



Did the Virgin Mary and her son Jesus visit a holy site in Iraq? *

The story of the birth of Jesus and the travels of the Holy Family spread far and wide. According to the Bible, the only country the Holy Family visited outside Palestine was Egypt. However, in the Qur'an -- which recognizes Jesus, as a prophet and Mary as his virgin mother -- there are verses that suggest they may have traveled as far as Baghdad.

The site of Baratha in northern Baghdad, where the mosque of Baratha has stood for centuries, was famous 2,000 years ago as the site where 70 "guardians" and 70 prophets were said to have prayed, among them the prophet Abraham, Jesus and his mother the Virgin Mary. Journalist Salaam Al-Shammaa' says those who defend the belief that Jesus and Mary came to Iraq point to Qur'anic verses which say the Virgin travelled east, far from her family, to a place abundant with date palms. "Iraq is east of Palestine, and it is a land of palm trees," Al-Shammaa' says. He added that a variation of the legend says Jesus wandered through the area to perform good deeds and spent some time at Baratha.

Iraqi historian Hussein Ali Mahfouz, who studied old texts to trace the origin of the legend, says some sources suggest that Baratha was once the temporary home of the Virgin Mary. A natural spring, known as Mary's spring, is said to have gushed from the ground at her touch.

It was to this holy place that, more than 600 years later, the Imam Ali, son-in-law of the Prophet Mohamed and the fourth caliph of Islam, paid a visit on his return from the battle of Al-Nahrawan. The Imam prayed there with his son, Al-Hussein, and 100,000 believers. The Imam himself is said to have dug the well which stands at the source of the holy spring. The Imam reputedly met a monk whose name was Al-Habbab, and who lived in a monastery there.

Mahfouz says these traditions may have been embellished over time, and that more research is needed to establish the truth of the stories. There is no doubt, however, that Baratha has been a holy place of long standing, and that its sanctity was reinforced by the famed visit of Imam Ali.

There is archaeological evidence of a pre-Islamic settlement at Baratha, and several artifacts have been unearthed at the site. Siham Al-Qaim, director of excavations, mentions pottery shards and bricks found at the well and in the surrounding area. He points out, moreover, that the mosque courtyard is three to four meters below ground level, and that archaeologists have discovered a circular basin built of square bricks. Their size, 22 x 22 x 5 centimeters, is typical of the Abbasid period in Iraq, and resembles the bricks of the Al-Khuld palace on the banks of the Tigris built by the Abbasid Caliph Abu Jafaar Al-Mansour, the founder of Baghdad. In other words, the mosque was built on the ruins of an older site.

Baratha mosque, which was built more than a century before the foundation of Baghdad, is considered by historians and religious leaders to be the fifth most sacred site in the Islamic world.

The well, which suffered badly over the passage of the years, was restored last January. Today it is covered by a marble top, while the water has been tested fit for consumption. Work to restore the mosque itself is under way. Each year thousands of Iraqi Muslims and Christians visit the site, as well as pilgrims from Iran, Lebanon and elsewhere in the Arab world. They bring with them jugs, phials and bottles to carry the sacred water, which they believe bestows a blessing (baraka) and will cure their bodily and spiritual ailments.

Abdel-Rahman Zagher, 34, who was at the well at Baratha mosque, said as he carried away two jerry cans brimming with sacred water: "As soon as I heard the well had been restored, I hurried here to take a few litres home to my family."

There are many places around the eastern Mediterranean and the Levant which have a tradition of sanctity and are regarded as holy, and where water from a well or spring is believed to have healing qualities. Baratha is one such place, and is thus held sacred by both Christians and Muslims.

***This article was reproduced from the Egyptian newspaper al-Ahram Weekly of 20th December 2001.**

Ruins of an ancient trading center soon to be under water *

The ancient city of Assur, once the seat of a mighty empire and now an archaeological window into a key period in the history of human civilization, is on the verge of falling victim to a dam. "The loss of a place like Assur, which was a world capital, would be a catastrophe for archaeology," says Richard Zettler, associate curator of the University of Pennsylvania's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Philadelphia. "This is in the category of world-heritage sites," although it does not carry that designation officially, he says.

The impending loss of Assur (also known as Ashur), and what Iraqi officials estimate to be at least 100 other ancient sites, is part of an accelerating trend

in the region as countries struggling to develop their economies build dams to supply irrigation water and electricity.



"This is part of a larger pattern in the Near East," says Paul Zimansky, associate professor of archaeology at Boston University. "It's not unusual for sites to be flooded. And, in some ways, these are opportunities."

He notes that typically when governments undertake dam projects, it's easier for researchers to get permits and conduct field work because officials want to preserve as much of their countries' heritage as possible while meeting development goals.

Beyond what the finds say about the history of Near East cultures, Dr. Zimansky adds, these sites often present young archaeologists with an opportunity for cutting-edge research they might not be able to perform if they focused on Greek or Roman civilizations, which have been exhaustively studied. Still, Zimansky says, the loss of Assur and other sites in the surrounding area will be tragic. "There's an enormous amount of information still in the ground." Although reports of Assur's watery demise first began surfacing about a year ago, researchers say, it quickly became a focus during a scientific meeting in London last month. There, officials with Iraq's Antiquities Department reportedly pleaded with their Western colleagues to help excavate ruins and record as much information as possible before the reservoir fills in 2007.

Efforts to provide that help are complicated by UN sanctions against Iraq, US and British restrictions on travel to Iraq, and uncertainty over what the United States might do, given President Bush's threats against Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's regime.

Although German archaeologists began working at Assur during the early 1900s, their work was interrupted by two world wars. Work came to a grinding halt during the Iran-Iraq and Gulf wars, and only in the past few years have German, Austrian, and Japanese research teams resumed field work in the country, US researchers say.

Key parts of Assur are built on a rocky outcrop that rises more than 100 feet above the Tigris's flood plain, researchers note. Some find it hard to see that part of the city threatened. But rising waters could threaten low-lying commercial and residential sections of the city -- either by inundation or through the effects from a rising water table.

These sections are largely unexplored and have the potential to reveal much about Assur's role as a trading center, which predates its emergence as one of ancient Assyria's capitals. "Assur is the most famous and oldest documented trade center," notes John

Russell, an archaeologist at the Boston College of Art. Much of Assyria's trade and manufacturing was conducted by powerful families, he says, who often wielded more clout than the kings. Yet much of what is known about Assyrian trade comes from records excavated from sites in what is now Turkey. Trying to understand the rise and structure of Assyrian manufacturing and trading from these records, researchers agree, would be like trying to understand the US computer industry's "House of Gates" from records gleaned from a local Comp USA store.

"We know very little about the people of Assur," Dr. Russell says, noting that an exploration of the residential and commercial parts of the city could yield a gold mine in finds revealing more about commerce and culture.

The region around Assur marks a transition zone between a wetter climate to the north and drier to the south.

Some researchers hold that among the unexplored sites will be those that could yield insights into the rise of agriculture in the region.

Russell, who also notes the accelerating loss of archaeological sites to dams, says he is uncertain that much can be done "in practical terms. If it's the will of the people to build a dam, a dam will be built." Countries in the region have a crying need for economic development, he adds.

But beyond the well-known if not exhaustively studied sites, lie unexplored "sites that have the potential to enrich us as human beings," he says. "That's what's lost to projects" such as the Makhoul Dam.

*** This article was reproduced from Christian Science Monitor of April 4, 2002**