



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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PILLARS TO HEAVEN: STYLITE SITES OF THE LEVANT

Austrian archeologist Lukas Schrachner's extensive fieldwork centers on early Christian monasteries and stylite sites in Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt. An unexpected meeting with *Road to Emmaus* staff led to a two-day traveling interview through the Syrian desert, where Lukas' command of archeological detail and his fascinating insights (both Christian and academic) into the daily lives of these great ascetics made the era come alive, its saints immediate, and their presence inescapable.

Monastic Economy and the Stylites

RTE: Lukas, will you describe your archeological work, and how you became interested in the stylites?

LUKAS: As an archeologist and a Christian, I've always been interested in monasticism. My focus is on monasteries in the Levant¹, including Egypt, which exist as textual references and/or as physical ruins. My doctoral thesis is on monastic economy and productivity A.D. 320-800, that is, how these monasteries supported themselves and what role they played in the regional economy of that time. The questions are: Did they produce? If they did, what did they make? Did they consume it? Did they sell it off? Did they buy and sell from the world? Or, as some ancient texts suggest, were they just living as the birds of heaven that neither "toil nor spin" (Matt 5:26).

This image of no earthly ties, however, is often accompanied in the desert fathers' writings by other scriptural passages that say, "Don't eat anything you haven't labored for, that doesn't come from your own hands"

¹ The Levant: In the present context, the region occupied by Palestine, Trans-Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and south-eastern Turkey.

*Qala'at Si'man. Ruins of the Basilica of
St. Simeon the Elder, Deir Sim'an, Syria.*

(II Thess 3, 10). Although this might mean that you grow or gather your own food, much more commonly you would make a handicraft to sell in the market (or have someone else sell it for you) to provide for yourself. On the other side, some fathers said, “it is the duty of people in the world, whose souls we care for, to supply us.” In either case, total reclusion and complete self-sufficiency were very rare. In most cases, being a hermit meant depending upon your own labor or on others bringing you food – that is, denying the world to such an extent that you come to rely on the world. There were centuries of discussion and even dispute about monastic labor centered around these two extremes. Both of these views were present in traditional monasteries, and every possible economic variant was experimented with.

My interest in monasticism in general has led me to a very particular interest in stylitism (*stylos*, in Greek, meaning “column”), the ascetics who stood on pillars. Although we often think of stylitism as a very unique and lonely calling, in its developed form it cannot be separated from monasticism. The stylite withdrew from the world, but in doing so in such a spectacular way, he attracted the world. And as soon as people began coming for advice or counsel, he needed dedicated friends or disciples to organize his life – to make sure he was protected, that he would be given the hours of silence he needed, and that the people coming to see him were taken care of.

I have also worked in Mesopotamia² where we know there were stylites, although most of the physical evidence of their presence has vanished, while northern Syria, the so-called Limestone Massif of the north-central hills, is still a paradise for the archeologist. Until recent times it was a remote place. The ancient villages, monasteries, and churches were well-built. Much has survived and in the past century it has been studied to some extent. I’ve had the chance to work there, and, on the basis of earlier studies, to locate remains and put them into context: location, means of transport, resources they had such as olives, wine, what water is available, etc. We look at the nearby villages as well: a monastery could have been attached to a village or stood completely on its own.

I first came across the stylites while reading Greek and Syriac texts which mentioned these holy men, and often said something like: “this one was so holy that he decided to ascend a pillar.” St. Simeon (+AD 459) was the prototype, although there were many: Simeon the Younger, Daniel, Lukas.

² Mesopotamia (Greek, “between the rivers”): Area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, now south-eastern Turkey, eastern Syria and wide areas of Iraq.

The stylite himself is generally seen as a Syrian-Mesopotamian phenomenon, a very severe attempt to follow Christ not only through self-mortification and fasting, but through standing on a tiny platform at the top of an exposed column or pillar – never coming down, and only rarely sitting or lying down. By exposing themselves to the harshest conditions any human can, they strove to be spiritually cleansed and to elevate their souls.

RTE: How do you identify a place where a stylite once lived?

LUKAS: As an example, once I came to a small Syrian village, Kafr Darian (*Kafra* in Syriac is the village, and *Dirian* is a kind of toponym, a place name), and I knew from a textual reference that there might be a stylite column there. Kafr Darian lies between two mountains of northern Syria, Gebel Barisha and Gebel el-A’la (literally, in Arabic, “the highest one”). To get there one has to climb rather high; it is quite spectacular and very beautiful. There



Kefr Darian: general view, looking south-east, in the foreground fallen column drum.

isn’t much left, a chapel with a portion of a portico in front and the trunk of a large column that has fallen into pieces, with very clear evidence of the base and remains of a surrounding enclosure. As I stood gazing at it, I was fascinated. Kafr Darian was in a most exciting place, high up, overlooking the valley and the entire area, and for the first time I thought, “Oh, here’s a link. Stylites may have stood in beautiful places, places well seen from the surrounding area. Secondly, stylite columns often stand where there was a church.” This is not astonishing, because once the stylite became known there would have been pilgrims coming who needed to pray, and after the stylite died, if he didn’t have a successor (in fact, I don’t know about successors) he might have been buried close to the base of his column. If he was revered, a pilgrimage shrine would have naturally developed, with a church for liturgical services and perhaps guest-houses. People would come to his grave to ask for the same blessings, the same advice – moral, social, and legal advice – that earlier they would have come to ask him in person.

What we know about the stylites comes from Greek and Syriac texts, some written when the stylites were still alive, and many of which relate the history of the most famous pillar saint, St. Simeon the Stylite (the Elder), who died in 459. Within twenty years after his death, the famous pilgrimage sanctuary and later medieval fortress of Qal'at Si'man was built. As Christians, we would call it "The Martyrium of St. Simeon the Stylite."

St. Simeon the Elder is the prototype, he was the one who was imitated. Of his life we have very specific evidence in both Greek and Syriac sources, although it is the Syriac which give the best descriptions. They tell us that he was a very ascetic man, and that at a certain point in his life he joined a monastic community. At a very early stage, however, it became clear that he was much more rigorous than the other brothers and finally had to leave to pursue his calling.

