

MAR ESHAI SHIMUN'S FIRST VILLAGE TOUR

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In the fall of 1921, the newly elected Patriarch of the Church of the East, Mar Eshai Shimun, set off on his first tour of Assyrian villages in south-eastern Turkey with his Aunt, Surma Khanum. This two-week journey, documented in her unpublished private diaries and correspondence, occurred amid circumstances eerily similar to ours today in 2021. Then, as now, there was an epidemic (malaria in Mesopotamia; residual influenza in the US), increased sectarianism, racial unrest, and prolonged economic hardship--a state of affairs far more the norm than the exception for Assyrians throughout time. In the aftermath of the Great War, as both Americans and Assyrians were wearily stumbling into a new decade under new leadership, both peoples craved a semblance of normalcy. While Warren G. Harding was being sworn in as the 29th President of the United States, half a world away in Iraq, thirteen-year old Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII, was taking up the Sisyphean struggle for Assyrian survival.

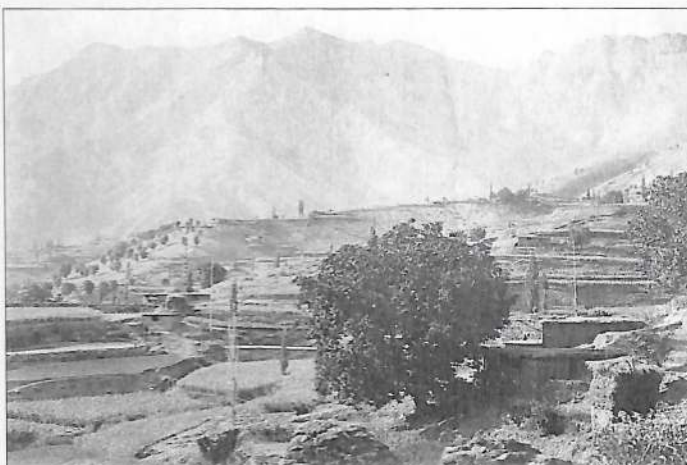
The Baqubah and Mindan refugee camps, to which over twenty-five thousand Assyrians had fled after siding with Russia and the Allies against their Turkish overlords in World War

One, were being closed by increasingly anxious British administrators. "How does this matter stand? Are the refugees being repatriated? When will they be off our hands? What steps are [being] taken to accelerate their departure?" demanded Secretary of War, Winston S. Churchill. It was at Baqubah in May of 1920 that Mar Eshai was consecrated patriarch after the unexpected death of his uncle, Mar Poulos, due to tuberculosis. Just two years earlier, the patriarch before him, his brother Mar Benyamin, had been treacherously assassinated by the Kurdish warlord Simku at a supposed "peace conference". Because the patriarchal succession had been traditionally chosen from the Mar Shimun family for over six-hundred years, the powerful maliks (Assyrian tribal chieftains), responsible for electing the next patriarch, would hear of no other alternatives or exceptions. After all, boys his age had married, fought in battles, and (occasionally) become the hereditary successors of tribal and church leadership since time immemorial. Childhood was not a luxury many Assyrians in the Hakkari had ever known.

Fortunately, no better counsel and guide to the duties of patriarch, in whom religious and secular duties were inextricably intertwined, could

be found than Mar Eshai's renowned and respected Aunt, Surma Khanum. Then thirty-eight years old, she had faithfully served and advised the previous three patriarchs (two brothers and an uncle), as had one aunt after another before her. She held an ecclesiastical rank within the church known as bar gымtah (literally meaning "after the Resurrection"), and had been educated in her youth by the Anglican missionary William H. Browne. Upon the death of her brother Mar Poulos and announcement of the consecration of her nephew, she rushed back to Iraq from London where she had been on a diplomatic mission, working with the Archbishop of Canterbury for the assistance of Episcopalian American missionaries still active in Mosul.

