

The Town of Tel-Kepe (Telkaif)

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Published in "Zinda Magazine", August 13, 2004

Introduction

It is very unlikely that an educated nation would fall in a deceitful trap, because an educated nation is a conscious nation and an informed nation is rarely misguided. Therefore, our people must continue their efforts to educate themselves and undo the mistakes of the past.

Most of the villages in north of Iraq, and especially those in the Nineveh (Mosul) Plain, were Christian villages. The demographic change in north of Iraq from predominantly Assyrian (known also as Chaldeans and Suryan) to Kurds or Arabs is only due to a recent meticulous process of Arabization and Kurdification. While there are still purely Christian towns and villages in north of Iraq that resisted the migration of Arabs and Kurds to them, other towns were less resistant to such movements in the twentieth century. Telkepe was vulnerable to the movement of Moslems, due to reasons that have been addressed in many articles by this writer and others.

The Name

Tel-Kepe is a compound Aramaic name. It consists of "Tel," which means hill and "Kepe," which means stones. Thus, the meaning of Tel-Kepe is "the hill of stones," in reference to the ancient hill that is situated there. There is no mention of Tel-Kepe in ancient Assyrian references and there could be an explanation for that. It is believed that Tel-Kepe, according to Hurmiz Aboona, was part of the bigger Nineveh, therefore, it did not have a specific name for it.

Population and Famous Families

While there are some indigenous Christian families in Tel-Kepe, still, many of the present Christian families are relatively newcomers (considering the rooted history of the town), who began to settle in the town from the fifteenth century. Most recent census indicates that in 1968 the population of Tel-Kepe was 7,102 and that 6,604 of those (i.e. 93%) were Christians. Out of these 6,604, there were 5,019 Catholics. From the total 7,102 of 1968, the following are considered new settlers: 551 Catholics, 1,181 Church of the East, and 548 Moslems.

Today, the population of Tel-Kepe is around 10,000 with half of the population Christians and half Moslem.

Here are some examples of families who moved to Tel-Kepe throughout the years, and there are many others of course.

Asmar and Abso from Diyar Bakir
Karmo and Mengeshnayeh from Saart
Dinha/Joja, Shalal, and Abro from Ashita (Tiyari)
Ma'arouf and Qoryaqos from Tella'far
Zooma, Khoshe, and Hnawa from Mardin
Jolagh from Alqosh
Nasfo from Aleppo
Saba and Kharkhar from Iran
Twaini from Amadiya
Orou from Sanna, Iran
Jammo, Kassab, and Manni from Bashbetha
Jibaya and Kithawe from Turkey
Talya from Lebanon
Qasha Giwargis from Quchanis, Turkey
Qarbo from Jazirat Ibn Omar
Bizzi from al-Karaj

Qashat from Sinjar

In early twentieth century, the inhabitants of Tel-Kepe, according to Jammo, were all Christian Chaldean Catholics. These inhabitants were pagans who worshiped the Assyrian gods just like their ancestors until they became Christians in the first century A.D. by Mar Addai and Mar Mari. In the fifth century, these Christians became "allies of Nestorius" and their church became known as the Church of the East or wrongly called the Nestorian Church. They remained as such until the seventeenth century when they united with the Roman Church.

Location and Archaeological Evidence

Tel-Kepe (Telkaif) is situated 11 miles (15 kilometers) from Nineveh (Mosul). There is much within Tel-Kepe that is yet to be unearthed by archeologists. According to Fr. Michael Jajjo Bizzi, there are Assyrian and Akkadian remains that are still waiting to be uncovered. This conclusion is not that strange considering the discovery of a seventh-century B.C. Assyrian Well while digging on the top of the hill in the town. The Well ends at the bottom with a reservoir made of stone that has four channels. The irrigation channel systems were popular during the Assyrian King Sennacherib who built many such irrigation systems. This particular system is similar to those present in Karamlesh and Bartella for example. The four irrigation channels:

1. Directed to the east (discovered in 1911)
2. Directed to the west (links to another well 29 meters away)
3. Directed to the south (links to another well 50 meters away towards Nineveh, discovered in the latter parts of the nineteenth century)
4. Directed to the north (discovered in 1950 and is well built and decorated with carved stones).