St. Simeon moved north of the mountain of Gebel Sheikh Barakat, to a village called Telanissos (now Deir Sim'an), at the foot of the mountain where his sanctuary was later built. (*Gebel* is "mountain" in Arabic, and it is now known as Gebel Sim'an.) The Syriac sources say that he lived a very basic life. We read of him taking a camel laden with goods up and down the road, and that wherever he went people were impressed by this humble, modest man. At a certain point he decided to go up the mountain to expose himself to the harshness of the wilderness.

Don't forget, we are in northern Syria where winters may be very, very cold and summers extremely hot with strong winds. Simeon was very aware that this place was exposed to harsh weather conditions year round. However, it is also a very beautiful place, with a 270° view in several directions, and not far from the village and the Roman road. If you take the old north-south Roman road from Cyrrhus, forty or fifty kilometers north, down towards Telanissos (now Deir Sim'an) to the junction that links you to Antioch in the west, you've passed between Telanissos and Gebel Sim'an.

So, we know that he was here not far from the main road, that he stood on the column without a break, summer and winter, for almost fifty years; that he was famous for his asceticism, for his suffering endurance, but also for the very social role he played in giving advice and counsel to the local population, to those who passed on the roads, to distant nomadic Arab tribes that came for his judgement and help, and even to the Byzantine emperor. We know he was constantly asked for personal, moral, and even legal advice (and this is important because legal matters in those days were



Qala'at Si'man: Close-up of St. Simeon's column.

very linked to religion, as in modern Islam.) So, St. Simeon was a man for everyone and everything.

But he soon found himself in the dilemma of having withdrawn from the world, but now being too close to the world. Pilgrims, as we know from the sources, came from far and wide. They came from all over the Mediterranean: by boat to Antioch, then crossing the rough country to Simeon's column. They came from Seleukia, from Asia Minor, from the Arabian peninsula, from Europe. As time went on, he decided to add another ten cubits to his column, and then another, until finally according to the Syriac text, he was standing at a height of forty cubits.³

RTE: I remember from his *Life* that he didn't begin with a pillar – perhaps he had gone up the mountain simply because it was isolated and he knew that other people couldn't conveniently live there. But the moment they understood that he was a holy man they came anyway, as people do, until the crowds were trying to touch him, to grab pieces of his clothing. I've wondered if perhaps he had even taken a vow to remain there and the pillar was simply a necessary measure to get out of their reach.

LUKAS: Yes. I think it was the universal dilemma of an isolated holy man. Once you are holy you often become known and can't avoid people seeking blessings. The holy man is like a magnet. But permanent exposure to the world puts your monastic ideals at risk because you don't have the time of reclusion, of absolute silence, of being alone with God. So, adding to the column's height was perhaps an attempt to maintain his original ideal of a life of prayer.

RTE: Also, the noise of a constant crowd – in St. Simeon's case it was not a handful, but hundreds of people a day from different countries with horses, pack animals, campfires. Some stayed for weeks. It must have been overwhelming.

Isolation and Provision

LUKAS: A good illustration of this dilemma of isolation is a Mesopotamian story from the region of Midyat, in so-called Tur 'Abdin (in Syriac, the "Mountains of the Servants [of God]"), where a 4th-century monk asked his abbot to allow him to leave the community to live in nature and alone with

³ 40 cubits = 60 feet or 18 meters.

God. This is from a Syriac text that has only been preliminarily edited, but it says that he went out of the city gates to seek a place, but once night fell, he hadn't anticipated that the night sounds from the outskirts of the city would tempt his solitude. So, the holy man took his things and moved further east, but now he found that some loving young couples, seeking solitude as well, were out walking eastward of the city and passing by his cell. He was embarrassed by this and thought that he should move again. He had to find a place that was both away from the city, but close enough to physically survive, but somehow he never managed to leave the city behind. In the literature this idea of the desert, of reclusion, is always a kind of balancing act to keep some close relations to the city. The reasons may have been economic, for survival, but they also may have had the charitable goal of ministering to the local population.

RTE: And unless you were living on wild grasses and roots, I imagine you had to be close enough to sell your handiwork, or for other monks to bring you food.

LUKAS: Yes, and this comes back to monastic economy. There is a lot of discussion in the texts about the proper work of a monk. What seems best is any work that doesn't distract your mind from prayer, such as basket-weaving, mat-making, knotting nets for fishermen. These were all common activities and monotonous enough that you could combine them with what the Greeks call *melete*, continuous prayer. So, in this variant, prayer and work are undivided, the work was compatible with prayer. Another concern, I'm very sure, was for provisions. For example, to get the materials to make baskets and mats, a monk needed to be close to a river with rushes, but this wouldn't make sense if he couldn't sell them.

In the Egyptian desert fathers, we have the example at Wadi Natrun of workers in the nearby natron⁴ mine acting as middle-men for the monks: carrying up bread and supplies, exchanging them for the monks' handicrafts, and carrying the baskets and mats down to the city. Only in exceptional cases did the monks go down to the valley themselves. Another concern, of course, was water. We have the Limestone Massif in Syria, and similar places in Mesopotamia, where water was rare but could be collected through well-constructed systems of canals. Run-off rain water was collected in big limestone

⁴ Natron: Native sodium carbonate and bicarbonate, a mineral compound used as a preservative and for making soap, to the present day.

cisterns, but if the monk could not build a cistern himself, he might rely on people from the village to bring him leather bags of water.

RTE: Were many of the hermits' cells as remote as we imagine from the literature?

LUKAS: There are only two cases where I have found very remote monasteries. Most of the monasteries, both from archeological evidence and from the texts, refer to distances of 500 meters to two kilometers from a village. Even walking slowly, you can do this in less than an hour. We have to consider this point – and it is quite important – that the Near East and Egypt are extremely hot in the summer. You can't go far during the day. Even caravans cross the desert only at night: they start when the sun sets and make camp at dawn. Weather conditions play a much larger part in life than we Europeans are used to.

RTE: So, when the texts speak of going to a remote place, it may have been only an hour or two from the nearest monastery or village.

LUKAS: Indeed. And they were aware enough of the dangers of the desert to know how far they could extend themselves. In one of the Egyptian desert fathers' stories, a sad one, there was a monk going down from Nitria, which is west of the Nile Delta, to Wadi Natrun, which was much more deserted. It says, "The good man ran out of water and he died on the way." If this hadn't been a serious shock to them – perhaps they were saying the monk wasn't aware of the dangers of the area – they wouldn't have written this down.

