

The History of Lebanon Holy Sites

Saint Elije Monastery – Mayfouq

“Mayfouq” is a Syriac word which means “the water found above”. The village of Mayfouq is in Caza of Jbeil (Byblos) at an altitude of about 850m above sea level, and at 64km from Beirut.

The Elije region has several religious sites that testify to its history and importance across ages. Most important among those sites is the Monastery of Saint Elije.

The history of this monastery is still somewhat vague. It is built with natural un-chiseled building boulders. The oldest evidence of its history can be seen in the Syriac inscriptions dated AD 1120 found above a window in the monastery’s north façade. The inscriptions state: “In the name of the living eternal Lord, four patriarchs built the monastery, Jeremiah, Jacob, and John in AD 1221. The construction of the Lord’s mother monastery, so her prayers be with us, was completed by the sinners father David, Peter, and John.”

In this context, it is important to note that some of the inscriptions found on the walls of the monastery relate part of its history: to the right of the main entrance, there is a relief of a bull’s head which signifies the remains of a pagan temple; above the doorsill of the main gate, a cross stands as an evidence of the Crusade era.

This monastery remained deserted until the Lebanese Maronite Order received it as a donation from the ruler of Mount Lebanon Prince Youssef Chehab, and restored it. On one of the walls, we read the following inscription: “This temple was renovated in 1746 by the priests Amon and Manila.”

Based on historical evidence, sixteen patriarchs lived in this monastery which was considered the most prominent see of the Maronite Patriarchate in Lebanon. Among those we cite Peter the First (1121) who had a major role in the construction of the monastery, Jeremiah of Amchit (1215), and Daniel Hadchiti who bravely confronted the Mamluks and died a martyr in 1282.

The church of the monastery was probably built on the remains of a pagan temple; this is based on some of the inscriptions found on the old stone blocks. Presently, the church still bears evidence of its historic and antiquarian value.

The Monastery of Saint Youhanna (John) Maroun - Kfarhay

“Kfarhay” is a Syriac word which means the pure place. Kfarhay is a town in the Caza of Batroun; it has an altitude of 400m above sea level, and located at 67km from Beirut. This town contains several water sources; its inhabitants are mainly farmers planting tobacco, olive trees and vegetables. There are many historic sites in Kfarhay in addition to religious landmarks most important of which is the Monastery of Saint Youhanna Maroun.

Most resources state that the monastery was probably built during the seventh century around the year AD 676 by Patriarch Youhanna Maroun who moved over the relics of “the head of Saint Maroun” into it; thus the Monastery became the first See of the Maronite Patriarchate.

After the Patriarchate See was moved to the Monastery of Saint Yanouh, the Monastery of Saint Youhanna Maroun was destroyed by wars and the ensuing acts of persecution. It was reconstructed during several periods by the earnest efforts and dedication of Maronite patriarchs until it was finally renovated by Patriarch Youssef Estephan aided by prominent men in the region towards the end of the eighteenth century.

According to a document dated August 15, 1812 written by Bishop Germanos Thabet, a school was established in the vicinity of the monastery, but the school had to close down due to the circumstances which the monastery suffered from.

Based on inscriptions found on a marble plate mounted on one of the internal walls, the monastery was restored several times the latest of which was in 1996 by the endeavor of Bishop Boulos Emil Saadé. The inscriptions state: “His Beatitude and Eminence Patriarch Cardinal Mar Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir sanctified the restoration works of the Monastery of Saint Youhanna Maroun in Kfarhay during the term of His Excellency Bishop Boulos Emil Saadé the general patriarchal deputy in the Batroun region on August 3rd, 1996,” who returned the relics of the “Head of Saint Maroun” from Italy after one of the Benedict monks carried them over to the Monastery of the Cross in Sansovino in Italy in AD 1131, to be transferred later to a church built there in the name of Saint Maroun. The bishop of Foligno moved it later on to the local cathedral after the church was demolished in AD 1449.

