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Halûk Çetinkaya

Church of Deir Mar Touma: A Roman Tomb Turned into a Church at Saidnaya (Syria)

Saidnaya is approximately 30 kms northeast of Damascus. The town is known for its church of Hagia Sophia. There are several transliterations of the village name, such as Sednaya or Sidanaya. *Sida Naya*, later pronounced as Said Naya, in Arabic means “Our Lady”. This article aims at shedding some light on the building, whose function changed under new cultural and religious milieu.

Saidnaya is approximately 1600 metres above the sea level. It is located on Qalamoun mountains between the Anti-Lebanon mountain range in the west and the Syrian desert in the east. The earliest human activities around Saidnaya date back to the palaeolithic era [6, p. 316].

After the death of Alexander the Great, Saidnaya became a part of the Seleucid kingdom. Syria was annexed during the period of Roman Republic by Pompey in 64 BCE [23, p. 258]. One of the most important issues for the Roman empire was its eastern frontier. At first the Parthians and, after 224, the Sassanids were the main problem for the Romans. Although mostly located in the north, army units in Syria were constantly moving from one place to another [8, p. 999].

After 194 Syria was divided into two parts by Septimius Severus: Syria Coele in the north and Syria Phoenice in the south. Another division was made under Constantine I after 328 AD, and the area between Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountains was called Augusta Libanensis. It was followed by the creation of provinces of Phoenicia I Paralia with an administrative center in Tyros and Phoenicia II Libanensis in Emesa after 400 AD [10, p. 368]. Since the borders of the provinces were not very clearly marked, it is difficult to establish where Saidnaya belonged.

Christianity spread rapidly in Syria and it also houses the oldest Christian building of the world dated to 232–233 at Dura Europos [12, p. 38]. The Church of Damascus appeared as the second largest one after the church of Antioch in the first quarter of the 5th century. By the time its position was degraded due to the loss of Roman imperial authority in the 9th century, it ranked the ninth in the list of metropolitan centers [11, p. 62].

As the Roman empire stretched towards east, local traditions and cults unavoidably began to play their part in every aspect of life. Influences were both ways. Since it was common to have local deities especially in the eastern provinces, such as Phrygia or Syria, the influences of these cults in the western provinces must not be surprising. For instance, the cult of Dea Syria, which was mostly worshipped in the horrea, found a way in the provinces other than Syria [2, p. 23]. One of the most important challenges for the time was religious diversion. In par-

ticular, the population of newly acquired lands was becoming more religious. The worshipping of local deities like Syrian Sol or Mithra continued, but generally on a local scale [21, p. 509]. There is an interesting period in Roman history concerning eastern religion affecting western provinces. One person in that aspect is worth mentioning. Originally named Bassianus, he took a new name of Elagabalus, since he was the priest of sun-god Elah-Gabal. He was a nephew of Caracalla, who when he ascended to the throne took his uncle's formal name and was known as Marcus Aurelius Antoninus II, but later in his life preferred to use the name Elagabalus [3, p. 254]. This is the only time a foreign god's name was used by a Roman emperor. It is not clear whether the number of worshippers of sun-god Elah-Gabal increased or not, but the followers of the deity most probably had easier access to social and political strata.

In Syria cults were related to basic things such as high places, water like a spring, lake or sea; trees or stones, or sometimes simply an area was considered sacred because it was thought to belong to a deity or to be a tomb [7, p. 221].

According to a tradition, the area of Qalamoun was converted into Christianity by St. Thomas [17, pp. 5–6]. Saidnaya gained its fame due to its icon of Holy Mother Mary. It is believed that this icon was housed in the Church of Hagia Sophia, which, together with several others in its environs, was founded by emperor Justinian I in the 6th century [5, p. 11].

The first mention of the miracle-working icon of Saidnaya was made by Burchard de Strasbourg in 1175, who also informs us about the cave dwelling monks of the area [19, pp. 138–140]. In the following centuries, Saidnaya gained importance as a pilgrimage center, and several sources provide us information about the area. The Templar order played an important role in this region especially Gautier de Marangers who was imprisoned in Damascus. Upon his release, before heading for Jerusalem he visited the holy myrrh-streaming icon of the Holy Mother [1, p. 374].

Interestingly, the name of the site was referred to as Sardenai, Sardaia, Sardinalli, and Sardinale [17, pp. 11–18].

