transported you to Toula to see some of the features of historical and cultural interest of the village which relate to the mediaeval, early modern and other periods. Some of the views in the photographs may have been cold, but you will receive a warm welcome to Toula and to the Toula Museum of Australia.