At this time, there was great uncertainty about the northern borders of the newly formed Kingdom of Iraq, to which Faisal Hussein of Syria was proclaimed King in August, 1921. Assyrians overwhelmingly favored remaining under British protection though and were thus compelled to trust in their negotiations for their security. A second repatriation plan (the first, led by the Assyrian military commander Agha Petros, had failed a year earlier) was formulated where-



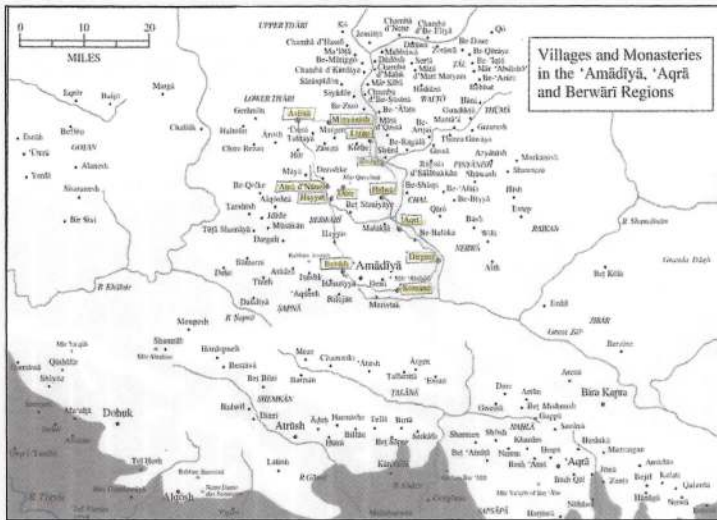
Ashita (1912)



d'Mar Shimun, Surma,
Mar Eshai & Mar Yosip - 1928
1924



Mar Eshai in Mosul, early 1920's



Amadiya Village Map



Hakkari Map

by Assyrians were encouraged to return to their homes in the nebulous border regions of the Mosul Vilayet. Robert Speer (1867-1947), Secretary of the Board of Presbyterian Missions in New York, who had been coordinating relief funds through Surma Khanum, sketches the backdrop for Mar Eshai's inaugural village tour that fall: "*Barely half of the mountain people . . . are now struggling painfully back to their mountain homes. Their churches are destroyed, the Patriarch and his family are impoverished, the schools and churches which were the pride of the evangelical communities are gone, the new situation is one of great difficulty for all.*"³ Speer's missionary colleague, E.W. McDowell, who had lived and worked with Assyrians since 1906 adds: "*Some of the mountaineers, being given their freedom, have gone outside the British lines and have settled in their own homes in Supna, Amadia, Barwar and Ashitha and lower Tyari. The house of Mar Shimun have been placed in a village close to Amadia. How safe it will be for these people, only time can determine. The remaining mountaineers, whose homes were still beyond reach, were settled in villages about Mosul, or rather to the north of Mosul and within the British lines. These number several thousand. These have been most unfortunate. They have been on the land for over a year but have not been able so far to make a living from it and have been reduced to almost famine conditions. Further to add to their misery, an epidemic of malaria broke out among them and, according to the report of the medical authorities, 99 per cent of them have been prostrated by it. . . . The victims of it have been left in a most debil-*

itated condition."³

The village in which the patriarchal family had temporarily settled was Bibaydi, just outside of Amadia (about 62 miles north of Mosul). This region was first observed by Western eyes in 1841 when the American missionary Asahel Grant described it as being, "*. . . Pleasantly situated in an extensive opening or undulating plain between the mountains, and . . . fertile in grain and fruit. The wheat is good and abundant, and the grapes are among the finest I have seen. The raisins made from them are an article of export, and are celebrated as the best brought into Persia; but the climate is deemed insalubrious, and successive wars have made sad havoc among the unfortunate population, who greatly need a good and stable government.*"⁴ But to thirteen-year old Mar Eshai, Bibaydi was simply a "*. . . very funny place.*" He gleefully informed his penpal and former Baquba camp playmate, John Neesan (grandson of Y.M. Neesan), of the "*. . . plenty of partrages and snakes*" to shoot at on his weekly hunts with his uncles Zaya d'Mar Shimun and Mar Yosip Khnanishu: "*My uncle everyday goes shooting and brings a partridge or two . . . but I have not shot anything,*" he laments. After apologizing for his poor grammar--because this is "*. . . my first later by English*"-- he wishes his friend well before adding: "*I will be very glad if you write me each time in English.*"

