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## THE MUMMIES OF THE HOLY VALLEY OF QANNOBINE IN LEBANON

Guita G. Hourani\*

The Qannobine -the Qadischa Valley, the Valley of Saints, Holy Valley- in Northern Lebanon is a cornucopia of sacred religious places, where cenobites devoted themselves to God by renouncing the world. The Valley was also a refuge for the persecuted lay Christians who took abode in and around it. Although the Valley has been insufficiently studied in archaeological and ethnological theory, a recent finding confirms that it could be a gold mine for anthropologists, historians, archaeologists and environmentalists. It was between 1989 and 1991 when a group of speleologists from Groupe d'Etudes et de Recherches Souterraines du Liban were studying Asi al Hadath Grotto that they discovered a valuable treasure -human remains dating back to the thirteenth-century A.D. Eight naturally mummified bodies were unearthed with their artifacts, embroidered clothes, Syriac and Arabic manuscripts, pottery, coins and household and defense instruments. Based on preliminary studies, it is believed that the mummies are from the Maronite community of the Hadath al Gibbet village located on the edge of the Qannobine Valley. The mummies, which are now housed at the National Museum in Beirut, Lebanon, received radiographic, tomographic and dental examinations at Hotel-Dieu de France in Beirut. In 1996, samples for DNA analysis were sent to the Laboratoire d' Oncologie Moléculaire, Institut Pasteur in France. To date no scientific studies of the examination or the analysis have been made public.

**Key words:** Natural mummification, medieval Lebanon, mortuary practices.

*El valle de Qannabine, formado por el valle de Qadischa, el valle de los Santos y el valle Sagrado en el norte del Líbano, es una cornucopia de lugares sagrados donde los cenobitas se consagraban a Dios y renunciaban a lo mundano. Estos valles también sirvieron de refugio a los cristianos perseguidos. A pesar de que el valle no ha sido estudiado detalladamente desde un punto de vista arqueológico e histórico, recientes descubrimientos confirman que podría ser una mina de oro para los antropólogos, historiadores, arqueólogos y ecologistas. Entre 1988 y 1991 un grupo de espeleólogos del Grupo de Estudios y de Investigación de Líbano estaban estudiando la cueva de Asi al Hadath, cuando descubrieron restos humanos del siglo XIII DC. En total se encontraron 8 cuerpos con momificación natural más sus artefactos, tejidos, bordados, manuscritos sirios y árabicos, cerámica, monedas e instrumentos cotidianos y de defensa. Estudios preliminares indicarían que las momias pertenecerían a la comunidad maronita de la villa Hadath al Gibbet, situada en el valle de Qannobine. Estas momias que se encuentran actualmente en el Museo Nacional de Beirut, Líbano, recibieron estudios radiográficos, tomográficos y dentales en el Hotel-Dieu de France en Beirut. En 1996 se realizaron estudios de ADN en el Laboratorio de Oncología Molecular del Instituto Pasteur, Francia. Hasta ahora no se había hecho público ninguno de los resultados científicos obtenidos.*

**Palabras Claves:** *Momificación natural, Libano medieval, prácticas mortuorias.*

### The Discovery

At eight o'clock on the evening of July 13, 1990, and after two years of excavation, speleologists from the Groupe d'Etude et de Recherches Souterraines du Liban (Gersl)<sup>1</sup> found the unexpected -a mummified corpse in the Asi al Hadath Grotto, which is situated on a 700 meter high precipice 1.300 meters above sea level.

The shrouded body belonged to a four-month-old infant. Her discoverers named her Yasmine. Clothed and fully interred only 40 cm below ground, she was lying on her back alone in the grave, her head resting on a smooth stone. Yasmine was carefully wrapped in gauze by the team and transported from the grotto to the laboratory. Beneath her shroud she wore three dresses<sup>2</sup> -one blue, with a beige dress over it and a more elaborate dark beige dress embroidered with silk threads over both. Her head was covered with a headdress, under which she wore a headband made of silk. She was adorned with one earring and a necklace garnished with hand-blown glass pearls and two coin pieces dated to the era of the Sultan Mamluk Baybars. Found nearby were a darker lock of human hair, bay leaves, almonds, walnuts, garlic and onion peels ([Gersl 1993: 38-40](#)). Little Yasmine was introduced to the world as the first known mummy of her people.