The subject of this article is the Church of Deir Mar Touma. It is located on a rocky hill overlooking Saidnaya. The dedication of the church to St. Thomas, Mar Touma, is based on the local tradition. The road leading to Deir Mar Touma passes by a very similar church named after St. Peter which was originally built as a square formed mausoleum [15, pp. 30–31]. It is obvious that it had become a Roman structure before it became a church.

The Church of Deir Mar Touma is surrounded by rock cut graves. The largest one is called by locals 'El Diwan'. A large burial with benches on three sides must have had sarcophagi on it. At a later time, it must have turned into refectory of a monastery, for that purpose benches were given a new shape as seats (Ill. 35). Other cavities in the rocks were mostly destroyed. The church building was erected using local stone quarried on the spot. It is a rectangular building with a projecting apse added to it. Its entrance is on the south and through a pointed arch (Ill. 36). Since there is no other example of a pointed arch in Roman architecture, it indicates that this was a later addition. Same applies to the window on top of the gate. Nothing of the pediment in the southern section survived, whereas beginning points of it in the north are still intact. Inside the church some alterations were made. The upper structure was made of stones to form a vault. This vault was used to support the upper chamber. In order to reach the upper floor a wooden ladder, as of today, was used. The purpose of the upper chamber is to provide a

space for seclusion. The eastern part of the church has two arches to reach the altar table. This arrangement was made at an unknown date. Around 1745, the Convent of Deir Mar Touma was in ruins, except for the main church [20, pp. 133–134]. With the lapse of time, the area still attracted people, as a result it must have turned into a small monastic community in the form of a skete.

The architecture of the Church of Deir Mar Touma is intriguing. It is clear that it was a Roman building similar to the temples (Ill. 37). By virtue of the shape, similar looking buildings were marked as temples, although they lack vital parts of a temple. One of the peculiarities of Roman temples was flights of steps from the entrance side of a temple (Ill. 38). Another one, which originated from the Etruscan architecture, was a high podium [22, p. 12]. The most important of all was a cella. In most of the cases Sections of the buildings do not remain intact. That is why travellers' accounts, drawings or photographs are very useful. In the case of Deir Mar Touma none of them exist. But, the observation of the area provides important clues. Around the church there are carved parts of a large rocky hill. These were made as burials, but with time their function changed. In the case of Deir Mar Touma, there is a combination of several types of burials. Interestingly, two of the types used here were the most common in Syria, namely mausolea and hypogea. In Syria, there were twelve types of Roman burials — pit graves, cist graves, hypogea, jar burials, tumuli, mausolea, stelae, enclosures, hypogeum-mausolea, sarcophagi in open air, facades, and depositions [9, p. 120].

The road leading to Deir Mar Touma from Saidnaya passes by a rock with three niches with two figures each. With an entrance underneath this is a burial most probably from the 2nd century. Similar to this type of burials were found not far, in Qatura, Souq wadi Barada, and Yabroud. Upon the arrival of Romans, some changes in funerary architecture and tradition took place: nearly three quarters of burials became visible and with their markers above [9, p. 156]. It is interesting to note that in temple facade type of burials, deceased was depicted on a rock, but most of the time buried in the chamber below, can be observed in Turkey as well. Some of the best examples come from Silifke Adamkayalar, Silifke Kanlıdivane, and Sanlıurfa Sogmatar.

Structures similarly shaped as temples but used as burials were sometimes called house-type or temple-type graves. In Syria, there is abundance of this type in Kharab Shams, Serdjilla, Meghara, Januh, Zekweh, and Hibbariye. Among these examples Januh is the only one converted into a church with and addition of an apse [13, ill. 19]. In Turkey, Silifke Imbriogon, Cambazlı, and Sidyma are the best examples.

Underneath the Church of Deir Mar Touma, there is a cavity, most probably used also as burial. Around the church, among the graves, a carved eagle was found which stood for a former member of Roman army. It couldn't be the indication of a soldier or veteran's burial place. Despite having Roman armies based in the north, auxiliary forces were sent there as well [16, p. 95]. They could have served in the southern part of the country. Once dismissed, depending on their age, they either settled in the place they were serving or moved to a new veteran settlement. Carved burials and Roman names in the nearby Qalamoun indicate the presence of Romans [18, p. 75]. Another possibility for the burials could be the local families with ties to Romans. It has been suggested that the rich families who owned the villages had their monumental tombs built close by [4, pp. 109–110].