The morning of November 9th 1921, when the patriarchal party set out on mules towards the village of Kumani, was certainly cooler than the heights

of the previous month when Gertrude Bell wrote her father from Baghdad: "*. . . The weather is unspeakable. These September days when the summer burns itself are the worst in the year—absolutely still, the white mist hangs heavy over the river at morning and evening. And you feel like a rag of the worst quality.*"⁵ While Mar Eshai's aunt and the elder Qashas (priests) related stories of Tyari during the days of his great-uncle Mar Rowil (1841-1903), the young patriarch, who himself had fond memories of playing and wandering about with his older brother and cousins at the Patriarchal See high in the mountains of Qudshanis, saw now only ruins and desolation about him. "*Even the great walnut trees, fruit trees, and vines have been cut down for the Turks and Kurds drove all the people out during the War,*" remarked American missionary Frederick G. Coan who had preached, taught and traveled throughout the region since the 1880s.

[Ed. The following excerpts have been transcribed directly from Surma Khanum's private papers in the Mar Shimun Memorial Foundation archives. I've added a few clarifying notes in brackets. The dates have been modernized from "Old Style" (Julian calendar) to "New Style" (Gregorian calendar), which accounts for the reference to the annual Church of the East festival of Mar Gewargis being later in November than it actually is today. -CN.]

November 9, 1921: "*We started from Bibaydi to Kumani. The people were unaware of our coming till we came near*

the village and sent a messenger to inform them: all that had not gone to work with women and children came to meet us just when going into the village. They were full of joy at seeing Mar Shimun. We had to dismount our mules that they might kiss Mar Shimun's hand and it took a time. Blessing of the children and the unwell babies brought with their mothers to ask the prayer, some of the people with their joyful faces looking up to heaven and thanking God to have let them see this great day, of Mar Shimun coming to visit them, etc. At last were taken to Rayis' [village head] house to be his guests. He himself came late, had gone to sow his field, and was very sorry that we had not let him know in time about our coming so that they all might come and meet us on the way, but we assured him it was all-right. What was very touching, an old priest, Petros, bowed down from age, came to see Mar Shimun and while going to church to evening prayer, he began with his feeble and shattery voice chanting the turgana [hymns] in honour of the Patriarch. After prayers we looked at Mart Maryam [St. Mary's church]; it is much ruined inside and not repaired yet. . . . The congregation consisted of both Catholics and those from the Church of the East. . . . We went back to the house and after supper the big room was full of people and they began talking politics and asked me many questions as to my stay in England. . . ."

November 10: "From Kumani we came to Dereluk where the Tkhuma people are. We sent someone to tell them of our coming and they came to meet us near their place, run-ning to kiss Mar Shimun's hand with their muddy hands. They were simply surprised to see us, men and women were

all so busy building their huts, they took us to their best finished hut. They were so rejoiced and cheered up at seeing Mar Shimun with them that they didn't want to go on with their work that day but I told them they must work on, to finish their huts before the winter. They went rather unwillingly. In the evening the conversation was again of politics, etc. and asking for more rifles. They were very sorry that we were leaving in the morning and very sad that they hadn't a place ready to celebrate at so that Mar Shimun should give them their communion. The people looked pretty well, except those who had fever and looked so poorly, sleeping in that cold place, and damp from rain. The cry was as usual: 'Home, home.' One does not wonder after all these years of build-ing huts and ruining, still not being sure of a home and being settled. Life really is hard for some."

November 11: "Today, from Dereluk we arrived at Dirgineh. We were received with joy, some even crying. The Tkhuma people would not hear of Mar Shimun leaving with only four servants armed. We must have more armed men, so I said six more would be quite enough, and they gave them to us. Poor Dirgineh people were weeping with joy. It has been a long, long time since they had a Patriarch with them. Of course, you know, how once Dirgineh was a great village and had nearly forty priests, quite learned people there. And now, they have not even one priest among them. So very sad. Their Church, Mart Maryam, is quite a large one and nicely built; recently repaired and ready to be consecrated."