The Gersl excavation efforts continued, and between 1989 and 1991 other mummies were discovered. Yasmine had not been buried alone in the grotto; but four more infants, three adult females, a male skull and a foetus had shared her grave site and kept her company for some seven hundred years ([Gersl 1993: 35-57](#)).

The state of preservation of the mummies varied "with some being little more than bones and pieces of dry skin, while others are better preserved" ([Doumet-Skaf 1995: 86](#)). As the preliminary identification, numbering, and naming of the bodies progressed, the mummies each began to take on individual characteristics. And while each of the mummies provided new historical details, they also introduced further enigma to the history of Mount Lebanon.

The preliminary examination of the bodies revealed that they were naturally mummified<sup>3</sup>. The grotto in which they had been interred acted as perfect protection for the buried bodies, eliminating the formation of air pockets that normally facilitate the process of decomposition. Moreover, the low humidity of the grotto's air and the lack of organisms in its soil slowed the total decay of the bodies ([Gersl 1993: 220-222](#) and [Doumet-Skaf 1995: 8](#)). Once preserved, they remained virtually unchanged over the next seven centuries.

These rare and untouched graves lay in the environs of the Cedars of God in Northern Lebanon, ready to illuminate the history and culture of Medieval Mount Lebanon, on the one hand and on the other, to add to the mystery of the life and death of its inhabitants — the Maronites<sup>4</sup>. Buried simply but with dignity, all the bodies and one male skull were fully shrouded and interred at 40 to 80 cm underground. No gold, no valuable earthly possessions, no ornaments accompanied the bodies on their eternal journey ([Gersl 1993: 35-57](#)).

The Qannobine is a site of overwhelming serenity, a solemn forest of majestic cedars, scented pine trees, effervescent springs and marvelous terraces. It embraces hundreds of hermitages and rock caves for anchorites ([Leroy 1963: 107-113](#) and de la [Roque 1722: 48-57](#)); through the centuries, the persecuted and the oppressed found shelter in its villages and grottos (Encyclopédie Maronite 1992: 90; [de la Roque 1722: 48-57](#); [Leroy 1963: 99](#); and Salame-Sarkis 1980: 34). Many of the Valley's hermitages and rock caves bear the names of those hermits who lived or were massacred there ([De la Roque 1722: 57](#)). Some of the grottos are familiarly known by the title *Asi* (the impregnable), as in Asi al Hadath and Asi Hawqa where genocide once occurred (Encyclopédie Maronite 1992: 90).

This Qannobine Valley can reveal much about the faith and martyrdom of its inhabitants. Throughout their history, the Maronites were "firmly attached to their religious beliefs" and "would prefer persecution to recantation" by their religious adversaries ([Leroy 1963: 106](#)). Many of the Maronites of the Orontes River area, Hama, Homs, Mabboug, Qennersrin, Aleppo, Damascus and others joined their churchmen in Lebanon. They migrated from the cradle of their faith in the fifth-century, Cyrrhus and Apamea, to the refuge of the Qannobine Valley and its environs ([Beggiani 1996: 7](#)). Economic reasons were not a factor in this resettlement ([De la Roque 1722: 18-23](#)). Rather, the migration was a passage to religious freedom. Lebanon's mountain offered them an almost impenetrable sanctuary. Persecution by the Muslims and other Christian religious sects followed them to their new homeland ([Leroy 1963: 106-107](#)). Since that time, the Maronites have periodically faced the challenge of death for their faith. Individual and collective martyrdom shadowed every century of their existence. It is therefore not surprising that Maronite human remains are found in Mount Lebanon. What is astonishing are the mummified bodies unearthed at Asi al Hadath and the remarkable degree of their preservation.

