

# Monastery of Mor Abay

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📍 Savur District, Killit, Qellet (Dereiçi) Village, Andıddeyr Locale

Present Function: **Abandoned**

Registry Status: **Registered - 06.07.2010/3280 Diyarbakır Regional Board for Conservation of Cultural and Natural Assets**

## History

This monastery, which was dedicated to a Persian saint, was founded in 370 according to some sources (Akyüz, 1998: 145), and in the 6th century according to others (Barsoum, 2000, 560). Mor Abay's life story has survived to the present day in Garshuni texts written in later periods (15th -16th centuries) (for the life story of Mor Abay translated from an Arabic manuscript, see: Akyüz, 1998, 150). In a monastery colophon, the name of the monastery is mentioned as follows: God's mother Mort Maryam, the Great Mor Abay and his disciple Mor Teodute and his disciples Mor Yavsep, and Mor Shabay and his disciple Mor Dimet (Palmer, 2010, 194). The site of Mor Abay monastery, known as Koros Mountain, is located in the close vicinity of the monasteries of Mor Teodute, Mor Shabay, and Mor Dimet. Palmer defines Mor Abay as the mother of these two monasteries and emphasizes that they are all connected (Palmer, 2010, 215).

The life story of Mor Teodute (d. 698) mentions that this saint stayed in this monastery. Although the earliest text from the life stories of this saint is from the 12th century, it is important that this information is traditionally conveyed. We know that in the years 1002-1031, a priest from Mor Abay was appointed as the bishop of Dara. We understand that around 1155, there was a specific connection between this monastery and Dayr al-Za'faran. Meanwhile, in Mardin, there was a bishop called Yuhannon, who was particularly noted for his construction activities, and probably the first additions to Mor Abay in the Middle Ages were made during his time (Vöobus, 1976, 214).

Pognon recorded three Syriac inscriptions in this monastery. One of the two inscriptions, which is lost today, was about the construction of the monastery during the time of the priest



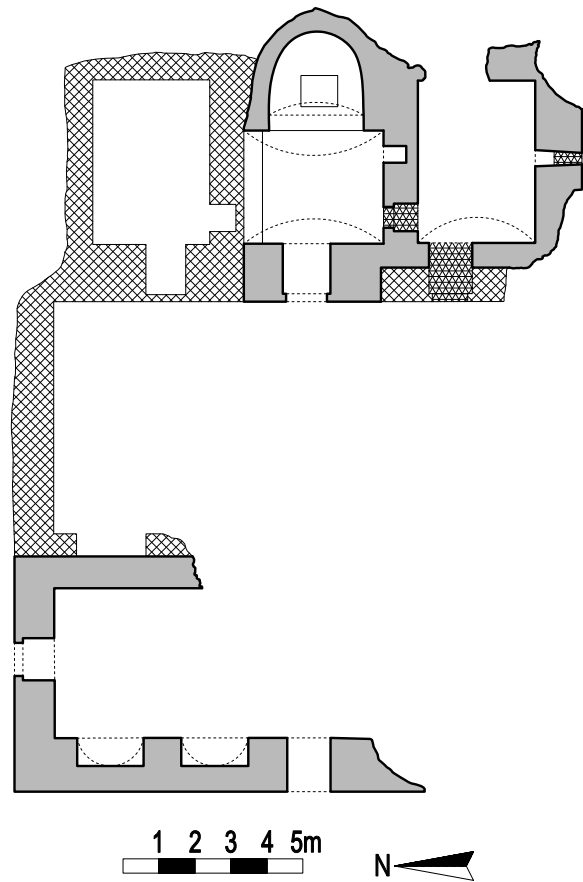
Abd-al-Messih and monk Moses. This inscription, which also mentions other structures built during the period of Abd-al-Messih, does not contain a date, but Pognon states that it was probably written in the second half of the 13th century (Pognon, 1907, inscription no: 93: 188).

One of the other two inscriptions still remains, which is horizontally placed on the tower of the monastery. Written in Estrangelo script, this inscription reads:

This tower, in one thousand, five hundred and sixty seven (1567) Greek year, in the reign of the victorious and joyful King Najm al-Din, the crown of all kings, - May Allah extend his life – is renewed with the efforts of Patriarch St. Mor Yuhannon, the monastery warden Humdan’s son Rabdan Moushe and all the monks. May everyone who reads pray for the contributors. And everyone who reads, pray to God for the priest AbdulMesih, architect / engineer and the dead. May also pray for all who read this (all contributors) (Translation: Mihayel Akyüz).