Following the exchange of successive correspondences between Bishop Boulos Saadé and Arduino Bertoldo, bishop of Foligno, an agreement was reached to send part of the relics inside a bronze statue through the general secretariat of the Vatican to the Apostolic Nunciature in Lebanon. Bishop Saadé handed over the relics to the Maronite Patriarchate on October 17th, 1998. The relics were preserved at the consignment office of the Patriarchal See before they were moved over to the Monastery of Saint Youhanna Maroun.

The church of the monastery was sanctified during the term of Patriarch Youhanna Maroun and dedicated to Saint Maroun. Its marble altar, next to the wall, is gold-lined, and in the center lies the sanctum sanctorum. The church was restored in 1996; its architecture is distinguished by relief building blocs and an illustrious vault. The church doors carry a variety of decorations and some ancient scripts, in addition to the wooden doors that add to its aesthetic value.

The Monastery of Saint Maroun – the sepulcher of Saint Charbel

Annaya is a Syriac word which means ‘the singer’ or the ‘shepherd’. Annaya is in the Caza of Jbeil (Byblos); it has an altitude of 1100-1400m above sea level, and located at 58km from Beirut. In this town, we find the monastery of Saint Maroun and the sepulcher of Saint Charbel.

After Patriarch Gabriel II was killed, the Maronites were dispersed and lived through a long period of unsettlement. Until a time came when they reached with the Shiites the “one third agreement” to regain their properties in the regions they had deserted. Among those Maronites, we cite the two worshipers Youssef Abou Ramia and Daoud Issa who later regained the “Tor” region (the current “Mahbassah” or “sanctuary” in which Saint Charbel spent his life in seclusion). In 1811, Abou Ramia and Issa also renovated the remains of the ancient temple found there, and constructed a house they called “the Monastery of the Transfiguration”. In 1814, they donated “the Monastery of the Transfiguration” to the Lebanese Maronite Order during the term of Father Superior or Abbot Ignatius Bleibel with the consent of Patriarch Youhanna Helou who requested that the monastery be dedicated to the patron Saints Peter and Paul, and appealed to the believers to assist the priests in completing the construction of the monastery.

Due to the financial conditions of the Maronite Order back then, means were hardly enough to support the monks; furthermore, the location was not suitable for the construction of the monastery. So, the Order decided to turn the old monastery into a hermitage or a sanctuary for seclusion. In 1820, the Maronite Order began to buy property from the local inhabitants and built some prayer cells. The monks completed the construction of all the cellars in 1841.

In 1842, the monastery faced a disaster due to the attack launched against it by the inhabitants of the town of Hjoula. The monastery was completely robbed of all its contents; its ancient manuscripts were burned; and one of the monks, Friar Iskandar Turtujani was killed.

After the restoration of the monastery, it was turned into an initiation monastery. Friar Charbel Makhoul (Saint Charbel) declared his monastic vows there on October 1st, 1853.

In 1977, the Maronite Order set up a special museum in the basement floor of the monastery to display Saint Charbel’s clerical attire and the sacred utensils he used. In addition, we find what the patients had left behind after they were graced with their healing. The second floor represents the reception area for visitors. The outer yard was also renovated, and it now contains an ancient water fountain.

Saint Charbel's life stages

Youssef Antoun Makhoul was born in 1828 in Bekaa Kafra (North Lebanon). He was raised as a Christian, and was fond of prayer ever since his childhood. He also followed the example of both of his maternal uncles who lived as hermits in the hermitage of the Monastery of Saint Antonious Qozhayya; thus so, Youssef got inclined to reclusion and a monastic life style.

In 1851, Youssef left his parents and his village heading towards the Convent of Our Lady of Mayfouq to spend his first year of his monasticism. He then left for the Monastery of Saint Maroun - Annaya where he joined the Maronite Order and took for himself the name of Charbel after one of the martyrs of the Antioch church in the second century. On November 1st, 1853, he declared his liturgical vows at the Monastery of Saint Maroun – Annaya and completed his theological studies at the Monastery of Saint Kibrianos –Kifan in Batroun.