### **The Grotto**

This incomparable discovery presented more questions than answers. Asi al Hadath Grotto is in the vicinity of Hadath al Gibbet, known as Al-Hadath ([Dussaud 1927: 72](#)). The high altitude of the grotto makes access or regular use of it as living quarters difficult<sup>5</sup>. Yet, there is evidence of organized communal arrangement: a man-made water reservoir (3.5 m x 1.4 m surface, 1.5 m depth and 8 cubic meters volume); a stone basin for grinding grain by hand; and two well-like openings ([Gersl 1993: 24-33](#)), probably used for retrieval and storage of water. The grotto is on two levels -a large living quarter on the first level, where the water reservoir and articles of everyday life were found, and a second level where the grave site was discovered (Liban Souterrain 1989: 10-11). Although a thorough scientific examination of the mummies, their artifacts and the site itself remains to be done, some preliminary remarks can be made at this time.

### **Historical Context**

Between 1102 and 1289 A.D., Mount Lebanon, including al-Hadath fell within the confines of the County of Tripoli<sup>6</sup>. Tripoli was one of the four fundamental city units of the crusaders'<sup>7</sup> Kingdom of Jerusalem, which also included the county of Edessa, the Principality of Antioch, and the Royal Territories ([Strayer 1982: 30](#)). During that period, the Mamluks<sup>8</sup> occupied Egypt, Syria and Palestine, and set out to conquer Lebanon and expel the Crusaders. As modern scholars have pointed out, the Ma, who

constituted the majority population of that county ([Salibi 1957: 288, 291](#); [Richard 1945: 86](#); and [de Vitry 1897: 79](#)), presented a constant obstacle to the Mamluks ([Salibi 1957: 294](#). See also de Tyre translated by Babcock 1943): "in fact, the effective military assistance rendered by the Maronites to the Franks of Tripoli must have been one of the factors that helped the county face repeated Muslim attacks successfully and outlast the other crusader states" ([Salibi 1957: 294](#)).

It was not long before the Mamluks realized that in order for them to capture Tripoli, they must first subdue the Maronites ([Salibi 1957: 295](#)). The Mamluks launched several assaults against the highland of Tripoli devastating Gibbet Besharri, Baqufa, Kfarsaroun, Hasrun, al-Hadath and others between 1250 and 1289 ([Salibi 1957: 294](#); [Al-Maqrizy 1936: 566](#); and [Grousset 1936: 640](#)). One particular raid was recorded in Ibn Abd az-Zahir's chronicle during his service as Secretary of the Court of three Mamluk Sultans (1223-1292 A.D.). Under the title of "The Account of Capturing the Patriarch of al-Hadath from the Region of Tripoli", he wrote:

*It happened that a Patriarch of the region of Tripoli annoyed, behaved insolently, became haughty and frightened the governor of Tripoli and all the Franks. He led astray the people of those mountains and the people of those valleys É. And this continued until he was feared by every one. He entrenched himself in al-Hadath and held his nose high [with arrogance] and no one succeeded in tricking him. It happened that the governors [of the Sultan] ambushed him several times but did not find him. Then the Turkomans sought him in his place and [finally] tricked him, captured and blindfolded him and [took him] prisoner. [The Patriarch] was one of the infidels and their impious ones, hence the Muslims were relieved of him and were spared his wickedness. His capture was a great conquest, greater even more than the conquest of a stronghold or a fortress. ([Ibn Abd Al-Zahir 1961: 4](#) and [Salibi 1956: 98](#)).*

Reports similar to that of Ibn ` Abd az-Zahir appear in the margins of two bibles<sup>9</sup> found in the Monastery of Mar Aboun (the Monastery of Saint Anthony of Qozhayya) located in the al Hadath region. The two bibles were discovered by Patriarch Istephan Duwayhi during his research and writing of *Tarikh al-Azmina* between 1670 and 1704. The first bible contains a note written in 1283 by an anonymous Christian who witnessed these events. The account contained in the second bible is a copy of the first one and is dated 1504 A.D. These accounts testify to the dramatic events unfolding in Asi al Hadath during the thirteenth-century. The witness and writer of the original account of 1283 tells us that:

