THE MARONITES OF LEBANON UNDER FRANKISH AND MAMLUK RULE (1099-1516)

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Northern Lebanon, with its predominantly Maronite population, was an outpost of militant Western Christendom in Syria during the period that elapsed between the Crusader and the Ottoman conquests. Its history, a confused medley of localized events and seemingly insignificant internal struggles, can only be understood when viewed in relation to Crusader and Western Christian policy and interests in Syria. Were it not for the Crusades the Maronites might very well have remained the fossil peasant community which the Franks found in Mount Lebanon in the last year of the eleventh century. It was, in fact, the Frankish conquest of Syria that gave this fossil community of fugitive heterodox Christians, which had already been reduced to the mountain fastnesses of Lebanon by the Islamic conquest, a new lease of life and a new raison d'être. While the Franks were in Syria the Maronites were their men; and after their departure, during the two centuries of Mamlûk rule, the Maronites remained faithful to the memory of their Western Christian patrons and lived in the almost messianic hope of their return.

The history of the Maronite community before the advent of the Crusaders is a matter of conjecture. Maronite historians, starting with al-Duwayhî (1629-1704)¹, have identified their people as

¹. Iššâfân al-Duwayhî, of Iḥdin, Maronite patriarch (1670-1704), was a graduate of the Maronite College in Rome, where he studied for fourteen years (1651-1665). He has been called "the father of Maronite history" (Georg Graf, Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur, Vatican City, 1944-1953, III, p. 306), and has left several important works on the history of the Maronites and of Mount Lebanon, the most important of which are Ta'rîh al-asmînâ (Beirut, 1950; hence T.A.) and Ta'rîh al-jârî/a al-mârûnîyya (Beirut, 1890; hence T.T.M.). It is in the latter work (T.T.M., pp.
the descendants of the Mardaites: the march warriors settled by the Byzantines in the Amanus mountain, in northwest Syria. These Mardaites, according to the Byzantine and Arab historians, were a cause of great anxiety to the early Umayyads in Syria, and were finally removed from the Byzantine-Arab border by Justinian II in 685 A.D., following the peace treaty between the Byzantine Emperor and the Umayyad Caliph, 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwân.

Although the Mardaites of whom the Byzantine and Arab historians speak are clearly not the seventh century inhabitants of Mount Lebanon, as the Maronite historians assert, there is no reason to suppose that there were no Mardaite or similar march warrior colonies in the region, serving the same purpose as those of the Amanus. A fairly old tradition, a record of which dates back to the early years of Mamlûk rule, has it that certain chieftains from the region of Mount Lebanon assisted Heraclius in his wars against the Persians and in quelling revolts in Armenia. Considering the undoubted strategic importance of Mount Lebanon, the Byzantines must have settled some "Mardaites" in the region just as they planted others on the mountainous northern borders of Syria; for Mount Lebanon, a natural fortress, commanded the important military routes of the Phoenician littoral and of Cœlesyria. These "Mardaites" of Lebanon, whose existence may be presumed, must have formed a special stratum of military colonists superimposed on the local mountain peasant population, whom they probably trained as guerillas. The class of mugaddams, or chieftains, who continued to control the local political life of Maronite Lebanon down to the sixteenth century, may well have been the descendants of those old military colonists.

The conquest of Syria by the Arabs ended the raison d'etre of those presumed "Mardaites", whose original duties must have been the guarding of the coastal and Cœlesyrian routes. Hemmed in on all sides by the Arabs, and their relations with the Byzantine

68-74) that he propounded the thesis of the Mardaite origin of the Maronites. Later Maronite historians followed suit, so much so that the Maronites of today accept the Mardaite thesis as fact.

1. DUWAYHI, T.T.M., pp. 68-69, quoting a historical anthology in Syriac dated 1315 A.D.

2. Crusader historians (see below) praised the Maronites as excellent fighters and expert bowmen, who were welcome auxiliaries to the Frankish armies. The Maronites seem to have kept up an effective traditional training in guerilla warfare.

ARABICA IV