According to Yousif Hermiz Jammo, Tel-Kepe was a suburb of Nineveh and that it was an ancient fort during the Kingdom of Ashur, just like other forts that were built to defend Nineveh. Tel-Kepe was part of Nineveh the capital, and that after the fall of Nineveh Tel-Kepe inherited and became the heir of Nineveh. Jammo adds that those who lived in Tel-Kepe since antiquity were the descendents of the people who built Nineveh, whether they lived in Tel-Kepe or in the villages around it. He stresses that the inhabitants of Tel-Kepe were surely the Ninevites. Jammo declares that if one visits the location called Nineveh today, one cannot but conclude that Tel-Kepe, or its fort, were founded from the day that Nineveh began its expansion. According to Aboona, archaeologists have reached the conclusion that Tel-Kepe (to the northeast) was indeed part of ancient Nineveh just as Karamlesh was an important part of Nineveh's southeastern section.

The well-known artificial mound in Tel-Kepe "is the making of the ancient Assyrians" just like other mounds that are present here and there, states Jammo. According to Aboona, Archaeologist S. Spierer was very interested with the findings he and the rest of his group had made at the mound called Tab Gora (the Big Hill) close to Ba'sheqa hill that extends to the east of Tel-Kepe. They found many tools and that the ancient people of Assyria used in their quest for a more progressive civilization. Aboona explains that whereas many of the hills around Nineveh were there earlier, still, the ancient Assyrians built many other hills for strategic reasons. The issue of these strategic hills must have been important, which explains the appointment of a special minister for this particular purpose, adds Aboona.

Tel-Kepe in History

Xenophobe in 401 B.C. writes that the Greek army crossed the Zab River northeast of Nimrud. The army then passed by Karamlesh (according to Fletcher, "Notes from Nineveh," Philadelphia, 1950) and continued on and went by a town near Maspilla (Mosul), where they gathered provisions. Scholars believe that the town in question near Mosul was Tel-Kepe. Ainsworth (died 1622) declares that Tel-Kepe was inhabited by the remnant of the Assyrians.

According to an ancient manuscript present at the Monastery of al-Sayyida (the monastery of Our Lady) in Alqosh, a monk had passed by Tel-Kepe in the ninth century while on his way from Alqosh to Mosul. Judge Abu Zakariya al-Azdi mentioned the town in his book "The History of Mosul" or "Chronology of Mosul" during his description of the events of A.D. 749 (132 in the Islamic calendar). He called the town

"Tel Kefa." According to scholar Giwargis Awwad, there is a Syriac manuscript written in Tel-Kepe in A.D. 765 (1076 in the Greek calendar). Furthermore, there is another manuscript, which was initiated in Tel-Kepe that dated to A.D. 290 according to C. James Rich. However, Sachau believes that it was written in A.D. 1465. One manuscript dated 1403 mentions the restoration of a nearby monastery of Mar Apni Maran by the villagers of Tel-Kepe.

Other references about Tel-Kepe are present, including one manuscript that dates back to A.D. 1508 during the war between the Safavids and Turks Qara Qutinlu tribes and how it was pillaged by Bar Yak. According to David Wilmshurst, in 1587, a traditionalist priest Khoshaba of Tel-Kepe was included in Leonard Abel's list of the most literate men in the "Nestorian nation." In 1654, the Carmelite father Denys de la Couronne d' Epines visited Tel-Kepe and found more than 50 priests, many very poor. He noticed that the priests and common people were not distinguished through their dress.

Tel-Kepe and Christianity

Tel-Kepe was not any different from all the rest of the settlements in and around the Nineveh Plain. Most of the Assyrians (known also as Chaldeans and Suryan) in the Mosul Plain adopted Christianity during the first two centuries of the Christian era.

With the birth of the Christological schools and thoughts in the fourth century, most of the Christians of the Nineveh Plain became part of what became known as the Church of the East, wrongly known as the Persian Church or Nestorian Church. Others formed the Jacobite Church (Syrian Orthodox Church). Wilmshurst states that it is not known when exactly the Nestorians of Tel-Kepe began to convert to Catholicism in large numbers. We know that Latin missionaries were present in Mosul in the seventeenth century. The turning point could have come in January 6, 1719, when some clergymen of Tel-Kepe, including Mikho, Ayyar, Hanna, and Eliya signed an agreement with Khidr, a priest of Mosul, abjuring the so-called Nestorian heresy. However, Catholics remained a minority in Tel-Kepe for most of the eighteenth century. According to Wilmshurst, in 1767, there were 500 Nestorian families in Tel-Kepe, of whom only 150 were Catholics. It was only in the nineteenth century that most of the Nestorians of Tel-Kepe became Catholics. Tel-Kepe made important contribution in the spread of Catholicism. Wilmshurst states that twenty-nine men from Tel-Kepe entered the Rabban Hurmiz Monastery between 1814 and 1826. In this period, nine clergymen from Tel-Kepe (Michael Kattula, Basil Asmar, Emmanuel Asmar, Youhannan Tamraz, Qoryaqos Giwargis Goga, Mattai Paul Shamina, Jerome Shimun Sinjari, Stephen Youhannan Qaynaya, and Philip Yacoub Abraham) became bishops. The Asmar family was particularly prominent in the nineteenth century and the scribe work of Andrew Asmar and another nine scribes from Tel-Kepe at the Rabban Hurmiz is significant.