I once thought I had found a really remote monastery, 25 kilometers west of the Nile, called Deir Samuel of Qalamun, but when I investigated further I found that this monastery, although far from the Nile, was actually located at a crucial point of a well-traveled caravan route. Another important monastery lies near Bi'r Natrun, which means the Well of Natron. This was also on a caravan route from Asyut in Egypt to Darfur in Sudan. It wouldn't make any sense to have a monastery 400 kilometers into the desert unless it was provisioned by (and provided for) those who passed by. So, the pattern of reclusion has to be seen in reality. We can't apply our usual estimation of quick walking in relatively comfortable weather.

Qal'at Si'man

LUKAS: Now, let us return to St. Simeon. Qal'at Si'man and Kafr Darian can both be seen from at least 190 degrees, from any direction. Usually stylites picked places where there was accessible water, but in places where there was none, facilities were created. In Kafr Darian we have an enormous subterranean cistern under the chapel. In Qal'at Si'man, it is east of the basilica. The water probably served many needs – liturgical uses, drinking water, water for crops and pack-animals, washing and even healing baths.

The village of Telanissos, as we now know, was a major infrastructure providing services for Qal'at Si'man. It is a large village, a kilometer in diameter, and housed three very large monasteries. Why, in a village, would you need three monasteries, each with a large church, a great courtyard and massive double-storied buildings around? One of the monastery inscriptions mentions a large *pandocheion*, a guest-house. Once we found this, our archeological assumption that the monks had acted as hosts to the pilgrims was confirmed. All three of the monasteries date to the late 5th and 6th centuries, with marvelous buildings and enormous water provision facilities. The total surface is enormous. We don't know their names, but we call them the north-west monastery, the south-west monastery and the south-east monastery. One of them may have housed a stylite itself.

As the texts suggest, soon after Simeon's death, the site was built up into a very sophisticated place, and down in Telanissos, as is archeologically attested, there was a lane of small shops where you bought your souvenirs: your icons, your ampullae for oil, small memorabilia. Ampullae, small sealed bottles that probably held holy oil or water, were normally made of clay with an imprint of the local saint, and these imprinted ampullae from different shrines give a very clear indication of how these items moved about the Mediterranean world. So, even if we have lost track of the pilgrim himself, we can still trace the ampullae he carried.

RTE: Would the places the ampullae ended up indicate how far St. Simeon's influence was felt?

LUKAS: We know that knowledge of St. Simeon reached up to Constantinople, down to the Arabian peninsula and many say to Europe. There are ampullae collections in Monza, Italy, some in Spain, also in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and the British Museum in London.

Although I am quite sure there are some depicting St. Simeon, in quantitative terms, St. Menas – whose sanctuary is situated in Egypt's Western Delta, and was approached from Alexandria – is the most frequently represented ampullae motif in the western world. But this also may be because St. Simeon's shrine left other, less long-lived souvenirs than ampullae, which are generally made of clay. Clay is abundant around St. Mena's shrine, but Qal'at Si'man is in the Limestone Massif and clay would have had to have been imported.

St. Simeon often appears on old illuminated manuscripts, drawings, engravings, and paintings, and they show him in a very nice way: up on his column on a small platform, perhaps lowering a basket on a rope to be filled with provisions, or a ladder leading to the top of the pillar with someone climbing up to ask his advice, or to bring him food or supplies. We have to be careful, however, in using things like ampullae or engravings to assess his influence, because finding a few items in a certain place may not reflect a general pattern of knowledge in that area.

RTE: What was it like for a pilgrim going up to the shrine?

LUKAS: Even today, on the north-eastern side of Telanissos, at the foot of the mountain is a kind of triumphal arch. Some Syriac texts say, "We arrived in Telanissos and we went up to St. Simeon's shrine." Going up to the shrine had a symbolic meaning for the pilgrim. You ascend through a triumphal arch, because Simeon, through his ascetic following of Christ, has won over darkness and brings light to the world. Pilgrims may have gathered below in Telanissos and made their way up through the triumphal arch in procession as Christians still do today – up very, very steep steps to a second gate, the foregate of heaven, one might say.

At the top, on the left side, was another guesthouse, a smaller one. For whom it was built we don't know, perhaps for higher clergy. On the right is the baptistry. It makes a lot of sense to have the baptistry on the right as you



Ampulla I: Most ampullae of St. Simeon, like this example, are between the size of a quarter and a half-dollar. At the centre is St. Simeon's column topped by his bust-length portrait. To the left a monk climbs a ladder towards the saint, with a censer in his raised hands, while just below a second monk kneels in supplication, reaching forward to touch the column. Finally, above and to the right of the saint are flying angels bearing leafy victory crowns. This ampulla bears the Greek inscription: "Blessing [i.e. eulogia] of St. Simeon of the Miraculous Mountain [i.e. Mons Admirabilis]".

enter, because every shrine was also a place where people were initiated into Christianity. Then, after you were baptized (or if you were already baptized as most people were) you walked on over a finished stone courtyard towards the shrine. The shrine was a very unique octagonal basilica built around Simeon's column with four naves at the sides and an apse to the east. The complex was completed in 479, twenty years after Simeon died.

RTE: A travel book from the 30's, says that the sanctuary built around St. Simeon's pillar was open to the sky – is that a view still held by archeologists?

LUKAS: Discussion about this is going on now. What we see today is that the roof is missing, and the column is mostly gone. How high the column was, we don't know.

RTE: You mentioned earlier that the *Lives* give rather precise measurements, in the English translations from 36 to 40 cubits.

LUKAS: Yes, but measurements in hagiographic sources and eastern texts in general cannot be taken too literally. Saying 30 or 40 cubits might have meant just that, or it may have been an exaggeration, a way of saying "very tall." There was not the same consciousness of precise numbers. Saying 500 people in a monastery could have meant "many." We have length data for comparison, but not from St. Simeon's site.

RTE: Just as "remote" might have meant a half-hour's walk into the desert?

LUKAS: Yes, the same. But with the existing architecture, would a 40 cubit column even fit under a roofed basilica of that size? From an archeological point of view there are two things to consider. One 6th-century author visiting St. Simeon's found the church roof open, and his is the most ancient authority we have. What does this mean? We aren't sure – perhaps that the octagon surrounding St. Simeon's pillar really was open to accommodate the height of the pillar.