*On August 22, 1283 the Muslim soldiers headed toward al Hadath, where the inhabitants took refuge in a magnificent and inaccessible grotto called al Asi. The grotto was besieged for seven [months]. [The soldiers] gained control of it through the Aman<sup>10</sup> then burned its prefecture [the al Hadath village] by fire and took the women captives. ([Duwayhi 1983: 261](#); [Salibi 1957: 294-295](#); and [Gersl 1993: 94](#)).*

These two references are testimonies of a tragic event that occurred in al Hadath. The accounts coincide in time, place, and action, and confirm an offensive against al Hadath, thereby providing some historical context for our understanding of this archaeological discovery.

## The Artifacts

Apart from the mummies themselves, a wealth of artifacts found at the site suggest that the people buried there were Maronites from the al Hadath village and that their death occurred circa 1283, which corresponds to the reign of the Mamluks and the presence of the Crusaders. Among the many examples of medieval pottery excavated, one pot attracts attention by its Arabic inscription: "This belongs to Boutros from al Hadath" ([Gersl 1993: 202-204](#)). Artistic and archaeological significance is manifested in the designs and motifs embroidered on textiles, which are identical to designs found in the Syriac Rabbula Gospels<sup>11</sup>. One example is the embroidery of two peacocks facing one another with a tree of life in between, which remains vivid in color seven hundred years later ([Gersl 1993: 78-80](#)). From the Grotto, over twenty manuscripts were unearthed. One of them is in Syriac and is a Maronite hymnody; another is in Arabic and bears the name and signature of George, son of David, the Archdeacon of al Hadath ([Gersl 1993: 146-210](#)). Among the discovered items were several engraved wooden double-toothed combs — thin teeth on one side and coarse on the other — which are identical to the combs used by Mamluk women in Egypt that are on display at the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, Egypt ([Gersl 1993: 215, 240, 245, 251](#) and [Abd Ar-Raziq 1973: 321-322](#)).

Many of the poles, arrows, and notches found are identical with the Mamluk era arrows now on display at the Traditional Art Museum of Aleppo in Syria ([Gersl 1993: 206-208](#)). The assortments of dated Crusader and Mamluk coins found at the site indicate that these mummies are of the thirteenth-century ([Gersl 1993: 198-201](#); [Slumberger 1878](#); and [Cox 1933](#)).

It is noteworthy that the archaeological textiles found with the mummies are the only artifacts studied so far. They number 30 pieces and provide tangible and valuable information on the popular apparel of the époque, as well as of the economic and social history of the northern region of Lebanon. These rare pieces from thirteenth-century Lebanon provide the field of archaeological textiles a unique opportunity to study the actual material rather than read descriptions in old travelogues.

All the pieces were tailored using cotton material of different shades of ecru. The analysis of these textiles proved that they were all woven in Baalbek from cotton planted and harvested on the terraces of the Qannobine Valley where the mummies originated ([Kallab 1995: 23-26](#)). The robes "all identical in their flowing voluminous style and belted in leather, are cut of heavy cotton cloth. Richly embroidered in straight or cross-stitched lines of geometric design -squares and diamonds framing motifs of crosses and flowers- they bear strong resemblance to the kilim patterns of nomadic Turkish origin. The textiles, still amazingly sturdy, have been washed back into their original resplendent colors" ([Khal 1998: 9](#)). The voluminous shapes aimed at covering the body, at being functional and at facilitating body movement. The beautiful embroidery was made by hand using local silk threads<sup>12</sup>. The variety of the colors of these silk threads were natively produced using vegetables from the vicinity such as indigo blue, madder and nut-gall. This cotton material was worn not only by the common people but also by the rich and royal. ([Kallab 1995: 25-26](#)).

However, the most important and uncontested evidence comes from the mummies themselves.