He was ordained priest at the Patriarchal See in Bkerké on July 23rd, 1859.

Father Charbel lived in the Monastery of Saint Maroun – Annaya for sixteen years. On February 15th, 1875, he moved permanently to Saint Peter and Paul's hermitage at the monastery. He was exemplary in leading the life of a saint and a hermit spending his time in prayer and devotion, rarely leaving his hermitage. His life was modeled on that of the ancient hermits and saints in prayer, lifestyle, and practices.

Father Charbel lived in the hermitage for twenty three years. During the celebration of the holy ceremony on December 16th, 1898, he was struck with hemiplegia (total paralysis of the arm, leg, and trunk on the same side of the body), and endured a period of suffering and agony that lasted till Christmas Eve. He died on December 24th, 1898. On Christmas day, his body was moved from the hermitage to the monastery to be buried in the monks' cemetery now situated behind his statue.

Few months after his death, strong beams of light appeared around his grave. His body, which exuded sweat and blood, was moved into a special coffin. There, crowds of pilgrims started to visit the place supplicating his saintly intercession. Many were blessed with recovery and the spiritual grace of his intercession.

In 1925, a petition was raised to canonize him and declare his sanctity to Pope Pius XI. In 1950, father Charbel's tomb was opened in the presence of an official committee of doctors who verified the intact condition of the body. After that incident, more people were miraculously healed, and pilgrims of all religions and sects flocked to the monastery seeking his saintly intercession.

The most prominent historic sites in Hardine

Researchers unanimously agree that the term “Hardine” is of Syriac origin, and it means “those who are afraid”. An interpretation of the term says that “those who are afraid” means “those who fear God” i.e. those who are pious and devout. Some researchers suggest that the term could be composed of two Semitic roots combining “saw” and “judgment”.

The town of Hardine is situated in the high mountains of the Batroun region in the governorate of Mount Lebanon and on the borders between Jibbet Bsharry and the Koura, both of which lie to the North-West of Hardine’s jurisdiction area; it has an altitude of about 1300m above sea level, and located at 91km from Beirut.

This town has a number of rocky plates most important of which is the “Hardine’s plate”. It also contains a number of caves, sarcophaguses, Roman canals, pottery and coin remains, in addition to the big temple known as “the roman castle of Hardine” decorated with Ionic structure. Hardine also has other religious landmarks; it is famous for more than thirty monasteries and churches, most important among which are:

The monastery of Saint Sarkis al-Qarn

Bishop Youssef Dibs points out that “...the monastery of Saint Sarkis was ranked in tenth position on the list of the Maronite monasteries up till the twelfth century.”

During the second half of the fourteenth century, reference to the monastery recurred in the handwriting of patriarchs and bishops namely Patriarch Daoud Youhanna whose See was in this monastery; he lived and died in it. Moreover, this monastery was a patriarchal See during the last decade of the thirteenth century.

The monastery continued to flourish and thrive until it was occupied and burned down by the Turks in AD1640. They robbed the monastery of all its funds, ransacked the valuable furniture, and killed the priests...today only cracked walls stand with ornamental inscriptions and engravings smeared with mud and covered up with trees.

The monastery of Saint Fawqa

The Monk of San Silvestro, in his Greek manuscript that dates back to the mid seventeenth century, states, “...when the light of Christianity dawned on the mountain, the monks entered and transformed [it] into a monastery for prayer in the sixth century...the monastery had been built in the sixth century, but an earthquake destroyed it...the monks reconstructed it...”; the monastery of Saint Fawqa became one of the most important monasteries. In 1940, the Turks occupied it, robbed the money, ransacked its furniture, and took hold of the estates and the forests and all the produce.

The monastery of Saint Taqla

Viscount Philippe de Tarazi states in his book "The Most Truthful on the History of Lebanon" that the Syriac monks during the sixteenth century occupied a section of the monastery of Saint Risha and transformed it into a convent for cloistered nuns and chose Saint Taqla as its patron saint.

Today, only three pillars remain of which one only still stands on its base but without its capital as a witness to previous epochs of the monastery's history.