The third inscription, which was formerly located in the eastern tower and is said to be in the monastery of Dayr al-Za’faran, mentions that the door, tower, vault and altars were restored in 1561 Greek year (AD 1249/1250), again in the time of Najm al-Din al-Malik al-Sa’id. Akyüz has published the two surviving inscriptions in Turkish (Akyüz 1998: 149, 150). In addition to the name of the priests and monks involved in the restoration, a group of sixty monks is also mentioned (Pognon, 1907, inscription no: 92, 187).

The monastery was in an important location during the Artuqid period. Savur was a robust fortress located between Mardin and Hasankeyf, two important centers of the Artuqids. It was also a settlement where the Artuqids spent their summers. The fact that there are inscriptions in the Mor Abay monastery with the name of the Artuqid sultan indicates that there is a strong connection between the Artuqids and the monastery, and may indicate that the Syriacs had a relatively comfortable time during this period. This monastery also had a lion relief, the location of which is unknown today (for the photograph of this lion relief see: Wiessner 1981, I/II, 81, fig.37). Lion was a figure, which was used by the Artuqids as an indicator of power. There are examples from the Middle Ages on Diyarbakır fortifications and in Mardin Museum. The lion in Mor Abay is similar in style to these lions.



It is known that Yuhannon bar Shayallah, the bishop of Diyarbakır and Savur in the 15th century, stayed in this monastery and restored it (Palmer, 1990, 23, d. 17). The patriarch Joshua I, who took his seat in 1509, was from this monastery (Palmer, 1990, 46, fn.11) and eleven other bishops were educated in this monastery. Barsoum mentions that the monastery, which was an episcopal center, was abandoned in the 1700s and later became a ruin (2000, 187 and 2006, 14). In late 19th century, Sachau described the monastery as a ruin (1883, 420). Pognon, who records the inscriptions, states that all the buildings of the monastery are in a very poor condition (1907, 186).

### Architecture

The monastery is located in a valley surrounded by hills in the east and west, about 1.5 kilometres north of the Dereçi village’s center. The monastery has an outer dimension of 39x54 meters, and has a square plan slightly narrowing down to the south. Aerial photos show garden or terrace walls beyond the northern main wall of the building.



The high and thick outer wall of the monastery complex has a width of 1.5-2.0 meters and gives the impression of a fortification. From the outside, the remains of two towers rising from the eastern and southern main walls are visible. The tower on the south wall has an arched entrance. The tower on the east wall, which is located close to the church of the monastery, also has a semi-circular arched entrance providing access to the monastery. Above the entrance door is a rectangular window (approximately seven rows of stones above) with jambs of large cut stone blocks. There are other rectangular openings in the surrounding walls, although not as large as this window.

When the architecture of the building is examined, at least two different construction periods are identified, which is supported by the information in the inscriptions. Large fine-cut stone blocks are used in first phase in the 5-6th century. In the second phase, which is the restoration in the 12-13th century, smaller rough-cut stones were used. Some of the windows, with flat arches, in the monastery have timber lintels. There are spaces with different dimensions in the monastery, some of which seem to be inter-related. Due to the filling of their ground levels, the functional or architectural features of these spaces cannot be traced. Only the space that is identified as the monastery's church gives clear information. The church, which is built with fine-cut stone masonry, has a typical monastery-type

plan of Tur 'Abdin region. It has a nave extending on the north-south axis and a three-partite apse in the east. The plan sketch of Wiessner shows different building phases (1981, I/I, 63, fig. 12).

Only the church's apse can be accessed through an opening with flat lintel due to the filling of the ground level. The traces of plaster on this entrance are noteworthy. There is a moulding running along the entire apse, which is covered by a vault. When Pognon visited the monastery, the church's nave was completely ruined, but the apse was in better condition (Pognon, 1907, 186).