In the 1870s, Tel-Kepe was affected by the dispute between the Chaldean Catholic Church Patriarch Joseph VI Audo and the Vatican. Most villagers supported the patriarch. The two natives of Tel-Kepe: Qoryaqos Giwargis Goga (bishop of Zakho) and Mattai Paul Shamina (Bishop of Amadiya) rebelled against the patriarch. Many disturbances took place in this time, including the suspension of bishops and priest. However, the Vatican brought things back in order.

Interestingly, Wilmshurst reports that in 1881, Wallis Budge visited Tel-Kepe. He was approached by its priests and villagers who was persuaded to carry a petition to England and the Archbishop of Canterbury seeking the establishment of an Anglican mission in Tel-Kepe. Their efforts did not materialize.

Joseph of Telkepe

There were two priests named Joseph who lived in Telkepe in 1664, one bearing the title of malpana, translated as 'doctor,' and the other qankaya, translated as 'sacristan'. One of these two Josephs was the collaborator with the Carmelite Fr. Dionysius, the Procurator of the Persian Mission. Fr. Dionysius arrived to Alqosh in 1653 hoping to speak with Patriarch Mar Ilyas (Elias) and secure his re-union with Rome, a union that his predecessor uncle had undertaken (40) years earlier. He found that the Patriarch had withdrawn to Telkepe because of Kurds persecution. Thus, he traveled to Telkepe and met with the patriarch. However, Fr. Dionysius found that the patriarch was not ready to establish the re-union with Rome. The patriarch had stated that he had left his seal in Alqosh, thus, there was no way for him to write a

letter to the Pope regarding the submission to Rome. Fr. Dionysius wrote in his diaries that it was something with the oriental characteristics that one can hardly distinguish between the various handwritings and that seals alone were the mean to differentiate between the different clergy. It was one of the two Josephs, a man of credit and repute, who approached the patriarch and tried hard to convince him to write that letter to the Pope even if without the seal, but the patriarch persisted in making excuses. This Joseph was of much help to Fr. Dionysius in latter days in the prior's mission of converting the Surayeh to Catholicism. The patriarch said that the conditions were much worse (40) years ago when they needed the diplomacy of the Vatican to secure their well-being from the pressure of the Kurds.

The other Joseph, son of priest Jamal al-din, became known by many as Joseph of Telkepe or Joseph Jemdani. Joseph of Telkepe was married and had many children. One of his children Isho, at least, became a priest too. One of Joseph's poems was, as it appears, because of the death of children of his, among them was priest Isho who he loved dearly. Fr. Dionysius wrote that to his knowledge Joseph of Telkepe was neither known as a writer in the classical language nor as a copyist, but in the manuscripts, six Neo-Syriac poems are attributed to him and two of the six poems specifically are attributed to Joseph because of the weak authority of the Berlin E. Sachau collection.

Churches and Shrines

According to C. J. Rich, in 1820 there were seven demolished churches and one well-maintained. In 1891, V. Cuiet (*La Turgie d' Asie II*) mentioned two churches. Meanwhile, Sachau (*Reise in Syrien*) mentions the presence of two churches: Mar Qoryaqos and St. Mary. In 1922, Bishop S. Sa'igh mentions five old churches and one large and new Christian compound that included three churches: The Heart of Christ, Saint Peter and Paul, and the St. Mary's Temple.

There are many shrines including: Bokht Sahda, St. Daniel, St. Shmoni, and St. Joseph.

Religious and Cultural Aspects

Describing the Rogation of the Ninevites, Jammo writes that the Chaldean Catholic Church enforced the fast of Ba'aotha (forgiveness) on the Christians, who were the remnants of the Ninevites, or the Assyrians.

Final Notes

Tel-Kepe is an ancient Assyrian city. The Assyrians (also known as Chaldeans and Suryan) must learn how to protect their towns and villages. If they will not, and continue to sell their lands to the first bidder, they will lose their villages and the last stand for the Christians in the Nineveh (Mosul) Plain. The Diaspora Nestorians, Chaldeans, and Jacobites must work together and improve their communication and cooperation with those in Iraq in general and those in the Nineveh Plain in particular.

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