The monastery of Saint Risha

Viscount Philippe de Tarazi says, "The monastery of Saint Risha was raised on the remains of a temple known as "the Roman Castle". The Syriacs constructed it in the twelfth century AD and built cells to live in as well as contiguous rooms for visitors who came from all over."

Dr. Rafic Bassil points out that, "The monastery of Saint Risha was mentioned in the manuscript of the Syriac Prayers transcribed in AD1171 and preserved in the church of Al-Hafr village found in the vicinity of Sadad village, of Homs district, where Bishop Jirjis Dagher Hardini was buried in 1598." In 1640, the Turks occupied all the monastery's buildings and robbed its valuable furniture. It remained in oblivion till today.

The monastery of Saint Estephan

No manuscript was found to attest the date of the construction of this monastery; however, the Monk of San Silvestro states, "The monastery of Saint Estephan is one of the seven monasteries of united Hardine where hermits used to live inside caves and caverns; its monks were seven; all of them were either killed or displaced in the summer of 1640; thereafter the monastery became one of the deserted monasteries..."

The monastery of Saint Youhanna Shqeef

Dr. Rafic Bassil mentioned that the monastery of Saint Youhanna Shqeef was built during the era of the Latin Crusaders when Hardine was part of their eparchy in the prefecture of Tripoli..." Others believe that probably the Cistercian monks supervised its construction, and it was used as a station for caravans on the road of Jibbet and Batroun.

Today, the monastery is composed of six vaults; a baptism basin still stands in one of the corners of one vault. It is still there despite dire climatic conditions as well as negligence. Some earthen pottery is still found in addition to building blocks fallen off ceilings or walls and dispersed here and there.

The monastery-home of Saint Neematallah Kassab al-Hardini

The Maronite Order bought this house and restored it in 1971. Father Joseph Khashan exerted a lot of effort to transform the house into its present state ornamented with arched crossed vaults. This revered father completed the reconstruction aided by some of the villagers who took the initiative and sent father Khashan a letter carried over to him by Elias Khoury. The letter states in one of its sections, "...when I got to know that the appeal to the beatification of our father Neematallah Hardini was in process at the Vatican, and as it was well known world-wide that the place where a saint was born and brought up has to be preserved, I wished to write to you being the owner of the estate where our holy father Neematallah was born and raised that probably you wish to buy it, and it becomes a shrine in the future after his beatification... and if you have knowledge...whether the Order would take this project into serious consideration, you would have thus performed a gigantic and eternal deed that would immortalize your name in Mount Lebanon as did others in the village of Saint Charbel Makhoulf..."

The monastery of Our Lady of Bkerké

"Bkerké" is a Syriac word which means "the house of tomes and bookcases"; it is probably composed of two syllables: "beit kerké" which means "a place where bookcases, tomes, and cilts (major division of a published work) are kept", that is a library where books and records are preserved.

Bkerké is situated on the south-eastern versant of a mountain overlooking the city of Jounieh amidst a thick forest with a direct view of the Jounieh Bay and the coast that extends southward all the way to where the cape of Beirut is visible. Bkerké is at 300m above sea level and at 25km from Beirut. This town has the Monastery of Our Lady of Bkerké which is the See of the Maronite Patriarchate.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, ten Sheiks of the Khazen family built this monastery in the vicinity where the church of Our Lady al-Bashousha (bright-faced) still stands; they also bought the surrounding land lots. In AD1726, the monastery was handed over to the Maronite Antonine Order who, with the help of Sheikh Haykal el Khazen and his brother Khattar, built a new monastery composed of four small rooms and a priest's house.

In AD 1751, Bishop Germanos el Halabi of the Antonine Order bought the monastery and completed its construction and handed it over to Sister Hanneh Ojeimi who established the Order of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

However, in AD 1779, a Bull (official order or announcement from the Pope) was issued to annul that Order; henceforward, the Monastery of Our Lady of Bkerké became the winter See of the Maronite Patriarchate.