RTE: Or for the aesthetic reason that it hadn't seemed right to enclose the pillar, seeing that his ascetic life was completely accomplished in the open air.

LUKAS: Yes, and this could have had a very dramatic effect as you entered the church. You would have had a covered basilica (which was surely covered because you can still see the post holes and the holes where the roof



Qala'at Si'man. Looking through the eastern door of the baptistery with the cathedral at the back.

was fixed), then, as you move forward, you see the open sky surrounding the column. Your eye would have been dramatically and immediately drawn to the column. This would have been a very reasonable construction.

The other possibility is that it could have been domed. Butler, who first studied Qal'at Si'man in 1904, made two possible reconstructions of the shrine, both domed. This would imply, however, that there were very great supports for the central dome, as the width is quite large. In Constantinople's Hagia Sophia the dome is 32 meters in diameter, but behind it you have enormous buttresses, without which it couldn't stand. What I noticed when we were at Qal'at Si'man is that there is no evidence of there ever being any strong buttresses. The octagon simply goes into other shapes. There is nothing of which you can say, "This could have held a huge dome." A wide dome would have created enormous horizontal forces, and I think that the open-roof idea around the pillar would not be out-of-date. But we also know that in the 6th century there were many earthquakes and roofs fell quite often. Did our ancient author find it open because it had fallen? He doesn't say. All we know is that the architecture doesn't support the idea of a large dome.

RTE: But this was all later. During St. Simeon's life, it was just the small village with him, his pillar, his disciples, and visitors.

LUKAS: Yes, only the bare mountain and the small Syriac village of Telanissos, which had yet to see its monasteries, its triumphal arch, its processional road, its shops. This shows how stylitism conditioned the life of a whole village, and if there was a demand for this huge structure, this means that tremendous amounts of people were flocking in. So, from 470 A.D. on, pilgrims were welcomed, taken up to the site, they saw the column, they could be baptized, confess, receive Holy Communion. To the southwest of the main basilica on the top of Gebel Sim'an are the ruins of a fourth monastery, also characterized by a porticoed building in dormitory style, which may have housed the monks who cared for the shrine.

I think we haven't changed very much in history. We are given the same hospitality today by the Syrian monastics who care for the Monastery of St. Thecla and the Saidnaya Icon of the Virgin. St. Simeon's, though, set the standard. Perhaps if he had foreseen this, he might not have approved, or even forbidden it. We don't know.

RTE: Although you've said that many sites have not been studied or preserved, the Syrian government has made some attempts at Qal'at Si'man. Can you speak about what has been done?

LUKAS: Until the forties or fifties, St. Simeon's was in ruins. These ruins were not only those of the pilgrimage shrine because the remains of the shrine were fortified in the 11th century, and at that time came to be known as "Qala'at" Sim'an, Simeon's "Castle." Later, it fell into pieces. Why did it collapse? I think a good explanation would be an earthquake. It was very well-built and rain could not have eroded it to such an extent, nor could it have been pulled down manually – it must have been shaken.

George Tchelenko, a Russian-French architect working at the French Institute in Beirut, was a very famous scholar of the region. In 1939 he began documenting, cleaning up, and restoring the site. He published many articles and a great work called, *Villages de la Syrie du Nord*, "Villages of Northern Syria," which came out in three volumes in 1953. He devotes a large section to St. Simeon's site. Later, another archeologist, a German by the name of Kreutzer, also published a monograph. The Syrian government took over from the foreign archeologists when they discovered that they could incorporate this pilgrimage place into their tour agenda. However, French archaeologists are still working at the site.

Since then, many things have been shifted and moved that should have been protected. They have blocked the traditional access from the west and routed visitors into an easily accessible entrance on the south flank, which prevents the modern pilgrim from getting the feeling of walking up the Via Sacra, the Sacred Way, which existed in ancient times, and also gives you the experience of a little fatigue.

RTE: One should have to work to get to a pilgrimage site.

LUKAS: Exactly, you have to move through space, you have to feel the space to get the height of the site and of the column. I did it last year from the village, but unfortunately now they've even disconnected the route from the site itself. There aren't yet clear indications posted for visitors of what the ruins are: the later monastery, the baptistery, the guest-house, the cisterns. Some of the reconstruction is speculative, and this is a pity because – apart from Jerusalem and the Holy Land – this is the most important sanctuary

in the eastern Mediterranean world. It attracted people in the past, and it attracts them today. I would like to see a more conscious development.

RTE: Today, as you approach the basilica ruins from the baptistery, your attention is drawn to the large rounded stone that sits upright on the base of the column [see picture pg. 29]. From a layman's perspective, it doesn't seem to be part of the column. Is it a remnant of the column, or a marker to draw one's attention to the base of the pillar?

LUKAS: I have no serious argument against those who say that it is part of the column, although this hasn't been proven. But what surprises me is that this stone has a very strange pattern of erosion, being eaten away on both sides, while all the other stone of the same material on the site is not eroded at all. I personally don't believe the stone was originally a part of the column, but that's just a feeling.

RTE: But the bottom of the column is well-fixed in the earth, and that's the original base?

LUKAS: Yes, the column base is considered to be genuine, well-inserted at the very beginning because it connects well with the surrounding slabs. I see no point why the base would have been artificially placed there, while I see a very human reason for the eroded "column stone." "Oh, this fits well above the base, let's put it up again."

Also, Simeon was not standing on the column with the basilica around him, he was in the pre-basilica time, so it is also possible that the present column base, with its holes for metal supports, simply marks the place where his original column stood, and was perhaps rebuilt as a memorial of the original column when the basilica was erected. We know that pieces of his original column were incorporated into altars and reliquaries around the world, but, even if it has completely vanished, this does not in any way demean the very real spirituality of the site. It is like an icon – a window to heaven, but not heaven itself.

RTE: Will you speak a little now about the Arab peoples who came to him and how far his influence reached?

