

Opening Address

The Maronite Heritage Centre in Redfern (25 February 2010)

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[Slide] Map of Lebanon showing Toula

Your Excellency Bishop Ad-abi-karam, Maronite Bishop of Australia, the Honourable Mr David Clarke, Mr Bruce Green, the Committee of the Toula Museum of Australia Inc., Ladies and Gentlemen

Situated in northern Lebanon, Toula is a village whose inhabitants belong to the Maronite Catholic Church.

[Slide] View of Toula

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.

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

The Maronite saint associated with the village is Saint Assia, and 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, 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.

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 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.

Cedars of Lebanon are famous from the Bible, and it 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 Mediterranean saw first the Greek rivalry with Phoenicians and their descendents the Carthaginians, and then the Punic Wars, Rome’s conflict with Carthage. Although Greece and Rome prevailed, but only just, and this led to the Roman Empire and thus Western Europe and the modern world, the dominance of the culture of the Greeks and the Romans is thus an antithesis to the Phoenician culture which emanated from Lebanon, and in this way Lebanon is fundamentally influential in the very formation of the modern world.

So do we need to ask why this needs studying and what is the role of a Lebanese museum.

Museums are important because they are a focus for the cultural memory of a society and are the place for a community to visit and to meet in order to understand better its own nature. Objects on exhibition are an important part of the museum, but the objects only have a life in the minds of people who visit or read about them, and the museum is also the interaction of visitors with each other.

This is the first Lebanese Maronite village museum in Australia and is thus important for introducing the Australian public to the culture of that country and the people who have come from there to settle in Australia, where they have formed a significant part of this society. Members of the Lebanese community will appreciate the opportunity, through the museum, of discovering more about their own society and also introducing their Australian born families to their cultural heritage.

Some of the objects are on loan from members of the community. As such, not uniquely, but less usually for a museum, the actual owners are alive and well known, which creates challenges for the curator in the presentation of the exhibition. The objects are thus no mere inanimate relics of people long dead or unknown.

We are planning exhibitions in Gordon of objects on loan to the collection. Initially, the temporary exhibitions will be on view from time to time. I shall prepare the objects for viewing, present them with relevant captions and descriptive written material, and be present when the public visits to answer their questions. I shall also assist with the presentation of material on the website. We also plan thematic exhibitions, with material on loan.

We aim to search for a building to house the museum on a permanent basis in the near future and I shall offer academic and practical advice about the choice, so that an appropriate

position is chosen to reflect the academic aims and the presentation of the collection to the community.

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.

and the book of poetry by Michael Farah

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

My career as a museum curator has prepared me to provide the academic, technical and practical experience necessary to establish and to maintain the museum.

I attended the University of Sydney, where I studied classical and near eastern archaeology, Classical Greek and Latin, and ancient history, and received the degree of Bachelor of Arts. I then proceeded to the University of Oxford, where I wrote a thesis on ancient Greek coinage of the period 600-300 BC, and received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, that is a DPhil. The subjects which I studied cover the region of Toula and Lebanon, including the Phoenicians. I also know French, which is relevant to the history and culture of the region in the modern period. I lived and taught in Greece for seven years in the 1990s and I am thus

familiar with the modern history and the cultural makeup of the region of the eastern Mediterranean.

After returning to Australia, I was the Curator, The Australian Institute of Archaeology, Melbourne, which is an antiquities collection focused on the Holy Land and surrounding regions, which is thus closely relevant to the art, history and science of Toula, and then Assistant Curator of Numismatics, Nicholson Museum, University of Sydney, in the largest collection of antiquities in Australia, which has collections relevant to Lebanon and the Phoenicians, and thus to Toula. I am a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London, founded in 1707 in England, and one of the world's oldest learned societies. Throughout my career, I have published many research and more general articles on areas of relevance to the museum.

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 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

I would like to thank the President and Managing Director, and the Committee of the museum for appointing me and I am honoured to be chosen to assist in this important initiative for the village and Lebanese culture in Australia.