MAALOULA & SAINT SERGE

An Extraordinary Village & A Unique Church

ST - SERGE CONVENT
INTERIOR OF ST SERGE CHURCH (4th c.)
MAALOULA, SYRIA

PLAN OF SAINT SERGE CHURCH (p. 2)

1 HIGH ALTAR
2 SIDE ALTAR
3 ICONOSTASIS
4- CHOIR
5- MAIN PORCH
6 SIDE PORCH
7- ENTRANCE
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MAALULA (pp. 3–4)

> **[Photo Caption — p. 3]** *Entrance of the church, dug in the rock*
>
> **[Photo Caption — p. 3]** *Antique wooden door of the church*

« Maaloula » is an Aramaic word which means « entrance ». This name is probably due to the site of the village at the entrance of the Defile (Fajj, in Arabic), with which we are going to deal below.

SITE: Maaloula is situated in the Qalamoun Mountains at about 50 km to the North-East of Damascus. Closely built wall to wall, its picturesque houses go down by gradations from the top of the mountain, covering the southern slope down to the valley.

CLIMATE: Perched like an eagle at 1650 m of altitude, Maaloula has a dry climate, cool in summer, very cold in winter, but always healthy. It is counted among the most beautiful summer resorts of Syria.

POPULATION: Its population is evaluated at about 5.000 people. This does not include a large number of inhabitants who have left it for Damascus, either to seek work or in order to enable their children to follow up their higher studies at the University. But they remain attached to their native village and frequently visit it, especially in summer.

IMPORTANCE: Maaloula has always aroused a keen interest among successive generations because of its unique characteristics:

The inhabitants of the Syrian capital find in Maaloula the fresh air of the mountain and the atmosphere of calm and rest they need.

Foreign tourists are fascinated by its remarkable site and by the breath-taking panoramic view they enjoy from the top of the mountain.

Speleologues love to stroll in its area in order to examine the Defile (Fajj) and the numerous antique caves.

Linguists specialized in classical semitic languages, come to Maaloula from all over the world to perfect their knowledge of the Aramaic dialect which is still alive here, as we are going to see below.

All these facts have led the Ministry of Tourism and the Directorate of Antiquities in Damascus to devote their full care to Maaloula. Their officials are doing their best to encourage foreign tourists to visit it.

CAVES AND GROTTOES: Maaloula's area abounds in caves and grottoes. Some are the work of nature; others have been dug a long time ago to serve as shelters for man. Perhaps the most famous one is the cave known as KAHF AL-KHOURY YOUSSEF, i.e. « the Cave of Father Joseph ». It is ornated with various decorations engraved in the rock: Two suns; two eagles, not to mention several seats sculptured in the rock. A valuable Greek inscription which goes back to 175 B.C. says: « This cavern was dug under Philippon to serve as a shrine... » It has been transformed into a Christian chapel from time immemorial. On its northern wall one can see engraved in the rock the image of the Holy Virgin with Child Jesus in her arms, each of them having a halo around the head. Virgin Mary holds either a lily or a wheat-ear in her hand.

MAALOULA'S DIALECT: People frequently say that the inhabitants of Maaloula speak « Syriac ». In fact they use Aramaic, an old semitic dialect, which spread all over the Near East in the time of Christ and is still used, not only in Maaloula, but also in two other neighbouring villages, Bakhaa and Joubadeen. In all, approximately 18.000 people speak but never write it.

Many linguists have spent years in Maaloula to perfect themselves in Aramaic, which, Jesus has used in his predication. The Gospel has even preserved some of the words which Jesus pronounced in Aramaic on certain important occasions. (Cf. Mark: V, 41 - VII, 34 - XV, 34) It is worth noting that certain books of the Bible have been originally written in Aramaic, for instance: The Gospel according to Saint-Matthew, the Prophecy of Daniel, and some of the Dead Sea manuscripts which were discovered at Qoumran in 1947.

THE DEFILE AND SAINT-THECLE'S CONVENT: The Defile (Fajj in Arabic) is an impressive split cutting Maaloula's Mountain from top to bottom and thus forming a picturesque pass. According to popular beliefs, the Fajj goes back to the story of the first

Christian girl Martyr, Saint-Thecle. Converted to Christianism by Apostle Paul's predication, she was persecuted by her own parents and chased by the soldiers of the Roman Governor, who wanted to put her to death. She suddenly found herself facing the mountain, with no possible escape. She then prayed to God to save her and He split the mountain, thus allowing her a provisional escape...

A Convent belonging to the Greek Orthodox Community has been built there in honour of that great saint of Christianity.