LUKAS: Many of the nomadic Arabs, the pre-Islamic Arab people, were also Christian, while others believed in a natural pagan religion, but holy men in

the East were quite universally revered. I'm not sure about all the details of the relationship between holy men and non-Christians in pre-Islamic times, but there were (and still are) many places of co-veneration for Moslems and Christians, like shrines to St. George, who is a kind of universal saint. His present-day Christian shrine in Lydda, right next to a mosque in his honor, is a good example.

There was a very large sanctuary in northeastern Syria, Sergiopolis (literally, "the city of [St.] Sergius," later Rusafa), where a whole town grew up around the shrine of the soldier-martyrs Sts. Sergius and Bacchus. Archeology has shown that within a single enclosure, the main church was face to face (and extended by) a mosque, and that the sanctuary itself was shared by both! Liturgy was probably served in a different place, but when it came to venerating the relics, Christians and Moslems used the same shrine.

So if you have saints like St. George or Sts. Sergius and Bacchus, who were highly venerated by the Bedouins, there may also have been some common ground between the pagans and Christians. There were very simple religions in these areas which might have had some monotheistic elements, people who gathered under the open sky to worship their god. In Arabic you have the word *Lah* (which means "God") or *Al-lah* (which means "the God"). As soon as you put a determinant in front of it you are referring to one God, the only God, and there is some recent research showing that there was a general climate of monotheism in this region.

Once Christianity appeared it was just a matter of time before Arabs from the Arabian peninsula also adopted monotheism. Their sanctuaries attest to a monotheistic style of worship, and it was only later that Mohammed abolished the remaining sects of gods and goddesses saying, *la ilaha illa (a)l-lah*, i.e. "There is no God(dess) but God." But this didn't come out of nothing; Mohammed was already somewhat aware of what the Christians believed. He was acquainted with a monk by the name of Bahira, who may also have instructed him in Christianity, and he knew the Jewish community of Najran, northeast of Medina, who told him very clearly what the Jewish people believed.

St. Simeon the Younger

RTE: Can you tell us of the stylites who came after St. Simeon?

LUKAS: Of course, Simeon of Telanissos was the prototype. We also have another Simeon, Simeon the Younger, who settled rather close to Simeon the Elder, but later, in the 6th century. He set up his column near Antioch, in a very spectacular place, but one that is still very difficult to climb to. His site, *Mons Admirabilis*, "the Wondrous Mountain," is much more remote, although it has to be argued that he, too, was close to the high road – the Roman Antioch-Aleppo road. Nevertheless, getting up from that road was a very different affair.



Mons Admirabilis (Simeon the Younger): octagon with column base, looking northeast.

RTE: And it's still difficult to get to?

LUKAS: Very difficult. I had a lift half-way, then walked the rest. It took hours and hours. Looking down on the Antiochian plain, I thought, "by the most direct route this is a five-hour descent," but being alone, I didn't dare risk it, because it's very easy to get lost in unfamiliar terrain. So, it was much longer.

St. Simon the Younger (d. 592) became equally influential, and in the 6th century, after his death, a monastery, a church and a pilgrim infrastructure were built around his column as well. Again, it was an octagonal building as we have at the site of St. Simeon the Stylite in Qal'at Si'man (perhaps modeled after it) with all kinds of buildings around. We also know from his *Life*, that a *loutron*, a bath, was built outside the complex, where sick people were healed. So, even in this very remote place, people thought, "We should give the shrine a proper environment, we should build a protection around the column, a church, a guesthouse, a bath where crippled people can "take up their beds and walk."

RTE: Do we have much written information about these other stylites?

LUKAS: Yes, we have good texts of the life of St. Simeon the Younger (in Greek),

as well as of many other stylites up to the 9th and 10th centuries in both Greek and Syriac. Even into the 8th century, stylites were a very common phenomenon. They were the pride of the village, they were counselors, they were advisers. A story that always comes to me is one in which a stylite of the 8th century was blown off his column by a terrible storm and everyone was very sad. The chronicle goes on to say, “It was by the sins of our people that an earthquake has occurred and God has sent a storm, and even our holy stylite, who was our only hope in the storm, was blown off his pillar.” The moral the hagiographer wanted to get across was, “Men, we have behaved badly, we must repent.”

Outside of Mesopotamia, where, as I said, there is little archeological evidence left, I know of one stylite who may have stood near Antinoopolis in Egypt. There is also a famous text about Daniel, another well-chronicled stylite, who was brought to Constantinople, the imperial capital, by the emperor to bring blessings to the city. Daniel’s *Life* shows that the authority of a stylite was tremendous, and even the emperor, aware of his own fallibility, wanted to have one close to his court. Practically speaking, the imperial capital may have been a place where his advice was even more needed.

RTE: Was his pillar in the middle of the city or outside?

LUKAS: I’m not sure. All I remember is that it was set up in connection with a monastery. Again, other monks are the most reliable ministers and helpers of this kind of asceticism. They also sought perfection in a holy life, but even if they could not match the asceticism, they could help the ascetic.

RTE: Sometimes they almost did match the asceticism. St. Simeon the Elder’s *Life* says that two of his disciples took turns standing at the top of the ladder under the edge of his platform, night and day, for years – to guard him, to bring him his scanty food and water, and to assist the visitors who climbed the ladder to ask the saint’s advice.

LUKAS: Yes. The stylites inspired that kind of dedication.



Looking west on old Roman road from Antioch (modern Antakya), to Beroia (modern Aleppo.) 15 km south of Qala’at Si’man.

Four Lesser-Known Stylite Sites

RTE: What other stylite sites have you been to?

LUKAS: I've spoken about St. Simeon the Elder and St. Simeon the Younger, but I can give you a short account of four other sites I've investigated.

The first is Kafr Derian, which is perhaps a half-hour by car from St. Simeon's. There, as I mentioned earlier, you can see the column base with some post-holes where an enclosure may have been fixed. You can also see a very venerable tomb. The column nowadays is lying on the ground in



Kimara: column drum, note the holes for metal clamps.

pieces. At the front of the church, facing the column, was a sort of portico, constructed as a balcony. George Tchelenko, the archeologist who investigated it, argues that this was a kind of platform, half the height of the pillar, from which you could better approach the holy man to ask your questions. If this is true, this was perhaps set up so that when he was consulting, he did not have to have people climbing his pillar as St. Simeon did, nor did he have to come down, but the people on the platform could talk to him from half-height. A very interesting arrangement. There is a little speculation in this, but nevertheless, it's a very good suggestion. We have no idea of what may have been built later around the shrine today, as the surroundings of Kafr Darian are all overbuilt. Nevertheless, we can say that, as at Qal'at Si'man, it was the village in the valley that cared for the holy man and his shrine at the top of the hill.