There are four inscriptions in and around the Church of Deir Mar Touma. A partial Aramaic two-lined inscription is illegible. The entrance of the church has a partial Greek inscription with four names. These names were considered to be the benefactors of the structure. Another illegible inscription, probably Greek, was found in the caves. The longest and legible fourth inscription bears the name of Iulia Salone having the monument erected for the salvation of her two sons: Antonio Gemino and Iuliano [5, pp. 186–188]. It is clear that this was an epitaph re-used as spolia.

Other items found in the vicinity are oil lamps. It is interesting to note that at the Temple of Zeus at Mount Hymettos in Greece, about 120 oil lamps dated to the 4th–5th centuries have been found [14, p. 76]. Probably the same tradition was continuing here, except it was for graves. It must have served both functions: practicality and dedication.

Sacred rocks and springs were vital for the religious life of Roman Syria [24, p. 159]. The location of Deir Mar Touma from that perspective must have been the continuation of the tradition started long before the Roman arrival.

When exactly house-type Roman burials were transformed into churches is nearly impossible to establish. Upon legalizing Christianity, temples and mausolea became the prime target for local magistrates especially if these structures were located near settlements [4, p. 129]. It is not known who the house-type burial at Deir Mar Touma was constructed for. However, it is clear that this site was chosen for the increasing number of Christians in the area and probably to indicate the victory of Christianity over pagans. It cannot be a coincidence that within less than a kilometer away, Deir es Sherubim church was also constructed with the materials taken from a Roman structure. Both churches are geographically located on dominating positions and are visible from very long distances. Series of Christian constructions with their own legends was readily accepted by the locals. In order to make use of their fame, all three churches: Our Lady of Saidnaya, Deir Mar Touma, and Deir es Sherubim were converted into monasteries. With the help of constant group of people, namely monks, safeguarding these sites in the early years of Christianity, protection against pagans and nature was provided.

Since Church of Deir Mar Touma lacks a high podium, flights of steps at the entrance, cella or any inscription indicating its original use, it is safe to assume that it was built as a house-type burial and converted into a church most probably in the 5th century. Until more scientific data is obtained this could be a starting point for the Church of Deir Mar Touma.

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Title. Church of Deir Mar Tuma: A Roman Tomb Turned into a Church at Saidnaya (Syria).

Author. Halûk Çetinkaya — Ph. D., associate professor. Istanbul Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University. Silahşör cad. No: 85 Bomonti-Şişli, İstanbul, Turkey. haluk.cetinkaya@msgsu.edu.tr

Abstract. Located in a rock-cut cemetery from the Roman period, a house-type burial was converted into a church most probably in the 5th century. Upon gaining fame, it attracted monks, hence it became a skete type monastery. Approximately 30 kilometers north of Damascus, there is a small town of Qalamoun. This town is known for its churches. Amongst them the Church of Our Lady and Hagia Sophia have special places. The Church of Our Lady in Arabic is Sida Naya, but as time passed it was corrupted and started to be pronounced as Said Naya. In and around this town, there are several historical monuments, especially from Roman and Early Byzantine periods. The local construction material is sand stone.

The subject of this article is a misidentified Roman burial turned into a church. Syria was one of the most important provinces of the East. For that reason, the presence of Roman military, settlements of soldiers with families and their burials are scattered around the country. Depending on the status of the deceased, burials had different types. One of the most common types was known as “house type” which was mostly used by the upper middle class. Examples of these can be observed in the places such as Ataman, Qreiyeh, Jmarrin, Feki, Ghariyyeh Sharqiyyeh, Rimet al Lohf, Majdal, Murduk, Nahit, Amrah, Khazimeh. Outside the city of Qalamoun, on the skirts of the hills in the North, approximately 400 m away from the Church of Our Lady, there are burials hewn out of main rock in the form of a chamber and several freestanding sarcophagi. There is a clear indication in at least one burial, the Roman eagle, which stood for a former military member. The highest position was reserved for a “house type” Roman burial, probably from the 2nd century AD. Upon legalizing Christianity this structure which measures 7.1 × 4.2 m was converted into a church.

