



# Antiquities Diplomacy

by Jonathan Aitken

**S**YRIA IS A DIFFICULT COUNTRY POLITICALLY, even for an Obama administration committed to dropping the axis of evil and replacing it with unconditional dialogue. But here is an idea for an initiative that might help to thaw the present frosty atmosphere between Washington and Damascus. The initiative would be focused on “antiquities diplomacy,” a more ancient yet no less potentially effective version of the Ping-Pong diplomacy that paved the way for Nixon’s opening to China.

Syria cherishes its antiquities and is richer in these treasures than almost any other nation in the world. It offers the discerning traveler the chance to see some of the least visited yet most amazing sites in Christian, Judaic, Muslim, and Roman history. These ancient monuments are a source of great national pride to both the leaders and the people of the country.

It was the holy places of Christian Syria that resonated most deeply with your High Spirits correspondent on a recent expedition to this politically isolated but spiritually fascinating nation. Selecting just three outstanding experiences, I would highlight visiting the Aramaic-speaking village of Maaloula; the monastery of Saint Simeon Stylites near Aleppo; and Straight Street, Damascus, where St. Paul’s sight was restored by Ananias.

Syria contains the last communities in the Middle East speaking Aramaic, the original language used by Jesus Christ. One of them is the hillside village of Maaloula, a cul-de-sac of culture and history that stands at the dead end of a serpentine road going nowhere on the edge of a mountain gorge. Its strange-tongued inhabitants have preserved their Maronite faith throughout the two millennia since Jesus cried out from the cross the Aramaic words *Eloi Eloi lama sabachthani*, which translate into English as “*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*”

At the whitewashed seventh-century church of Mar Sarkis overlooking the deep Maaloula gorge, the village priest welcomed our group by saying the Lord’s Prayer in this same Aramaic language. This was a remarkable link of continuity with Syria’s Byzantine heritage. One of its many impressive examples is to be found near Aleppo at the site of a huge monastery venerating a most eccentric saint.

He was Simeon of Stylites, a monk so devoted to ascetic solitude that he spent most of his life on top of a 60-foot-high pillar. Chained to the parapet of this elevated station, he endured almost 40 years of northern Syria’s broiling summers and freezing winters, preaching twice daily to the crowds who came to honor his sanctity. His sermons influenced at least two Roman emperors and his miracles were said to heal many pilgrims who came to gaze upward at this bizarre hermit. When Simeon died in 459 AD he was the most famous holy man of the fifth century. The magnificent church his successors erected around his pillar or *stylos* is the largest remaining monument of the early church, pre-dating by several centuries St. Peter’s in Rome and other leading cathedrals of Europe.

To anyone familiar with the story in Chapter 9 of The Acts of St. Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus, the restoration of his sight by Ananias at the house of Judas “in a street called Straight,” and the great apostle’s escape from the Jews of the city over the wall in a basket, it is a spiritual adventure to visit the locations of these events. They are commemorated by somewhat down-at-heel chapels lovingly maintained by Syria’s small but respected Christian community, which numbers about 7 percent of the population.

Tolerance and respect for all religions is a feature of the Syrian character. The best place to get a feel for this is in the Great Umayyad Mosque in



central Damascus, whose architectural and historical splendor exceeds Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock. Westerners are free to wander into this magnificent edifice whose airy spaciousness and exquisite mosaics create a strong sense of the beauty of holiness. Suddenly amidst a panoply of white and gold marble there stands a green domed tomb said to contain the head of John the Baptist. When the president of Syria makes his annual visit to the Great Mosque, he says Muslim prayers in the main hall, then moves to the shrine of John the Baptist to say Christian prayers for the decapitated saint. This presidential custom is a reminder that peaceful coexistence between the ancient religious traditions of Syria, including Judaism, is a modern reality, strangely though this jars with the country's political reputation for militant attitudes towards its neighbors.



**T**HE POLITICAL TIMES MAY, however, be changing in Damascus. Forty-three-year-old President Bashar Assad by Syrian standards is a modernizer, steadily pensioning off the old guard from his father's regime, closing down prisons notorious for torture, liberalizing the socialist economy, making deals with French president Sarkozy to share intelligence, and opening up his country to visitors. This is where antiquities diplomacy might come in useful.

"Behold the half was not told me," said the Queen of Sheba when she joined one of King Solomon's caravans in ancient Syria and saw the wealth of his court. The same words could be applied to today's Syrian treasures, which go centuries, indeed millennia, further back than Christianity. To give one example from a single city, my mind was completely blown by the desert ruins of Palmyra, with its stunning Greco-Roman colonnades, its vast temple of Baal, and its Valley of Tombs, most of whose rich sepulchres still await discovery by archaeologists.

A small percentage of the best antiquities from these sites are in the national museum of Damascus. The pieces exhibited there range from ornate jewelry created in the fifth century BC to a sensational set of murals from the second-century Jewish synagogues of Dura Europos depicting the Exodus and other scenes from Israelite history.

There is, however, a problem with Syria's stewardship of such gems. Until recently this closed soci-

ety had no idea how to open up its national heritage to visitors. The result is that even the finest of these treasures are displayed in ramshackle settings, with poor lighting and frayed labels handwritten in the 1940s.

But hope for higher standards is at hand in the attractive person of the president's wife, who is leading an initiative to change the presentation and the profile of Syria's antiquities. Madame Asma Assad is a groundbreaking first lady for an Arab country. Educated at King's College London, where she achieved a first-class honors degree in computer science, she worked for J.P. Morgan in New York as an M&A specialist. Energetic, erudite, and elegant, she has become the driving force in a program of cooperation with international museums designed to gain wider recognition for Syria's heritage. Will America participate in this initiative?

The time is certainly ripe for the Syrian authorities to welcome overtures from U.S. scholars, experts, and institutions in this narrow field of collaboration over ancient treasures. The narrow approach could quietly broaden into better diplomatic relations with the open-minded Assad leadership. Sounds fanciful? Remember Nixon's Ping-Pong diplomacy to "Red China" in the 1970s and think about the potential for "antiquities diplomacy" in Syria today. ❧

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