

Platform of Anatolian Religions and Beliefs Platform/ Those who are backing our cultural heritage Vanguards of Our Cultural Heritage / Part 6

Cultural heritage of Urfa with İbrahim Halil Sarısu

TOPICS: Short Brief history of Urfa, history of beliefs in Urfa, recent archaeological excavations, diversity of historical buildings in Urfa,

"Urfa is definitely the world's largest open- air museum"

Nükhet Everi- We are in Urfa infor this part of our interviews. Art historian, restoration expert, and tourism expert İbrahim Halil Sarısu, can we get to know you you please introduce yourself?

İbrahim Halil Sarısu- I graduated from the Department of Art History at Marmara University, Department of Art History. I have been conducting various archaeological excavations in Urfa for about seven years. We are located in such a region that sometimes you can even come across the Neolithic period 80 centimetres below the excavated area. Sometimes you can come across discover the Roman period, sometimes the period of the and other times, that of the Great Holy Kingdom of Edessa. During the 7 years I was in Urfa, I witnessed valuable finds in terms of archaeological and art history. I took part in the excavation of some of them, and in the restoration or conservation of others some of them. Apart from that, I have been involved in various restoration activities on Urfa buildings and architectural structures. Most of these were are within the Walled City, because Urfa also had walls. Although a few city gates remain, Urfa is actually a walled city. I have been involved in the restoration of around 500 buildings within the city walls or in the reporting writing of reports of that building in some way. Two years ago, I bought an old forgotten building, restored it and brought it to tourism made it into a tourist destination. Two years ago, I did my master's degree in tourism guidance tour guiding at Mardin Artuklu University. I recently gave defended my graduation thesis and graduated.

Nükhet Everi- Urfa is an interesting city especially in terms of beliefs, it has layers and a difficult history. Can we talk a little Could you talk briefly about those layers? And why is it called the city of prophets?

İbrahim Halil Sarısu- Archaeology is a very important method for us, namely stratigraphy. We see so clearly that all civilisations leave a trace. that tThe city of prophets is a part of this stratigraphy. There are so many layers from the first settlements, neolithic periods to the classical period, namely Assyrian, Roman, Islamic period, that we observe see very obvious traces in all of them. As you know, the Neolithic period settlements have become popular in recent years. The most well-known of these today is Göbekli Tepe today. It is a marvellous poem... It is not a coincidence that Göbektepe and the sites from the Göbektepe period are only in the Urfa region. But why here? I mean, was it just geography, just topography? Places like Karahan Tepe, Sefer Tepe, there are many such places in the Urfa region. First of all Firstly, we see that agriculture started here, wheat was domesticated, some animal species were domesticated, and people started to live with them. Göbektepe has probably answered most of our questions. We can easily see these in the excavations to be carried out underway in Karahantepe and Harpetsuan.

In During the post-Neolithic periods, for example in the Bronze Age, when the modern use of metals began, for example in the Bronze Age, we can see traces of the modern use of metals it on in several layers in Urfa. We see that the shamanic belief systems, which are the basis of the belief systems that continue to this day, started here. In the Harran region, about 5,000 years ago, they consecrated the