THE CONVENT OF SAINT SERGE (DEIR MAR-SARKIS) (p. 5)

[Photo Caption — p. 5] *Dome of the church and the caves dug in the rock.*

The Arabic name « Sarkis » is but a popular deformation of the Greek SERGIOS. This Convent and its church were built early in the 4th century in honour of two Martyrs: Serge and Bacchus, of Syrian origin. They were inhabitants of the city now called Roussafa in the north of Syria and were both officers in the Roman Army. As they refused to abjure their Christian faith and to sacrifice to idols, they were executed under Emperor Maximian in 297 A.D. During the Byzantine rule, Roussafa used to be called SERGIOPOLIS i. e. « Serge's City » because its cathedral contained the relics of the Saint. Both convent and church must have been built during the period between 313 (date of the Milan Edict which granted religious liberty to all citizens of the Roman Empire) and 325 (date of the convocation of the 1st Ecumenical Council of Nicea). Sometime during that period, the Christians who probably lived in the above-mentioned caves, must have demolished the old pagan temple dedicated to Apollo and built on its place the Convent and Church of Saint Serge.

MAALOULA & THE SALVATORIAN ORDER / SAINT-SERGE CHURCH (pp. 6–9)

[Photo Caption — p. 6] *Arches of the church and the built in logs*

MAALOULA & THE SALVATORIAN ORDER: Since 1732 these two venerable monuments have become property of the Basilian Salvatorian Order of the Greek Catholic Community. Founded in 1682 in the Lebanon by the Bishop of Tyre and Sidon, Euthymios Saifi of Damascene origin, this Order was due in the Founder's thought to serve as a link between the various Orthodox Churches of Orient and the Roman Catholic Church.

The Salvatorian Order counts now about one hundred priests and friars as well as 7 bishops. It directs a High Seminary in Rome, a Secondary one in the Lebanon, a third one in Beit-Sahour (Palestine), two Social Centres (with an Orphanage and a Technical Training School for each): One near Sidon (Dar al-Inaya), the other in the Beqaa (Dar as-Sadaaqa).

The Salvatorians serve a large number of parishes throughout the world including Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, the United States of America, Canada, Brazil, with other convents in the Lebanon and Over-Seas.

SAINT-SERGE CHURCH: Every year a great number of pilgrims and tourists come to visit Saint-Serge Convent and admire its antique church. Within the walls of this church, very old

logs had been inserted. Samples have been sent to West Germany to be analysed according to the most modern scientific methods. The results have shown that they are at least 2.000 years old. This also applies to the wooden door of the church, to which we devote our attentive care.

The walls of the church were originally ornated with frescoes, a part of which, recently discovered, still keeps its original freshness. It seems that such frescoes were common in the churches of the area, as proved by the similar frescoes which have been discovered in SAINT-ELIAS SANCTUARY of Maarra, at 6 km to the South of Saidnaya and 42 km to the South-West of Maaloula. The same can be said of the Convent of Saint-Moses of Ethyopia, in the Nebek area.

> **[Photo Caption — p. 7]** *St - Serge Convent and its church under snow*

THE BISHOPS OF MAALOULA: Very early, Maaloula was an important religious centre and had an episcopal see of its own, with a resident Bishop at its head. Some of Maaloula's Bishops have even attended the major Ecumenical Councils, such as:

1. EUTICHES, who took part in the debates of the 1st Ecumenical Council of Nicea in 325 and signed with the other Fathers of the Council the Credo which we still recite in every Mass: « I believe in one God... » (1)
2. MARCIAN (2nd Ecumenical Council held in Constantinople in 381).
3. GERONDIUS (3rd Ecumenical Council held in Ephesus in 431).
4. IOHANNES or John (4th Ecumenical Council held in Chalcedon in 451.)
5. DYONISIOS (5th Ecumenical Council held again in Constantinople in 551.)

Maaloula kept its episcopal see till the beginning of the 19th century (2) It was then attached to the See of Yabroud and recently to the Patriarchal See of Damascus.

(1) « NAMES AND CHRONICLES OF THE SAINTS OF OUR EPARCHY » by former Patriarch Macarios ZAIM (Manuscript 1052, Library of the Holy Saviour's Monastery.)