Since AD 1823, the Maronite patriarchs have spent the winter season continuously in this monastery. The first patriarch was Youssef Hobeich from Sahel Alma.

The Patriarchal See contains a library of old valuable and rare books, and archives of Bulls received by the patriarchs, Arabic and Syriac manuscripts transcribed by bishops and priests over generations, and documents that relate the conditions of the Maronites in times past.

In AD 1730, the church was built with outstanding and distinguished artistic perfection with a display of columns after the simple oriental bearing. Patriarch Elias Hoyeck furnished it with precious utensils and diverse uniforms and two copper candleholders. The artist Youssef Hoyeck adorned the church with oil paintings the most magnificent of which is a painting of Our Lady of the Assumption mounted behind the marble altar brought over from Rome.

The monastery of Saint Maroun – Hermel

“Hermel” is an Aramaic word which means “the pyramid of God”. Al-Hermel city is the center of the Hermel Caza which is the furthest Caza from the city of Zahlé the capital of the Bekaa governorate. It is at an altitude of 750m above sea level located at 143km. from Beirut. This town is considered a meeting point connecting both governorates of the Bekaa and North Lebanon. The Monastery of Saint Maroun is one of the most important religious landmarks in Hermel.

There are no available documents to attest to the history of the monastery’s construction. Yet, some information affirms that it was built during the fifth century. The Jesuit father Henri Lammens says in his book “Tassrih al-absar fi ma yahtawi Lubnan min athar” (The Wandering of Eyes Over Lebanon’s Archaeological Sites), “...some monks seized the opportunity of the presence of prominent rocky beds in the place to dig underneath; they dug deep and built fences in front and outer walls in which they made loop holes thus creating a roofed corridor. Behind that corridor, they also dug out rooms and cells linked to the foot of the mountain with a narrow tunnel leading all the way to the Assi river bank. Today, the building is desolate and uninhabited.” Only three levels are left of the whole building.

The monastery of Our Lady of Qannoubine

Qannoubine is a Syriac term which means the ‘group’ or ‘the company’. There is no evidenced attestation to the date of the monastery’s construction. Some believe it was built by king Theodosius the Great during the fourth century; others believe it was built by Saint Theodosius known as the Abbot of monasteries, or by one of the Saint’s disciples.

This monastery played a significant role in the history of monasticism and asceticism in the sacred valley. The scholar Patriarch Dweihi called it “the monastery of the two-hundred monks”. It was adopted as a center for the initiation of monks where they lead a communal life before moving on to a life of asceticism in the near by hermitages.

It is important to note that the secular authorities as well sought its prosperity. The Mamluk king al Thaher—Barqouq—went down to the monastery after he escaped from jail. Minister Boutros, father superior of the monastery, welcomed him; as a result, the king signed a copper plate asserting that the monastery of Our Lady of Qannoubine was exempted from paying taxes.

Our Lady of Qannoubine monastery was the official See of the Maronite Patriarchate since AD 1440 until the first quarter of the nineteenth century despite the fact that some patriarchs had to leave it and take shelter in the Cazas of Kesrouan or Chouf due to the despotism of the Tripoli rulers. The first patriarch who lived in the monastery was Patriarch Youhanna al-Jaji.

This monastery was built in different stages to become formed of its cross wall construction and tubular cellars. Important to note that five years ago, a fresco was discovered of a face that could be the face of an angel, that is probably one of other fresco remains dating back to the Middle Ages; however, restoration works are still going on today supervised by the Antonine Sisters.

Our Lady of Qannoubine monastery is considered one of the oldest Maronite monasteries where monks lived according to the ancient tradition of ascetic life after having been in seclusion in the caves spread all over the valley in the vicinity of the monastery.

The church, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, takes the shape of a domed arch that seems like a broken vault; its roof is made up of wooden junctures inserted in the rock. It is believed that its plastering was probably done in the year AD 1702 based on inscriptions in Karshouni (transcription of Arabic in Syriac letters) found at the bottom of a fresco on the main arch.

