

Syriac Mor Abhay's Witness To The Miracle Of The Seven Sleepers¹

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Abstract

This study delves into the miraculous narrative of the Seven Sleepers, which is widespread in various religions and cultures, albeit with nuanced variations, and that generally tells of the Seven Sleepers' escape from the tyranny of a king, their prolonged slumber over centuries, and their eventual awakening. While acknowledging the many variations within this popular narrative, this study aims to draw attention to the encounter between the seven faithful youths and the Syriac figure of Mor Abhay after their awakening. Specifically, it evaluates a variant within Syriac hagiography that testifies to Mor Abhay's witnessing the miracle of the Seven Sleepers. Using the methods of literature review and field research, this study undertakes a comprehensive examination.

This study is structured under the following main headings. It first provides information on the identity of the Seven Sleepers and their location. Subsequently, it briefly touches upon the history of Mardin and the Syriac tradition in relation to the subject. The next section examines who Syriac Mor Abhay is and why he holds significance. The relationship between Mor Abhay and the Seven Sleepers is then analyzed through one particular Syriac narrative. This section specifically focuses on the Syriac narrative, under the heading *Yemliho and His Companions*. Ultimately, the narrative of the Seven Sleepers, which appears across almost all religions, is evaluated within the context of Syriac literature and its connection to Mor Abhay. This evaluation specifically aims to highlight Mor Abhay, a witness to the miracle of the awakening of the Seven Sleepers. Thus, it becomes possible to not only assess the narrative itself but also to interpret Mor Abhay, one of the witnesses to the miracle, from a distinct perspective.

Keywords: *The Seven Sleepers/Ashāb al-Kahf, Syriac Hagiography, Mor Abhay, Mardin.*

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Introduction

In this study the aim is to shed light on the relatively underexplored relationship between the narrative of the Seven Sleepers, which exhibits diverse details across various accounts, and the context of Mardin culture and that of Mor Abhay. Prior to delving into the specific narrative of the Seven Sleepers in Mardin with a focus on Mor Abhay, it is essential to highlight the significance of this story within the multicultural and multilingual city of Mardin, located in the southeastern region of Turkey. This city's rich tapestry of cultures, religions, and languages underscores the importance of exploring this narrative within its unique socio-cultural context. One of the most interesting aspects of this city is the Syriac community. This research is divided into three separate sections: the first section examines the life and teachings of Mor Abhay, while the next section explores the narrative of the Seven Sleepers, also known as Yemliho and his companions. The final section explores the relationship between the Seven Sleepers and the Syriac figure of Mor Abhay from the perspective of Christian narratives.

The common feature of both stories, the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus in Christianity and the legend of Ashāb al-Kahf (Ashab-ı Khef¹) in Islam, is the resurrection of people after death. The emergence of this tale in Christianity coincides with a period when people started to disbelieve in life after death and the story is used to strengthen their beliefs.² Islam, on the other hand, uses the same story for a different purpose. In Anatolia, in a geography where Islam was trying to settle, it identifies some caves associated with this legend as areas to claim for itself. In the Islamic tale, which is almost the same as in Christianity, Islam does not attach much importance to the details. For the Qur'an, the main striking part of the story is represented by the claim of Life after death and that God is capable of realising it. In this study, special attention will be paid to the figure of Mor Abhay, who witnessed the miracle of the Seven Sleepers.

The names of the Seven Sleepers/Ashāb al-Kahf

Regional variations aside, there are different opinions about the names of the Seven Sleepers/Ashāb al-Kahf and their place in public narrative variants. Though the names are different in other sources, in Christianity they are known as Saints Malta, Malchus, Martinianus, Dionysius, Joannes,

¹ Although it is referred to as Ashab-al Kahf (Companions of the cave) in the literature, "Ashab-ı Khef" is used in this article to avoid confusion of meaning.

² İsmet Ersöz, *Ashāb-ı Khef*, İstanbul, Türkiye Diyanet Encyclopedia of Islam, 1991, C: 3, p. 465-467.

Serapion and Constantinus.³ According to the narrative of the Seven Sleepers, six of them were appointed within a palace, seated beside the emperor of the time. Those on the right were termed "Ashab al-Yamin," while those on the left were designated "Ashab al-Yasar."

For instance, according to the Catholic Church, the names of Seven Sleepers are: Maximian, Malchus, Martinian, Dionysius, John, Serapion, and Constantine. But according to Grégoire of Tours (538-594 AD) they are: Achillides, Diomedes, Diogenes, Probatas, Stephanus, Sambatus and Quiriacus. According to the Eastern Church, they are: Maximilian, Jamblichus, Martin, John, Dionisos, Constantine and Antonin,⁴ but their dog is not mentioned. While in Western resources they are: Malcus, Marquianos, Maximilian, Ioannes, Dennis, Serapion and Constantinos, they are: Yamliha, Makthalina, Mashlina, Marnush, Darbanush, Zazanush and shepherd Kaferstatyush in Eastern resources (Koçer 2012: 154).

In Islamic mythology, as mentioned in the work *Zubdat al-Tawarikh*, their names are: Makseline, Yemliha, Mertus, Sazinus, Peynus, Zubunus, and Kefestetayyus. The name of their dog is Kıtmir. In other versions, there are eight individuals in the cave, and their names are: Meksemlina, Mahsemlina, Yemliha, Martuş, Kusutans, Biruns, Resmuns, Betuns, and Falus. According to Ottoman sources, their names are: Yemliha, Mekseline, Mislina, Mernuş, Debernuş, Sazenuş, Kefeştatayyuş, and Kıtmir. Names such as Yemliha, Debernuş/Tebernuş, and Sazenuş are commonly found in places such as Tarsus and Afşin, believed to be the locations of the cave according to Islamic tradition.⁵

People who live in the places where the ones who were told about in Ashāb al-Kahf narrative and known as the Seven Sleepers, give those names to their children and some places, continue to keep the myth alive by giving it a place in their culture and traditions as the symbols of 'the resurrection'.