sun, which is valuable for humanity. They believe in the moon. We see an incredible interaction with the planets, a situation of examining the planets. The idea of analysing the planets in the solar system and naming them emerges here. Belief systems have been internalised so much that we see that architectural structures are based on these belief systems in their iconography in the plan session, in the storytelling of the builder, in other words, from static to all aesthetic concerns. Perhaps the reason why it is called the city of prophets, or the region of prophets, is compared to this place. We do not know exactly how many prophets came. From Prophet Job, Prophet Moses, Prophet Jacob, Prophet Abraham. There are Brahmas in India, thought to be descended from Abraham. From here we can see that they export religions. It can be observed that religions were exported to the world. There are Rohingya Muslims and Rohingya Christians in the southeast of Malaysia. These are Assyrians and they are Assyrian Christians whom we know that they travelled from Urfa. Rohingya, in Kurdish, means the place where the sun rises, the birth of the sun. What I want to mean here is that we can easily say that the idea of heaven and hell, the idea of one god, one creator, in the world started in Assyria. We can say that Christians and Muslims are the cornerstone of all of them. When we read the inscriptions in the cemeteries in the places where we excavate, firstly, there is a reference to the shaman or in the early Christian period, they praise each other very well, they praise their ancestors. After that, they give very beautiful eulogies for God to accept their wishes. In all the pre-Christian and early Christian periods, the house of eternity was built. We see Syriac inscriptions on hundreds of rock tombs. Occasionally we also see Greek inscriptions. In other words, while there is an official language in a place, that officiality changes from time to time. Sometimes only the official language is Syriac, sometimes both Syriac and Greek. It probably has something to do with the Urfa region being a buffer zone. Why a buffer zone? I think that the architectural structures of the Urfa region, especially the structures that have survived to the present day, are basically Assyrian architectural structures. We always say that if it is archaeological, it is Roman., Roman is monumental, Roman is established order, Roman is static, Roman is bureaucracy, Roman is the institutionalisation of religions. In fact, it was the Assyrian Empire, the first and only great empire in history, that started this before Rome. The place we call Syria is the country of the Assyrians, even its name comes from there. When you ask if Assyrians/Syriacs are Assyrians, yes, they are the continuation of Assyrians. They are people who became Christians, left some of the pagan belief system and believed in Jesus Christ. Children of 5,000 years ago, 5000 years ago as far as we know. The children of this belief system, the children of this great state are still an incredibly beautiful area for research. Syriac script can be read in the same way for about 2,500 years. It has undergone very minor changes, and most of these we read in the buildings and documents related to the belief system. In other words, let's us say they are a fully believing people. We are talking about a people who believed a lot in the pagan period and believed a lot in the Christian period. I don't not know of any other people who hadve so fully absorbed, assimilated and institutionalised a belief to such an extent. I haven't seen anything like that, to be honest. We see traces of it everywhere. I call Urfa an Assyrian city, and I write this in my reports. I analyse the iconography and ornaments used in the Assyrian and Early Christian periods and I can make this connection. No one in Urfa currently guesses or knows that there are Assyrians or Assyrians. Of course, there are many variable reasons for this. We always say Mardin, there are Syriacs in Mardin. Yes, there are Syriacs in Mardin, in Şırnak, in the Cizre region, in Diyarbakır, in Adıyaman, in Antep, in Hatay, in the north-central region of Syria, and in Lebanon. The geography where they spread is the most fertile areas of the world. Of course, we can distinguish between urban and peasantrural Syriacs. But the Assyrian people have such a great history inat the state levels where art, craft and politics begin, that the institutions and areas where they took part have left a lot of archaeological and architectural works to our day until today. Now, we learn a lot from the documents written by the 10th century chroniclers in Suriçin in the Urfa region. Ibn Havkal specifically mentions Suriçi in the Urfa region and says that there are the presence of churches and monasteries.

300 churches and monasteries in and around Suriçi is an incredible number. In other words, how big a city was it that there were so many educational and religious buildings. And it is also important that this was written by a foreign chronicler. As you know, chroniclers may exaggerate a little bit slightly in about the region or province in which they live in or the states they live in. But however, when we see what someone else writes, it may not be an exaggeration. Because he observed the place and what he saw had a numerical effect on him. Again similarly, in the documents written during the Kingdom of Edessa in Urfa, we think estimate that this number is really 300 or more. I think there is no other city with so many churches and monasteries.

Nükhet Everi- You have touched upon a very good subject. I still can't understand the Assyrian/Syriac-Aramaic quarrel. Both are actually the same thing. We know that there are 70 families in Urfa. I would like to ask you about this. How were the mosaics in the grave chambers etc., stolen from there, and how did they come back/return? Can we briefly talk about these a little bit?