There are no windows in the structure due to the difficulty of digging them in rock; its vault is composed of three apses crowned with several frescos, most important of which is the one representing the coronation of the Virgin Mary, found in the northern side of the church above the baptism basin.



The coronation of the Virgin Mary

The fresco pictures the coronation of the Virgin Mary by the Holy Trinity (Holy Spirit), resting above the cedars of Lebanon, wearing red the sign of glory, and all the Maronite patriarchs at her feet wearing Roman attire. The Latin crown has Syriac inscriptions saying “come on my bride from Lebanon, ye be crowned”, and the angels surround her with their musical instruments with clouds spread around them. The sun appears in the right corner of the picture while the moon is in the left one; both represent a basic Syriac iconographic factor. We also notice other inscriptions in the Karshouni script listing the names of the consecutive patriarchs to the See without neglecting their pictures as well. It is important to note that this fresco is an oriental iconography that relates a synopsis of the Maronite state during that period. It has Levantine roots and Roman Latin inscriptions despite the addition of Italian factors. The lower part of the fresco was damaged by time.



The fresco of the Pantocrator

In the main apse, we find the fresco of “supplication” representing Lord Jesus, the Pantocrator, sitting on His throne wearing a large red triangular crown similar to the one worn by the Supreme Pontiff; his robe is dark blue ornamented with flowers; he blesses with his right hand raising two fingers that denote his dual nature: the absolute holy one and the absolute human one. In his left hand, he holds the Holy Bible; at his feet, the four animals are found. Around him, young angels spread engulfed with clouds.



The fresco of the Virgin Mary to the right of the Pantocrator

To his right, stands the Virgin Mary with a golden halo around her head and her arms raised open to her son the king of glory; her right hand to her heart. The artist was keen to clearly depict the three stars in the form of buds on the Virgin Mary's head and shoulders, as a sign of her virginity before, during, and after delivery.



The fresco of Saint Estephanos to the left of the Pantocrator

To his left stands Saint Estephanos wearing the uniform of a deacon and carrying the palm leaf of martyrdom in his right hand.

In the bottom of the fresco, Syriac inscriptions state, "Hail to you Saint Mary, supplicate for us; Saint Estephanos pray for us."



The fresco of Saint Joseph

On both sides of the big altar, two small apses are found; the fresco of the right apse represents Saint Joseph carrying the Divine Child in his left hand; a saw in his right hand symbolizes his profession as a carpenter. Saint Joseph is surrounded by six angels. At the bottom of the fresco, Syriac inscriptions state, "Hail Saint Joseph, supplicate for us".



The fresco of Saint Daniel

The fresco of the left apse represents the Prophet Daniel thrown in a black pit.

The ancient monastery of Saint Elisha'

The scholar Patriarch Estephan Dweihi says in his book "The History of Times", "...Boutros, Bishop of Bsharry, was the head of the monastery of Saint Elisha' the prophet in the great valley of Qadisha in AD1315. However, the disasters that befell across time had not left any remarkable trace of it. Yet, it was reconstructed in the sixteenth century." This is a proof that the monastery is quite old and belongs to the period prior to AD1315.

The Carmelite monks lived in this monastery for sixty years beginning AD1624. The upper floor contains seven altars. A black slab was discovered in the monastery bearing inscriptions in the ancient Estrangela script (this is the earliest Syriac script); it was probably brought over from Aleppo.

In AD1693, the Maronite Order received the monastery by the right of an official document dated April first, 1697. The monastery is composed of several contiguous adjacent small rooms and simple furniture.

Following the acts of oppression that befell the region in AD1740, the Order Synod decided to evacuate the monastery until father Germanos Al-Dlebtawi decided to renovate some of its sections in AD1871. It was renovated again in 1991 during the term of Abbot Louis El-Boustany who added to it humble ornamentation.

It is important to note that the first floor of the monastery contains a natural scene engraved on rock representing "the rosary of the Virgin Mary"; the monastery also contains a museum of ancient seals for the Order, manuscripts, ecclesiastical uniforms, paintings of saints, vessels used in the religious services, and tools used by the monks in the fields.