(2) « KHAZAEN AL-KOUTOB » (Libraries), by Habib ZAYAT, Damascus, 1982, p.123

> **[Photo Caption — p. 8]** *The marble block of the central altar dedicated to St Serge*
>
> **[Photo Caption — p. 9]** *The marble block of the northern altar dedicated to Our Lady the Holy Virgin*

ALTARS OF SAINT-SERGE CHURCH: The characteristic feature which makes Saint-Serge Church unique in the world is undoubtedly the form of its altars. The marble block covering the central altar dedicated to the holy patron of the church has a semi-circular form and is sculptured in such a way as to have a vertical edge of about 7 cm. Also the stone block of the northern altar dedicated to the Holy Virgin has a vertical edge of 4 cm but its form is rectangular. In this they resemble the altars of the pagan antique temples with, however, two notable differences:

a. The stone blocks are not provided with a hole allowing the blood of the sacrifice to flow away through an internal canalisation.

b. They don't have engraved in the brim a list of the pure animals which were allowed to be offered to gods.

These differences can be easily justified by the fact that Christian religion rejects all bloody sacrifices.

In order to re-establish harmony among the three altars, we have recently restored the southern altar by providing it with a stone block similar to the one of the northern altar. Dedicated to Archangel Saint-Michael, this altar was inaugurated on November 8, 1984.

ANTIQUE ICONS OF SAINT-SERGE CONVENT: Authentic Byzantine icons are but a visible representation of the Gospel. Their spiritual radiance penetrates directly into the heart. That is the impression gathered by anyone who quietly meditates before the venerable icons conserved at Saint-Serge Convent. Among the most famous ones:

1. The Icon of the THEOTOKOS or MOTHER of GOD, representing the Holy Virgin with Child Jesus in her arms. This Icon is believed to be copied from the original painted by Evangelist Saint-Luke.

2. The double Icon of the Crucifixion and of the Lord's Last Supper:

   - The upper part of the Icon represents Jesus crucified, with the Holy Virgin on one side and the Beloved Apostle John on the other side.

   - The lower part shows the Last Supper of the Lord, with a remarkable detail: The table has a semi-circular form, exactly like the one of the above-mentioned central altar.

3. The Icon of Saint-John the Baptist. He is represented in a unique posture, sitting, smiling, with crossed legs, as if to express his satisfaction at his accomplished mission of Precursor.

We ought to mention also the lovely collection of Icons executed for the iconostasis of the church by the famous iconographer Michael of Crete in 1813.

Saint-Serge Convent possesses two other rare icons, probably of Polish Art (17th century?). They were offered to the Convent in token of gratitude by General Anders. Following his liberation in 1943 he had spent some time as guest of the Convent which was managed at that time by regretted Fr. Gregory ABI-SAMRA well known for his hospitality.

A VENERABLE, UNIQUE MONUMENT IN THE WORLD (pp. 10–12)

> **[Photo Caption — p. 10]** *Icons painted by Michael of Crete on golden background*

A VENERABLE, UNIQUE MONUMENT IN THE WORLD: The archaic form of its altars, the antique logs inserted in its walls and the participation of its Bishop Eutiches in the Ist Ecumenical Council of 325, all these facts indubitably prove that Saint-Serge Church of Maaloula is one of the most ancient churches not only in Syria but also in the world.

> **[Photo Caption — p. 11]** *Christ and the Mother of God (donated by General Anders)*
>
> **[Photo Caption — p. 12]** *The Christ, King of Kings (17th c.?)*
>
> **[Photo Caption — p. 12]** *John the Baptist, having completed his mission as Precursor.*

RELIGIOUS FESTIVITIES OF MAALOULA (p. 13)

> **[Photo Caption — p. 13]** *The Holy Virgin (copy of the icon attributed to St Luke)*

> **[Photo Caption — p. 13]** *The Holy Cross and the Last Supper of the Lord (with a table similar to the block of the main altar)*

Maaloula yearly celebrates three religious popular feasts:

1. The Exaltation of the Holy Cross, 14th September.

   Big fires are lit on the top of the mountains. Folkloric dances are organised along with fireworks and collects for charity purposes.

2. Saint-Thecle's Feast, 24th September.

3. Saint-Serge Feast, 7th October.

Large crowds assemble in Maaloula to attend these religious festivals, which are very popular in the whole area.

THANKS TO ALL OUR FRIENDS (pp. 13–16)

Before closing, we would like to express our warmest thanks to the Ministry of Tourism, which has graciously put at our disposal the pictures reproduced here and chosen from its archives.

Our cordial thanks go also to all our benefactors and friends, especially to those who have kindly helped us with the translation of the Arabic original into French, English and German.

God bless them all!

FATHER MICHAEL ZAAROURA B.S.
Superior of the Convent Mar-Sarkis
Maaloula
SYRIA

> **[Photo Caption — p. 14]** *Welcome to our guests!*
>
> **[Photo Caption — p. 16]** *Maaloula under snow*