İbrahim Halil Sarısu- When we started archaeological excavations on a sloping, hilly land of more than 100 decares in 2014, it was previously a slum neighbourhood. Since the 1950s, buildings had started to be built. A natural soil layer on the rock graves, then people started to build vineyards and houses on it. Until 10 years ago, it was a place with abandoned buildings and a very ugly urbanisation, but the area was expropriated by Şanlıurfa Metropolitan Municipality and all the concrete structures were removed. After about three years of excavation, we uncovered more than a hundred rock grave chambers. And we see that all of these rock grave chambers, all of which, without exception, belong to the ancestors of the Assyrian people. Some of the burial chambers were built in the 3rd century BC. And again, at that time, there were things that confused us a little bit and we said, what were the Parthians doing here? Because the Parthians came to Anatolia in the fourth century BC and visited the Urfa region. They also had a serious/significant cultural interaction in Urfa. As you know, when a culture moves to another place, it not only leaves traces but also takes traces. Unfortunately, very few of the frescoes have survived to the present day and they gave us so much information. Because they were all written. The Assyrians, the continuation of Assyrians, are a very good document transmitter people. They transfer what they have done, they just wrote it down. They clearly wrote for whom they did it for, what they did it for, on what date they did it., they give it clearly. We cannot see this in every archaeological site. We can understand it from the construction technique or various laboratory analyses. Probably the most famous of these is the Orpheus Mosaic, which was smuggled abroad and brought to Turkey/Türkiye. There, again, it indicates whose grave it is, for whom it was made and the name of the master. Let's call him a mosaic master or an artist. The man has left a signature on his work and says for whom it was made. Probably he is also referring to the owner. We can say that the story of Orpheus, the oldest troubadour of history, is from the Thracian region, which means that they have travelled to Thrace. These people knew the peoples in Thrace, the Greek people, the Dorians, and so on/forth. We have two very large rivers in Mesopotamia. The Tigris and the Euphrates, this is what the Assyrians called them. But they also travelled to the Thracian region. While mass media today can transmit information in a split second, we see that in those years there were people who could go to geographies thousands of kilometres away to study their art, belief systems, and to raise awareness. In the floor mosaics with which contain Estrangelo (the oldest form of Syriac alphabet/script) inscriptions that we found at the foot of the castle, the portraits of the people buried in the burial chambers were made before they died/passed away. After death, they are buried in order. You have such a solid, institutionalised belief system that you think that this world is transitory, and that you should make preparations for the place where eternal life will begin. There

is an incredible colouring, an incredible perception of depth in these mosaics. Those mosaic building stones, each of the building stones we call referred to as *tesera*, were collected from the Euphrates basin. These are very hard stones. They collected these stones in their natural colour and cut them into cubes. We know that they sometimes used glass. We can see these mosaics in the Urfa region, in Suriçi or close to Sur. In the analyses we made on the fresco mortar, we know that they took the volcanic soil or tuff residues around the volcano, mixed them with lime, stone dust, and various earth mortars, and made root dyes. The only volcanic area in Urfa is the Karacadağ volcanic area between Diyarbakır and Urfa. In other words, they go back to mineralogy. They know very well which soil, which element is good for frescoes, or which part of the bedrock is prone to serious dissolution and deterioration. For example, we see that they pay great attention to the status in rock tombs. We see that they did not carve every bedrock. You know that the main layer in Urfa is limestone. Calcium limestone is actually its technical name. Here, they call it 'nahit'. Another meaning in Kurdish is 'the strong one'. Another thing again Furthermore, mosaics are technically obtained by compression, with a mortar underneath, and by cutting the building stones, which we called *tesera*, in such a way that there are no joints between them. There must be a very strong mortar underneath so that it can be fixed. This is an incredible workmanship. In other words, By bringing that mortar to that consistency, look, we see mortars that the mortar have not deteriorated for hundreds and thousands of years., about 2000 years.

Nükhet Everi- Can we also talk about the diversity of historical buildings in Urfa?

İbrahim Halil Sarsu- Unfortunately, there are so many buildings in Urfa that have disappeared, been destroyed, or taken over. We know that many great mosques in TurkeyTürkiye have been taken over, are the result of conversionsverted from churches or synagogues into mosques. In Urfa, buildings whose the architecture of which is not Islamic have undergone various additions and repairs until today. Unfortunately, some of them have not survived to the present day for various reasons. I took the initiative to go afterundertake research about these buildings. We are very close to Balıklı Lake. I am talking about a topography descending from the north to the south of the city. Here we can see churches, monasteries, mosques, mansions, baths, all of them. We know that there were water systems under them. I can sayaffirm that there is an incredible stone workmanship, an incredible and building statics. And tThere are thousands of structures that need to be restored. Urfa is interesting. Urfa has the most registered buildings after Istanbul, and new places are added every month. These registered buildings are increasing day by day. It will probably surpass Istanbul. When the Hagia Sophia was built, it is estimated that there was a larger structure in Urfa before it. A and this building should have been in Balıklıgöl, near the cave where it is believed that the Prophet Abraham was born. When a church was to be built in another city, a comparison was made saying, "It should be so big that it should be as big as the building in Edessa". Unfortunately, this building has not survived to the present day. We know that both Christian chroniclers and Muslim chroniclers occasionally mentioned it from time to time. There were different peoples and different belief systems in Suriçi. Until the 10th century, there were no Muslims, there iswas a dense Assyrian population. There arewere also some Armenians, Jews, and Kurds. In the south-eastern part of Urfa, the neighbourhood around Harran Gate, was where Jews lived. In the northwest, we see that the Armenian neighbourhood and the Assyrian neighbourhood formed a border with each other. There is an Assyrian densitydemography of about 60%. 20% iswas maybe Armenian and the rest arewere Kurdish and Jewish neighbourhoods. We can sayaffirm that there are different, larger temples in the Balıklıgöl basin. B because there is a water cult here. In other words, there is a natural water source, there is a beautiful topography, we are talking about a place suitable for defence. There is a castle just above it. There were probably pagan belief systems here before the big church. After that, there is a church was constructed, then the present Halil Ür-Rahman Mosque / Döşeme Mosque. In 1993, during a repair, a very important