A second stylite column is on the same mountain as St. Simeon's, north of Gebel Sim'an, in a village called Kimar. In Kimar, we still have two apses of a church standing, and the monastery building, a nice quadrangle with some crosses. Inside are arcossolia, which are arched tombs. They are very common in both ancient and modern monasticism, and in each, a holy man would have been buried. There is a large column lying close to one of the

apses that has broken into pieces. The absence of other columns, which you would certainly see if the building itself was columned, may well indicate that this was a stylite site. Most interestingly, the drums were connected by metal hooks, of which you can still see some holes, and atop the last one, there may have been a platform. The other evidence that this may have been a stylite column is the diameter. I measured it and it is 80 or 90 centimeters, which is never used in normal architecture as such.

A third column is in a place up in Gebel el-A'la, which is another mountain of the Syrian Limestone Massif, and again, you see there a very large base, with a column fallen into pieces and no other columns around, a kind of platform and a big cistern.

The fourth site is close to Ghebel el-A'la, southwest of Gebel Sim'an, in a place called Deir el-Malik – *Der*, or *Deir*, the House or Monastery, *el-Malik*, of the King, the one who has power. This is a fascinating site that, unfortunately, has been disregarded by modern research. It has a very



Deir el-Malik: general view, looking north, on the left the column base; in the back, monastic building.

large enclosure, is situated near a village that was famous for its wine production in ancient times, and was close to a traveled Roman road. It has a big platform that overlooks the eastern valley on two sides of the mountain. Here we have a kind of flat platform, and slightly off-center, a large column base with most of the column gone. We know with certainty that Deir el-Malik was a stylite site from a Syriac text in the British museum that speaks of both the stylite and this place. So this is one of the cases in which archeology meets the text. The column was in a very central place, well-seen from all sides.

Deir el-Malik also has a large cistern, with what we suppose to be a small guest-house, and in the major compound are olive or wine presses. So, here again we have an obvious need to accommodate people who came to pray at the shrine, an enormous need for water, and the presses. Why domestic wine? We don't really know. The monastic attitude towards wine varies from complete refusal to mild praise, and both attitudes can be found even towards growing and crushing the grapes. Although some monks argued,

“No wine, no meat... it doesn’t suit the monastic life,” others argued, “The Lord drank wine and even blessed the jars at Cana, so there would be more.” So there is no general rule, but there were local rules and we often have very clear statements against the consumption or production of wine. Rules like this are almost always a response to something that was out of order.

But at Deir el-Malik it seems that the monastery/pilgrimage center that grew up after the stylite’s death grew grapes to produce wine for their own and their pilgrims’ needs, or perhaps to sell it to obtain other supplies. The guesthouse could have been for the upper-class, and since wine was the common table drink, why not make their own? Also, we don’t know who the laborers were. It may have been the monks, or it could have been hired villagers, as the temptation of working in the vineyard and the winepress was often a cause of debate among the fathers.

So, the main elements that are common among the stylite sites I’ve seen are that they were close to a village, they seem to have often been on an elevated, beautiful site, there were provisions made for water and supplies for pilgrims, and eventually each site was surrounded with pilgrimage buildings.

Archeological Preservation

RTE: Can you articulate the importance of saving these sites? What does archeology speak to in the human spirit and why do we need to have these links with the past?

LUKAS: I think that knowledge of the past helps us to understand the present and plan for the future. Also, I feel that if this is a holy site, if it touches one person spiritually, then it is worth guarding. These Christian holy places are filled with spiritual power, and if you are not arrogant and allow yourself to “catch” it, you can think, “In this place there was prayer, there was asceticism... I have had a chance to witness it, and I want to carry this witness forward in my life.”

I’m quite sure that we can’t carry it forward in the same way the stylites did, but there are principles behind it, which are: “Do good. Step back from the world, but when you must be a part of the world, interfere in a good way. Step back for prayer. Do your job in the world but keep some resources free for others.” We also have to remember that a spiritual place does not cease to exist spiritually once it ceases to exist archeologically. So even though

Qdā’at Si’man: Looking northwest to the Plain of Afreen and Cyrrhus.

St. Simeon's site is in ruins, it is a reminder that people in the Syrian lands were once able to follow Christ in this very unique way.

Don't believe that times are so much better nowadays. Economic constrictions affect us more and more and we are part of a global network that brings many advantages but leaves our souls very dry. Meeting something like this helps you identify yourself, where you come from. "I have a chance to believe in the same Gospel of Christ that this man did. He performed miracles. Why should I not be given a chance to imitate Christ in a similar way – not on a column, but in a contemporary way?"

If we had never discovered St. Simeon's, perhaps it would not have been a spiritual catastrophe, but since it has been preserved, it is a reminder in time and space to mortify ourselves and to follow Christ.

Archeology itself, of course, has a rather academic purpose – to keep the memory of pre-existing cultures alive where there are material images and structures for a future generation, for the building of identities, and also for future development. It doesn't necessarily have a spiritual dimension.

RTE: I'm not sure. I think we need these physical links to our history to help engage our spirits. Grace comes through the sacraments, through our neighbors, or through the earth itself, blessed by a holy man living and praying in a certain place. I think its archeology's job to save these sites for the sake of this spiritual connection as well.

LUKAS: I fully agree with you in this, but as far as academic archeology goes, it is a science dedicated only to bringing things to light and documenting, analyzing, and interpreting them. This is a very technical science, which does not mean that the archeologist won't be deeply affected personally by this spiritual element. It happens to me often, and this is why I continue working on these monastic sites. It has developed a dynamic: the more I work on them, the more fascinated I become – the more fascinated, the better I work. I also have to be aware that fascination may distort my view. If I allow the fascination to overshadow my archaeological technique, I might be willing to see or construe things that do not really exist.