Because of its large size, it was mistaken by scholars for a pagan temple. In fact, it was a burial given new function upon adding an apse in its eastern section. Later, this structure became part of a monastic complex where monks stayed for seclusion. According to tradition, it also housed the grave and the relics of the saint who spent years there, namely Mar Touma. My intention has been to show an art piece created for one reason, but acquiring a new function and value in later times. This work intends to broaden geographical and time scale and show other examples of similar structures, thus creating a database.

Keywords: house-type burial; Early Christianity; icon of Saidnaya; converted church.

Название статьи. Храм Деир Мар Тума: Римское захоронение, превращенное в церковь, в Саид Наия (Сирия).

Сведения об авторе. Четинкая Халук — Ph. D., доцент. Стамбульский университет изящных искусств имени Синана, ул. Силахшер, 85, Бомонти-Шишли, Стамбул, Турция. haluk.cetinkaya@msgsu.edu.tr

Аннотация. Приблизительно в 30 км к северу от Дамаска находится небольшой городок Каламун, который славится церквями. Церковь Богородицы и Святая София имеют особое значение. Церковь Богородицы по-арабски называлась Сид-Наия, однако со временем название было искажено, и сегодня церковь известна как «Саид Наия». В городе и за его пределами есть несколько памятников римского и ранневизантийского периодов. Строительным материалом в этой каменной местности был песчаник.

Настоящая статья посвящена прежде неверно интерпретировавшейся постройке — церкви, созданной из римского погребения. Сирия была одной из важнейших провинций на Востоке. В связи с этим здесь располагались поселения римских солдат с семьями, их захоронения разбросаны по всей территории страны. В зависимости от статуса умершего, погребения могли быть различных типов. Наиболее распространенным был так называемый «тип дома», использовавшийся верхушкой среднего класса. Такие погребения можно обнаружить во многих местах. Так, к северу от Каламуна на холмах примерно в 400 м от церкви Богородицы находятся захоронения: несколько высеченных в скале и несколько в форме саркофагов. По крайней мере на одном из них имеется изображение римского орла, свидетельствующее о том, что здесь покоится воин. Самый высокий статус имело погребение типа «дома», которое относится ко II в. н. э. После того, как христианство обрело официальный статус, это сооружение было превращено в церковь. Ввиду его значительного размера (7,1 × 4,2 м) исследователи приняли его за бывший языческий храм. В действительности это было захоронение, которому было дано новое назначение — служить христианским храмом. Для этой цели с востока к нему была пристроена апсида. Позже это сооружение стало частью монастырского комплекса. По преданию, в течение многих лет в этом монастыре подвизался святой по имени Мар Тума, который был погребен здесь же.

Нашей целью является продемонстрировать, как может меняться назначение постройки. В перспективе предполагается расширить географию и хронологию исследования и создать базу данных подобных памятников.

Ключевые слова: погребение домового типа; раннее христианство; Саид Наия; перестроенная церковь.



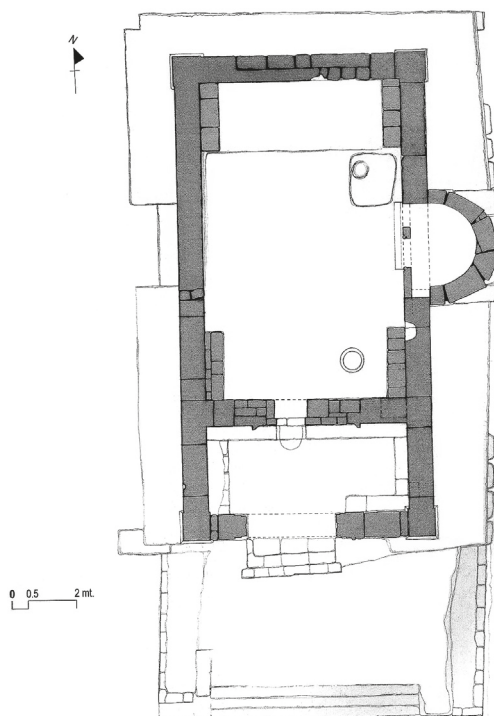
Ill. 35. Inside hypogeum called el diwan. Photo by P.Martin Asuero



Ill. 36. Entrance to the church of Deir Mar Touma. Photo by P.Martin Asuero



Ill. 37. Projecting apse of the church of Deir Mar Touma. Photo by P.Martin Asuero



Ill. 38. Plan of the church of Deir Mar Touma. Plan by P.Castellana — A.Di Bennardo — R.Fernandez