sculpture was unearthed from among the fills in the construction mortar of Balıklıgöl during repair works. In fact, they say it was named Balıklıgöl man, but that is technically a wrong term. It would be more correct to call Balıklıgöl man statue. Because we do not know exactly whether it is a woman or a man. A 11,500 years-old sculpture. We are talking about a statue that is close to the height of the world's oldest real human, about 180 centimetres long. We can see that this The statue was cut and made from the bedrock in Urfa. There and is one obsidian stone in each eye. 11,000 years ago, it would be correct to say that there were beliefs here and that they have reached today through continuous transmission.

You cannot make the following distinction in Balıklı Lake; you cannot say claim that this is Assyrian, this is Armenian, this is Kurdish, this is Arab, this is Turkish. Until recently, Christians used to see this place location as a kind of pilgrimage place. Jews used to occasionally come here from time to time. Because Jews they also think believe that their origins come from the Urfa region. Until recently, Jews used to go to the ancient city of Şuayb and perform various worship services there. In recent years, this has almost disappeared. The same is true for Christians services.

Nükhet Everi- Isn't the place you are in now one of those 300 monasteries and churches? Can you tell us a little bit about the opening inauguration of that place?

İbrahim Halil Sarısu- There was no record of who this building belonged to, when it was built. Unfortunately, we encountered such a problem. A large part of it was destroyed, it had become a place destroyed by treasure hunters and used by substance addicts. The building was divided into 6 parts. 6 different families used it. And they started to abandon it over time. I had a was undertaking restoration works in this neighbourhood, on a building I discovered at that time. I knew that there were many such buildings, but you cannot enter every building, because most of them are private property. We think it was a monastery. There is a very large kitchen in the building. And there are sections 3 metres below the courtyard, which we think is a support. These sections were designed like classrooms, they were buried under the soil, we uncovered them during the excavations. We discovered independent but interconnected structures. I had two similar restorations in Urfa. One of them was a house of a Latin Catholic female religious congregation the nuns' house. We knew that Kapusen nuns Capuchin sisters used to come and use it, and this one had similar sections. But there was no inscription, not even a date note. As an art historian, as someone who carries out architectural restorations in the region, I thought that this could have been a monastery convent, and by comparing it with other buildings, I was largely sure of this. I think we have brought restored this building to a level such a condition that it can be passed on for many more years. We named it 'Naharin'. I wanted to make a reference to the Assyrian identity of the city, which has been lost but is its true identity. In Assyrian, it means rivers, in the literature it is Bet-Nahrin. In other words, between two rivers is Mesopotamia. We are located right in the centre, in the heart of Mesopotamia. We think of it as a hotel and an art centre. This is a place where we will try to explain to the visiting guests coming here that there is not only Göbektepe, not only Harran, not only Balıklıgöl, but that there is a very serious significant accumulation of art history, a serious accumulation of the history of religions, a serious accumulation of the history of and architecture. I am talking about a place where academic studies can be carried out, music festivals can be held, gastronomy events can be held organised. It was a place that Urfa needed.

Again, interestingly, in the Camii Kebir Neighbourhood, where the only Armenian Catholic Church in Urfa is located, a forgotten, demolished, taken over expropriated, or dilapidated building is being restored. It will also become a tourism facility. It has an inscription,; we know that it was built in the

early 1800s. There are so many such buildings that need to be recorded and restored in stages., whether I say they be Reji Church, the Nuns Sisters' House, the houses on Yorgancı Street, the other buildings in on 58 Square, the Bey Gate, the Harran Gate., all of these are places that need to be recorded and restored in stages. I am talking about the world's largest open air museum. Urfa is definitely the world's largest open- air museum.