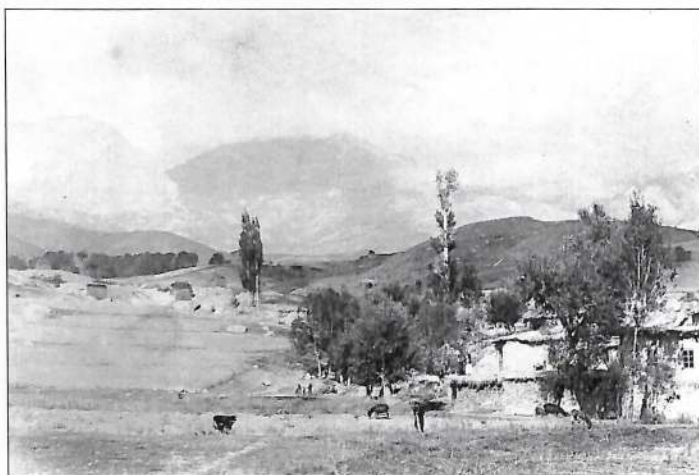
November 12: "We had to get up early, at 4, and Mar Shimun consecrated the church

and conducted his first Holy Communion here. We started early after breakfast for Igreh where Malik Shamisdin is, and then proceeded on to Khoora. They welcomed us most joyfully."

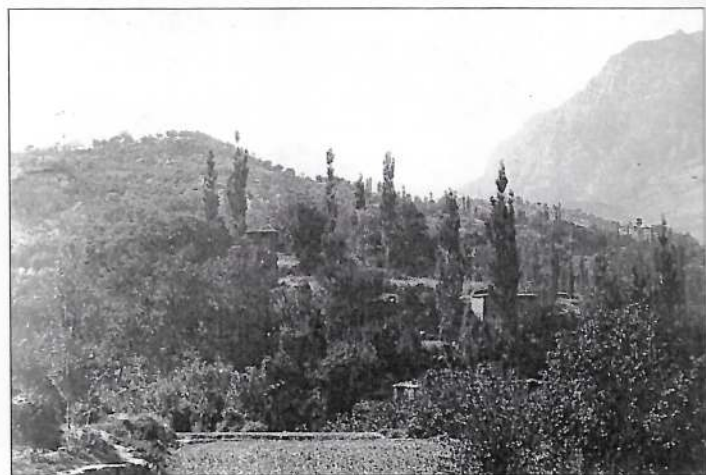
November 13: "Got up early again (at 4) and Mar Shimun celebrated in Mart Maryam. The church has been destroyed and only the altar remains. The people were so glad to take communion from the hand of their Patriarch. We started early after breakfast for the next village, Halwa, where the rest of Malik Shamisdin's people are. Their church, Mar Yonan, had been repaired and was consecrated by Mar Shimun."

November 14: "The festival of Mar Gewargis--Mar Shimun ordained and conducted Holy Communion in Mar Yonan with a congregation of about three-hundred people. Everyone is anxious to return to their homes. From Halwa we went to Zarne where we stayed as guests of Rabbi Tuma who had a very nice warm room with the stove on. Many of the villagers are divided. On the whole, Tyari people here looked to me more comfortable and settled than the poor Tkhuma people were. I think one reason is that they had come sooner than the Barwar people. The church, Mar Kiryakus, is in ruins."

November 15: "We arrived in Lizan from Zarne and were the guests of Mar Slewo. One part of Mar Gewargis church is destroyed. The people were quite busy making their huts, some didn't come to see us, and others did not know that we had come, while others were not present at the village."



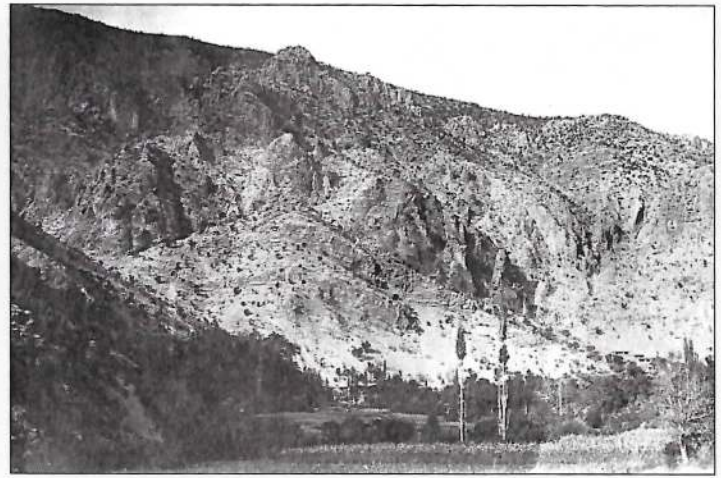
Tyrari village (1912)