The main church of the Mor Abay monastery has similarities with the main church of Mor Gabriel monastery, and the Ambar church. It reflects the typical 6th century architectural features of the region with its stone vaults, mouldings and stone workmanship. For these reasons, Barsoum dates the church to the 6th century (Barsoum 2000: 560). When Sinclair visited the monastery in the 1980s, he saw frescoes on the apse wall (Sinclair, 1989, 322). Although there are not any frescoes in the spaces accessed, there are the traces of lime plaster. The arches have profiles with dentils.

Pognon mentions the inscriptions found in the niche at the eastern gate, which are lost today: 'There are inscriptions on two stone blocks in this niche. One of these blocks is not damaged,

whereas the other has fractures on it. Neither of these blocks are in their original location' (Pognon, 1907, 186). Pognon argues that the location of these two inscriptions were changed when the church was rebuilt, and they were originally in the interior. He also mentions a third inscription on the outer wall of the tower in the center of the western wall. The position and orientation of this inscription, which is now placed sideways, indicates that its location is not original.

About 15 meters southeast of the building is a chapel with a square plan and a flat roof, constructed with rough-cut stone masonry, as well as a well. According to the tradition, this chapel was dedicated to Mort Shem'uni. A moulding with dentils on the arch of the apse, elevated by a step, is noteworthy. There are traces of plaster on its walls.

### Present State

The monastery can easily be reached from Killit village (Dereiçi). There is a secondary road passing about 100 meters away from the monastery. However, the building does not have any visitors except those who already know it. There are not any information panels neither on the region nor on the three monasteries in the area. The old

village of Killit, which is the closest settlement to the monastery of Mor Abay, is now largely deserted. Only a few families continue inhabiting in the village, which was mostly abandoned by the migration wave of 1970s. Only the houses of these inhabitants and the ones used as summer houses are in good condition. Iwans and ornamentations are observed in some of the historic houses in the village, which are in danger of being lost. The village has three churches of three different communities, belonging to Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants (Hollerweger, 1999, 143).

As per the monastery complex, Sinclair, who visited the building in the 1980s, had mentioned that the vaults were collapsed, and the floor was raised with soil (Sinclair, 1989, 322). During the site visits to the monastery in 2018 and 2019, the building was found in poor condition and neglected, confirming that no measure for the protection of the monument has been taken to mitigate the effects of cumulative decay for at least the past forty years. At present, the upper structure of the building and most of its main walls are collapsed, and its ground level has been raised more than 1.5 meters due to the accumulation of collapsed building material. The ruins



of the monastery are covered with dense lower vegetation, while locally the growth of trees is observed. The elevation is raised also outside of the monastery complex.

There are structural cracks and collapses on the walls of the monastery. Severe material losses and surface weathering are also observed in the building. The northern and western walls of the narthex are partially standing, but the vault has completely collapsed. Some of the walls of the nave are visible, but due to the collapsed vault, further observations cannot be made. Indeed, the ruinous condition of the monastery, obstructs understanding of the architectural features and plan organization of the spaces other than that of the church.

### **Risk Assessment and Recommendations**

The church of the monastery -dating back to early 6th century- shares similarities with important monasteries such as Mor Gabriel and Mor Ya'kup. It also shows similarities with the church in Ambar in terms of its construction technique, ornamentalions, dimensions, and plan organization. However, the ensemble of the values of this church, and its surrounding monastery complex is in danger of being lost due to long-standing neglect, acts of vandalism and incidents of looting (i.e. indicated by the loss of some of church's inscriptions recorded by Pognon in 1907).

The monastery, survives in poor condition. It is directly exposed to the effects of water and wind, while its upper structure is largely collapsed. It is open to vandalism since its entrance is not controlled or guarded. In short, the structure is at risk of rapid deterioration, collapse and loss. The building should be protected against further deterioration and collapse by first taking emergency consolidation, stabilization and security measures. A future rejuvenation project should aim at a holistic approach whereby taking into account not only the monastery but also its



immediate surroundings (the village and other monuments) and landscape; the latter being one of the factors affected the choice of establishing the monastery in that location. Moreover, the inclusion of the Killit Village, which is a historic Syriac village with abandoned historic houses, as well as the remnants of the monasteries of Mor Theoduto and Mor Dimet that are closer to Mor Abay Monastery, in a conservation project is essential for the preservation of the Syriac cultural heritage in this area. A cultural route, connecting these buildings and the village, is recommended together with insertion of information panels and signage.