An example of this are the towers that have been found in the ruins of Syrian monasteries. There is a debate going on, "What was the purpose of these towers – two, three, four floors high?" There is an early Arabic verse that says, "I saw the light of the hermit's tower shining in the night." So,

based on this poem some would like to believe that these were hermits' towers. But there is a lot of discussion going on. Was this a hermit's tower, or was it simply a watchtower, or was it a watchtower that had been taken over by a hermit? We have one scholar (in fact he is a Franciscan monk himself) who interprets every tower as a hermit's tower – hermits, hermits, hermits. Since he is so persistent in seeing hermits' towers everywhere, I don't believe this anymore. In many cases we can't say; there are only a few inscriptions or textual references.

RTE: Although an abandoned watchtower would have been an excellent place for a hermit looking for a refuge.

LUKAS: Yes, and in eastern Syria there are ruins of many abandoned towers and fortresses, which at certain points were taken over by monastic communities. This was a very common procedure.

Syria, Yesterday and Today

RTE: Can you give us an idea of what Syria was like in those days? Who was travelling back and forth, where were the trade routes, what foreigners came through?

LUKAS: By 106 A.D. Syria was a very well-organized Roman province, annexed by Trajan and divided into the provinces of Syria Prima and Syria Secunda. Syria always profited from its location on the coast, between Antioch in the north, Mesopotamia in the east, and Palestine, the Holy Land, in the south.

RTE: And Antioch and Alexandria were two of the most cultured cities in the Mediterranean.

LUKAS: Yes. They were very well developed, strongly Hellenized, saturated with Greek culture, business-oriented, and very educated. They had set up famous schools of law, philosophy, theology, and when the Romans came Antioch became a mixture of Greek-Roman architecture. Antioch was a very posh city. The Limestone Massif in the hinterland was another aesthetic, and there you find a very sophisticated country style of building that I wouldn't have expected. The country somehow had a share in Antioch's nice

capitals, columns, ornamentation. It wasn't marble, but there was still a share of the city lifestyle, although the villages are villages, and not cities.

Syria also controlled access to the hinterland; to modern Baghdad, to Mossul (which was very important in this period), to Cyrrhus, where Holy Theodoret came from, and to Palmyra, which was an important caravan stop. So Syria was in a very strategic position, and this explains the extensive Roman infrastructure that was built there. Hand in hand with the new roads would have been the tens of thousands of people who traveled these roads on pilgrimage, as soldiers, as merchants, as nomads. We have a very good 4th-century account of Antioch by Libanus, who writes quite freely about the upper class with their decadent lifestyle and moral failings.

RTE: As did St. John Chrysostom, who was from Antioch himself. Antioch is no longer a part of Syria, is that right?

LUKAS: No, it belongs to Turkey now, the city of Antakya, although Syria still claims it as her own (and shows it on her maps). But then it was Syria's, and the wealth of the hinterland was closely connected to Antioch and the coast by the production of oil, wine, and goods, which were then transported overland and by sea. St. Simeon lived in a period when you had wealthy landowners and peasants who would have been slaves, serfs bound economically to the land, or perhaps free farmers.

Syria enjoyed good water and sun conditions, irrigation was highly developed and there were extensive markets for trade – up to Seleukia on the Euphrates and all over the Mediterranean. Generally Syria enjoyed great wealth, which we see from the architecture of the Limestone Massif. All of these villages were made of well-dressed stone: tall buildings with well-cut inscriptions that are still readable, mentioning the owners, the investors, the patrons. So, Simeon did not grow up in a poor society. It was a rich, prosperous world, and his retreat may even have been a reaction to this, as well as a call. Libanus shows us how sinful the world had become through luxury; perhaps Simeon wanted to show how sinless life could be through asceticism.

This is the general background and these conditions continued until the 7th century. We have many stylites and hermits in the 5th, 6th and 7th centuries.

RTE: How many stylites do we know of, and how widespread do you think monasticism was in St. Simeon's time?



Lukas Schrachner at St. George Church, Izraa, Syria.

LUKAS: I once heard estimates of up to six hundred. The literary sources we still have mention a dozen or so in the period prior to the 8th and 10th centuries, but colophons (small notes written by copyists at the end of books) and unpublished manuscripts mention many, many more, in both Syria and Lebanon. Regarding monasticism, percentages are difficult to assess, but we know that from the 4th century in the Syria-Mesopotamia area, such large numbers of people withdrew from the world that it became a problem for society because a good part of the work force was gone. Byzantine emperors finally intervened in the 6th century and forbade this wholesale exit into monasticism because they were running short of tax income.

There were many holy men and women in this period, but there were also problems that came with this great influx of people into monasteries, as one would expect. We have Isaac of Antioch, around 500 A.D., who says that “even in the monasteries, the holy men are adopting the bad habits of the world: they have large wine cellars, spreading vineyards, they work in the secular world and forget about their real mission which is prayer and helping the poor and sick.” Working for the poor and sick was a very monastic ideal that continues until now, and we have to remember that from this period until the 19th century – I would even say until today in the Orient – there was very little state care, so the Church, particularly monks and nuns, took care of those whom Christ would have had them help.

RTE: Were there comparable shrines to saints other than St. Simeon in the Levant and Egypt at that time?

LUKAS: Yes, St. Simeon the Elder is just one of the stylites, but he is perhaps the most famous, because, after Jerusalem, his sanctuary was the most prestigious in the middle-eastern Roman world: close to Antioch where the major highways cross, lots of patronage, many wealthy people who, with the clergy, built this huge shrine after his repose. Of course, when you build a shrine, you increase pilgrimage, and the more you increase pilgrimage, the more you add to your sanctuary.

One shrine of comparable importance was St. Menas in Egypt, which was easily accessible from Alexandria (Alexandria to Taposiris Magna, then down to St. Menas, nowadays Abu Mina). In archeological terms, Abu Mina is a mega-city with all kinds of facilities that any modern Lourdes would envy, but the second most important shrine in the Mediterranean was St.

Simeon’s. You also have monasteries like St. Sabbas in the Judean Desert east of Jerusalem, but they never played a major role as a pilgrimage site like St. Simeon’s did. The third major shrine in the Near East is that of St. Thecla in Seleukia, near modern Maryamlik, situated in the north-eastern angle of the Mediterranean, on modern Turkish soil. This site, too, was situated near the high road from Constantinople to Antioch, and had a harbour with many ships passing by.

RTE: There were major pilgrimages going there from the 3rd century?