Lizan (1912)



Ashita (1912)



Ashita (1912)

November 16: “We rested at Manyanish with Mar Dinkha of Bakkus. Their churches, B'nai Shmoon and Mart Maryam are in disrepair. The people were very sorry that their churches (they have three) were not ready to be consecrated. We went on to Ashita. Rayis and his household were not there. We were taken to his cousin's house, the nearest stop in. While in the house I understood that we were the guests of the father of Gilyana, a robber who gave the governor trouble for at time. The priests came to see us and said that their church, Mar Gewargis, was not quite repaired for consecration.”

November 17: “We arrived at the Aina d'Nooni in Barwar and stayed at Zacuraya's house. They had been expecting us. They are such a nice family. I was quite astonished how nicely repaired and ready their church Mar Sawa was. The priest gave thanks to Zacuraya, who is the village chief.”

November 18: “Mar Sawa Church was ordained by Mar Shimun and he conducted Holy Communion for the congregation which was attended by three of the local villages. Of course the Barwar people came sooner than the rest. We arrived at Dure from the Aina d'Nooni very late.”

November 19-20: “Mar Shimun conse-

crated their church Mar Gewargis and celebrated inside with many many communicants. Nice small church. Their other church is much ruined and unrepaired.”

November 21-22: “Mar Shimun consecrated their church and celebrated Holy Communion. We left for Hayyat and their church, Mar Pithun had been consecrated by Mar Sargis, so we rested there and took our lunch and came to Bibaydi. We only stayed overnight. I saw that if we stayed longer we might be making people very uncomfortable because in many places they had only one room or hut for the whole family and that one they left for us at night. Sometimes I insisted that the family should not sleep out of doors but share the room with us. It would be quite enough for me and Mar Shimun to have two curtains round our traveling bed-steads. One couldn't see children and women sleeping in that cold dampness out of doors.”

Back in Bibaydi, Mar Eshai was anxious to update his friend John on important “temporal” matters, writing on the 25th: “My dear John, I hope God that all you are well like us here. The whether is very well. My uncle had killed 6 partridges . . . and is trying to kill a pig. He will sent flock for Mrs. Neesan, he says . . . Lady Surma, she is giving her best love to Mrs. Neesan and Mr. Neesan. -Your af-

fectionate friend, Shimun, Patriarch.”

As for his ecclesiastical duties, Aunt Surma writes to long-time friend of the Assyrians, Dr. William A. Wigram of the Archbishop of Canterbury's mission: “. . . One thing I must not forget to tell you, that Mar Shimun not only, of course, naturally was interested in our travel and visits, but especially when riding, he made either Qasha Tuma's or Rayis Yohannan's mule kick till poor Qasha dare not go ahead of him. On the other hand, whenever we could not find a mule for Qasha he gave him his mule, for the most part of the way, and he went on foot. But the best thing is how much interest he took in wanting to go into the life of the people and how much he took in within ~~in~~ a few hours. After being several hours in every village and his going for a walk he would come tell me, 'Aunt, so and so's house has so many fields and four brothers who do all the work for him, and his income was prosperous this year,' etc, etc. Or, 'There is an orphan whose mother and father died in Baquba and he has nobody to take care of him.' Or, 'This village has no priest but they have two young men who can read, but so and so can read better than the other—he might come to our house to be educated for the priesthood.' And in this kind he informed me of many things. Also, he was very keen in doing his

1 British War Office Records: 32/5231 (June 7, 1920).

2 Speer, Robert E. & Russell Carter. Report on India & Persia of the Deputation sent by the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the USA to visit these fields in 1921-22. BFM USA, New York. 1922: p. 481-2.

3 Speer, Robert E. & Russell Carter. Report on India & Persia of the Deputation sent by the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the USA to visit these fields in 1921-22. BFM USA, New York. 1922: pp. 546-7.