### Customs and Rituals

Compared to the mummies of Egypt, these mummies were simply buried without any long-term or elaborate preparation. A preliminary observation of the mummies has revealed striking parallels with customs and rituals still practiced in present-day Lebanon. An adult woman was found buried with her eighteen-month-old child. The infant was placed at the mother's left shoulder. We are almost certain that the infant is hers, since this burial custom is still practiced today in Lebanon when the deaths of both mother and child are caused by complications in the birthing process or in postpartum<sup>13</sup>. Most interesting of all is that the woman had pieces of cotton and cloth inserted in both her vaginal and anal orifices. This preparation of the deceased for viewing is still practiced to our day. In some areas of Lebanon, such as the Bekaa Valley, the cotton and cloth pieces are wrapped around a small onion and inserted in human orifices<sup>14</sup>.

Another cultural manifestation is the presence of strands of long black human hair found between Yasmine's toes, which probably belonged to the child's mother. Local tradition has it, that the grieving mother will pull out her hair while kissing the feet of her lost child ([Gersl 1993: 40](#) and personal observation of this practice in Lebanon).

A talismanic prayer recovered from the grotto requests the intercession of saints in curing a sick child ([Gollancz 1912: xxxi-xxxii](#) and [Dandini 1884: 127](#)). This prayer is almost identical to those still used among the Maronites in present-day Lebanon; e.g., *Kitab Mar Antonios* — the Talisman of Saint Anthony of Qozhayya ([Salame-Sarkis 1989: 36-39](#)). A wooden house key was found on the body of one of the adult female mummies. In accordance with traditional customs, at the funeral of the last surviving member of a family, the key to the dead person's house is tossed over the roof of that house, indicating that the house of that family will forever be closed. In this case, the person died in a besieged grotto, so the key was tossed in the grave ([Gersl 1993: 46-48](#)). Today, in similar circumstances mourners will comment by saying, "Pity this family, their house is forever closed".

### The Status and Future of the Mummies

The mummies, which have been out of their original environment since early 1990, have yet to be fully studied. They are now housed at the National Museum in Beirut and "are exposed to all sorts of factors that can cause irreversible deterioration. Changes in temperature, bio-deterioration, photo-oxidation and pollution, among others, create harmful conditions from which such organic materials must be protected. Even substances, such as phenol, that are being used to preserve these mummies from insects, fungus or bacterial attacks are likely to cause reactions on the skin's surface and thus have long-term caustic effects. Such dangers are also compounded by the museum's heavily trafficked urban area (emitting high amounts of oxidants), lack of air filters (to remove soot and dust) and drastic changes in temperature, etc." ([El-Dahdah 1995: 9](#)). According to a spokesperson from the Museum, samples from the mummies have been sent to the Laboratoire d'Oncologie Moléculaire, Institut Pasteur in France to be examined. No reports regarding the findings have been publicly released as yet.

These physical remains can teach us much about the medieval history of Lebanon and the Maronite people. The mummies also have much to teach us about natural preservation, which is a rare phenomenon by international standards. Professor Arthur Aufderheide, a renowned pathologist and expert on mummies, has stated that the mummies can be analyzed and studied, either individually or collectively, through Computerized tomography (CT Scan), X-rays, osteological examination, dentition, chemical dietary reconstruction, radiocarbon dating, coprolite studies, molecular biology study (DNA) and hair and nail analysis.

Professor Aufderheide pointed out that through such studies, these mummies will help to identify relationships within the grotto-group itself; that kinship elements may also be traced with their contemporary descendants; and that very specific information can be gained about their diets, medicines, diseases and other ailments. The causes of their deaths can be obtained through the use of modern technologies in studying them.

Museums in many countries are faced with a shortage of funds for the study of antiquities, but most stewards of national treasures find that they can accomplish their objectives through collaborative relationships with scientists and scholars from the international community.

It is, moreover, critical that these mummies be studied before preservation considerations, such as "inert atmosphere cases"<sup>15</sup> ([EL-Dahdah 1995: 9](#)) deny scientific access to them.