LUKAS: St. Thecla’s tradition is even earlier, from the 1st century, and archeologists have found ruins from the 5th century onward. It is very similar to St. Simeon’s: a church with pilgrimage houses, with baths, with large water cisterns. In the 7th century there was an interruption in pilgrimage – not necessarily a persecution, but increasingly difficult conditions in the Mediterranean with shipping. Communications were affected, people were a little frightened of travelling, and after this disruption the mass pilgrimages never fully recovered.

RTE: What can you tell us about the Christian population of Syria nowadays?

LUKAS: In late antiquity, when St. Simeon lived, Christianity was strongly supported by the state and was the religion of the great majority of people. If Christianity ever replaced all the pre-Christian cults, we aren’t sure, but Syria changed dramatically with the Islamic invasion. Perhaps not all at once, but slowly this Muslim element took over. If you look at modern Syria, the Christian population has been reduced to a very few regions – parts of Aleppo, parts of Damascus, and a few communities in Southern Syria, the so-called Hauran, and eastern Syria, close to (nowadays) Turkish Tur Abdin.

Aleppo’s Christian element today is due to the continuing role Christians have played in economic affairs. Aleppo is on the main route from Constantinople via Antioch. For the Ottoman Empire, this was the city of merchants and craftsmen. Now, it is the port of trade from Russia, from Europe, to Mossul, Baghdad, and Damascus. Through the centuries, Damascus has always been secondary to Aleppo in trade, and merchant trade for long periods was in Christian hands. Aleppo now has a very large Armenian Christian community, which moved from Armenia to Aleppo after the genocides of 1895 and 1915. There are also Syriac Jacobite



Syrian Villager near Telanissos.

Churches, and the Chalcedonian Churches (both Orthodox and Catholic) are well-represented. But if you go westward from Aleppo to the Limestone Massif, one of the Christian heartlands of antiquity, nothing is left today.

The second Syrian Christian enclave is in Damascus itself. As every big city, Damascus attracts intellectuals, and as Christians are normally well-educated, they also move there. In eastern Damascus, in the areas of Bab el-Sharki and Bab Tuma, we have most of the Christian churches grouped in the area around St. Paul's shrine, the House of Ananias.

We also have some dispersed cells of Christians around the ancient monasteries – Saindaya, Maaloula (also dedicated to St. Thecla), and a few villages which are also very ancient and have preserved a Christian element; this is changing now because of the emigration of the young people to urban centers.

A fourth center, if you want to call it this, is in southern Syria; Suweida, where five percent of the population may be Christian. Of course, Lattakia and other large port cities still have Christian trade, but there is very little left in eastern Syria except for a few isolated villages. Syria is mostly a Muslim country nowadays. Most are Sunni, a small minority are Shi'ite, and some are Alawites or Druzes. Since the war with Palestine from 1967 onwards and the expulsion of the Palestinians, the religious proportions in Syria have altered in favor of a strong Sunni Islamic element.

RTE: What contact have you had with the Syrian villagers who live around Qal'at Si'man now, and how do they feel about St. Simeon? As you say, most are Moslem.

LUKAS: I've had some contact with the people, but I haven't lived in Telanissos to investigate this. They know, "this was a holy man in the old time, Christian, a little crazy... now we're selling souvenirs and postcards and you're buying." Here, I would be surprised if there was much religious or philosophical understanding, but perhaps in the hinterland of Qal'at Si'man, which is basically Kurdish and Moslem...

East of Qal'at Si'man there is one village, which in 1953 still had a Zoroastrian fire temple, in a Muslim context. This village could have a continuous history back to St. Simeon's time. I visited last September, but no one could give me any information, and if there's any connection with St. Simeon there, I'm not aware of it. What is nice is that the places in which St. Simeon the Elder and St. Simeon the Younger set up their pillars

are now preserved as monuments and pleasure grounds, and both Christians and Moslems come to spend the afternoon, take pictures, etc., so they are safe for the present.

But, I'd like to add something here. I have often witnessed how very simple Moslem people – the ones who hosted me for months during fieldwork – think about Christianity, and I've always seen that they have a very positive attitude towards it. They agree with me, "You believe in Allah, we believe in Allah, very good." They are not philosophical, they are not theological. They are happy as long as you believe in God, ONE God. They sometimes believe in a kind of Trinity - Allah-God, Jesus with Mary, as based in the Koran, but they don't worry about this. They are always very glad to hear that I am Christian. We have had lots of discussion about the good in the world. I honestly avoid discussions about the bad, and we have found quite a common ground of mutual sympathy. This is an important statement when one knows what Westerners generally think about Islam – we watch news that focuses on isolated radical movements in different spots, but they do not represent the general feeling of Moslems, and we never question the underlying reasons, the lack of perspective of the younger generation, etc. However, the war in Iraq has increased emotions in Syria, and there is indeed a feeling that the western Christian world was involved in bombing their brothers further east, in neighbouring Iraq.

Another thing I've found is that those people whom I meet in the Syrian countryside don't measure you as "Lukas, an archeologist," "Lukas, a doctor," "Lukas, a westerner." They judge you because you are Lukas. They don't care about the facades we set up – "Ah, you are a doctor," and automatically we put on a special register of language and discourse. I always present myself simply as Lukas, and I find that I am very much appreciated as a young man, whatever my vocation. I never inquire much about their education, about their economic conditions. I ask about what they feel, what they think about the world. And generally, I find that they are very happy. It's with them that I spend my evenings, it's with them that I dance, it's in their houses that I stay overnight.

In meeting Syrian Orthodox priests, bishops and metropolitans, one can see that Christians in the Near East have a much more sophisticated and relaxed way of dealing with Muslims than we do. This is an image that we Westerners do not see. We look at TV and say, "They are terrorists, they are bastards, they are destroying the world," but we cannot extinguish either

religion. We have to co-exist, and their lives prove that the better we co-exist, the better we make the world. I think that Syria, together with Lebanon, are quite good models of Christian-Muslim co-existence.

In the solitude of the Syrian countryside, St. Simeon's pillar, along with so many other remains of churches, monasteries and stylite sites, bears witness to a spiritual past. These amazing remains of well-cut stone inspire even today, and the archeologist's vocation is to find out what living in that age of spirituality would have meant for the peasant, the monk, the pilgrim, for you and me. ✦