4 The Missionary Herald. American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Boston. (1841) v. 37: p. 120.

5 Bell, Gertrude. Correspondence [1920-1924]. Gertrude Bell Archive. University Library, Newcastle University, UK: Sep 4, 1921.

6 Coan, F.G. Yesterdays in Persia & Kurdistan. Saunders Studio Press, Claremont, CA. 1939: p. 217.

7 British Foreign Office Records: 839/23.



Assyrian Village (1900)

church service any day that he had to get up so early (sometimes at 4) and conduct service too. Not once did he grumble or say he was tired. We never called on him to get up from his bed and he was always the first to call on us, sometimes a little too early, but on the whole, very punctual."

Mar Eshai Shimun's patriarchal punctuality as a leader would persist for over half a century despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles and challenges from both within and without the Church and Assyrian millat (nation). But already, from the moment he was consecrating his first crumbling churches and celebrating communion with the survivors of villages that were vanishing faster than they could be rebuilt, British and French politicians had been busily re-drawing the maps of collective memory. Several British "experts," namely, Churchill, T.E. Lawrence and Gertrude Bell had already met in Cairo earlier that year to re-shape the borders of the Middle East. To them, the overriding priority was the stabilization of the newly formed Arab state of Iraq

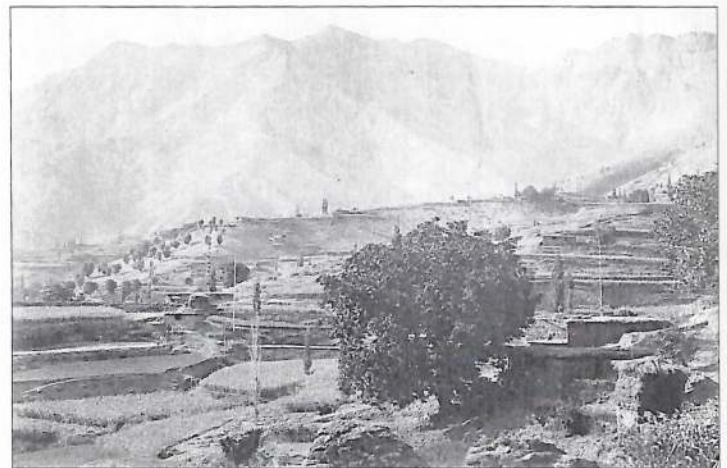
(i.e. access to cheap oil and safe trade routes). The "Assyrian problem" could be conveniently handed off to the repatriation committee at the League of Nations. In the meantime, thousands of idle Assyrian mountain warriors were compelled to join the newly formed Assyrian Levies (indigenous military units) where they were trained to support Iraqi interests, under the tacit understanding that the British would likewise help them return to their homes in the Hakkari. Reflecting the general hopes of Assyrian leadership at that time, Agha Petros wrote to the British delegate at the Lausanne Conference in Switzerland the following year: "I can assure you that Assyrians will do the same service to His Majesty's British Government without any expenditure and British Military forces . . . if only our country will be recognized by Great Britain as a free state."⁷ This, after Assyrian Levies had held the northern frontier of Iraq against rebellious Arabs and Kurds that winter.

Mar Eshai Shimun and the patriarchal family would be in the fore-

front of the fight for an Assyrian homeland in Mesopotamia until physically forced from the region in 1933. Until that unfathomable fate, there would be as many dangerous twists and turns in the patriarch's precarious path as there were to Qudshanis. The cross of over six-centuries of patriarchal succession within his family (1,880 years within the Church of the East) had been bestowed upon him and the carefree days of hunting partridges and snakes or playing soccer with his friends in Bibaydi were no longer. Having fled in terror from vengeful Turks and Kurds alongside the masses of his people in 1915 under the protective wings of his now martyred uncle, Mar Benyamin; living in a refugee camp; experiencing the untimely deaths of several close family members; and witnessing firsthand the grit and determination of his people to rebuild their churches and lives in the only homes they had ever known, the young patriarch felt more than ever that the prayers, hopes and dreams of his nation now depended upon him.



Assyrian Village (1900)



Ashita (1912)