

The Worship of St Assia in the Village of Toula in northern Lebanon

St Charbel's Church and Monastery, Punchbowl (11 June 2010) (with Special Guest Speaker, Father Maroun Bechara, Parish Priest, Toula)

The Museum premises, at Level 10, 309 Pitt Street, Sydney (25 November 2011, 18 May 2012)

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[Slide] map of Lebanon

[Slide] View of Toula

Situated in the Zgharta District in 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. 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 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.

[Slide] View of Temple of Mercury-Bacchus Baalbek

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 the 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)agios* (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.

[Slide] Photo of painting of St Assia

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.

[Slides] Views of Church of St Assia

The church of St Assia in Toula is a beautiful stone building of Romanesque style, with Gothic features, which shows the probable influence of either Byzantine or western European architecture brought to the region by the Crusaders in the Mediaeval Period.

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.

[Slide] View of the *hrissi dsoutti*

The festival of St Assia is celebrated in Toula each year to mark the anniversary of his death in 377. On the last Sunday of September, the village holds an annual Summer Festival in his honour. 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 slaughtering of the lambs for the *hrissi* is done in remembrance of and thanksgiving to God and Mar Assia (Saint Assia). 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*.

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.

We have written the website for the museum, which is online. 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, such as General George A. Joulwan, who was the former Supreme Allied Commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), from 1993-7, whose grandfather came from Toula. We need support for the many proposed programmes of the museum, including the future development of the website.