This is why during the Third World Congress on Mummy Studies in Arica, Chile, an effort was made to rally the attendees to sign a petition addressed to the Lebanese government requesting it to make the mummies accessible to study by international scientists and scholars. The petition was sent to the Lebanese government, but it has not been acknowledged or responded to as yet.

The study of these mummies will inevitably connect us to a history that has been passed along, generation after generation, by word-of-mouth during cold winter nights — a history that now finds tangible evidence in the mummies.

Now that their solemn sleep has been interrupted, Yasmine and her companions lie at the Lebanese National Museum in Beirut, patiently waiting for the world of science to decipher their secrets.

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1 A Lebanese non-profit organization established in 1982 to document and study Lebanon's grottos, caves, caverns and cavities.

2 Seasonal clothing was not known in thirteenth-century Mount Lebanon. People simply added layers of clothing in winter.

3 Mummification occurs either through an act of man, as in the mummification of the Egyptian mummies, which occurred due to a mortuary treatment called embalming; or by an act of nature, like the mummification of the ancient Scythian bodies of the Altai mountains in Siberia, which occurred due to the permafrost conditions; or that of the Lindu man, due to the anaerobic conditions of the bogs ([Brothwell 1987: 17-18](#)).

4 The Maronites, Eastern Catholics, derive their name from the celebrated Saint Maron (c. 350-410 A.D.), who lived in Apamea in what is now Syria. There, he led the life of a hermit and established a hermetic way of life by living under the elements without shelter. He guided a number of disciples and many lay followers who embraced his way of life. These followers came to be called the Maronites ([Jowett 1826: 17](#); [Canivet and Leyro-Molinghen 1979: 29-33](#); and [Urquhart 1860: 10-18](#)).

5 Mount Lebanon's inhabitants have been building and living in houses since before the Canaanites, the Amorites and the Phoenicians (See [Renan 1864](#)).

6 Tripoli, on the north shore of Lebanon, was one of the Crusader's strongholds. It fell to the Mamluk army in 1289 ([Salibi 1957: 291, 294](#) and [Hiro 1992: 1](#)).

7 The Crusaders were Western Christians who led organized military expeditions against Muslim rulers in order to control the Holy City of Jerusalem and to give aid to abused fellow Christians in the East.

8 Muslims, the Mamluks, literally "owned men" or slaves, established the Mamluk dynasty, which ruled Egypt and Syria from 1250 to 1517. The Mamluks were hailed for their expulsion of the remaining Crusaders from the Levant.

9 It is not unusual to find record of important events written in bibles. An account of the Arab invasion of Palestine, for example, appears on the leaf of a fourth-century Gospel manuscript in the British Library. Similarly, a narrative of the massacre of the Syrian Orthodox community in southeast Turkey between 1895 and 1896 is found written in one of the Mingana manuscripts.

10 According to Islamic religious law, *Aman* is a pledge of security and a promise of protection given by Muslim(s) to non-Muslim(s) [Jews and Christians] belonging to *dar al harb* [Abode of War] for a specific period of time.

11 The Rabbula Gospels, a sixth-century artistic masterpiece, belonged to the Maronite Patriarchate until the mid-fifteenth-century. It is now housed in the Medicaen-Laurentian Library, Florence, Italy.

12 Silk production was introduced to Tripoli by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian in the seventh- century A.D. ([Firro 1990: 151-169](#). See [Chevalier 1971](#)).

13 I personally observed this practice in the case of a friend, who died in childbirth in Jal el Dib, Beirut, Lebanon in 1979.

14 My paternal grandmother explained this process to me when she assisted in the preparation of our neighbor for viewing.

15 An Inert Atmosphere Case is a medium developed by the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) for the long-term preservation of the Egyptian mummies. It is a "hermetically sealed volume that, when flushed with an inert gas such as nitrogen, creates an environment wherein deterioration caused and aided by oxygen can be stopped" ([El-Dahdah p. 9](#)). Once mummies are hermetically sealed, any attempt to re-open the case will cause disintegration.

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