Where are located the Seven Sleepers/Ashāb al-Kahf?

Four of the thirtythree cities where the cave of Ashāb Al-Kahf is said to be located are in Turkey: Afsin, Selçuk (Ephesus), Lice and Tarsus. Although there are several stories, according to Christian belief, it is believed that

³ URL:1 <http://www.yediuyurlar.com/eshabikehf.asp>.

⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica, (2008). "Seven Sleepers of Ephesus", Encyclopædia Britannica Online: <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9066942>, Date of Access: 12.05.2012.

⁵ Metin And, *Ottoman -Islamic Mythology with Miniatures*, İstanbul, Yapı Kredi Publications, 2008, p. 233-237.

they lived in Ephesus. The cave accepted by the Christians is located at the foot of Panayır Mountain, which is near the ancient city of Ephesus in Selçuk. A church was built over the cave. It was discovered during an excavation between 1927 and 1928 by the Austrian archaeological mission. As a result of this excavation, some tombs were found which belonged to the 5th and 6th centuries. Writings dedicated to the Seven Sleepers were found both on the graves and on the walls of the church.⁶

The German-Jewish Orientalist Schaht adopted the Seven Sleepers myth and spread it. In the magazine "Al Mustemi-ul-Arabi", which was published for 20 years, he said that the Seven Sleepers were in Ephesus. He also stated that they might be near Amman, Jordan. On the other hand, in "Al Abhas" magazine, Dr. Enis Feriha stated that according to the Greek and Syriac sources, the cave was located in Ephesus (Özdoğan 2012: 97).

Syriac history of Mardin

Mardin and Tur Abdin have historically been significant centers. Due to its location at the heart of Mesopotamia and its proximity to Anatolia, Mardin has been subject to numerous invasions throughout history, bearing traces from every era, from the Paleolithic age to the present. It is almost like a summary of human history.

Mesopotamia extends beyond the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, covering a much larger geographical region. The Tur Abdin Mountains, part of the Southeastern Taurus range, mark its northern boundary, with Mardin and Midyat situated in this mountainous region. The southern border of Mesopotamia reaches the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf, while its eastern border is defined by the Zagros Mountains and its western boundary by the Mediterranean coast. After this point, the area around Midyat, previously known as Kashyari by the Assyrians and Mons Masius by the Romans, came to be called Tur Abdin. The adoption of a Syriac name reflects the influence of the Syriacs, who shaped the region's identity. Having distanced themselves from mainstream Christianity, the Syriacs viewed this mountainous region as an perfect place for seclusion, away from major centers and dangers. Over the centuries, they established many monasteries, turning the area into one of the foremost spiritual centers of Eastern Christianity. Indeed, Midyat and its surrounding areas became the heartland of the monastic tradition

⁶ Hatice Kübra Uygur, *Narratives of Mardin Syriacs in the Context of Sacred Space*, (Unpublished doctoral dissertation), Ankara, Hacettepe University, Institute of Social Sciences, 2015.

within the Eastern Church. The earliest records that refer to the region as Tur Abdin date back to the 6th century.⁷

In the diverse population of south-eastern Türkiye,

the Syriac Christians stand out both as a religious and ethnic minority. The population of the Syriac Christians has been concentrated in the city of Mardin and in the villages of a limestone plateau to the east of Mardin which is called the Tur 'Abdin. This community is historically called Syrian Orthodox but terms like West Syrians, Suryoye, Syriacs are also used to define the community. Syriac Christians still speak a dialect of Aramaic and are proud to be speaking the language of Jesus. It is not surprising that the community, its language and its written heritage attract international attention. However, the architectural heritage of this community is not less important.⁸

Currently, the Syriac population in Turkey is estimated to range between 15,000 and 20,000, with the majority residing in Istanbul. To facilitate administrative efficiency, the Syriac Church in Turkey is structured into four regional archdioceses and patriarchal vicariates. These are: the Archbishopric of Istanbul and Ankara; the Patriarchate Vicariate of Mardin; the Patriarchate Vicariate of Tur Abdin; and lastly the Archbishopric of Adıyaman. Syriacs speak a dialect of Aramaic known as Turoyo.⁹

Mardin's diverse cultural heritage is reflected in its architecture, including houses, churches, monasteries, synagogues, markets, mosques, and madrassas. The city has preserved its bilingualism and continues to embody a multicultural and multi-religious identity. Ancient traditions, rituals, arts, and crafts are vividly present in the city's enduring languages, flavors, and aromas. This focus extends to the churches and monasteries of the Tur Abdin region, bordered by the Tigris River and the South-eastern Anatolian mountain range to the north and east, the Syrian plain to the south, and the city of Mardin to the west. Although there are different views about the etymology of the word Tur 'Abdin, the translation 'Mountain of God's Servants' approved by Sebastian Brock, is quite appropriate to describe this region which is dotted with churches and monasteries.¹⁰ Tur 'Abdin

⁷ W. A. Wigram, *History of the Assyrian Church or The Church of the Sassanid Persian Empire 100-64 AD*, NY, Gorgias Press, 2004, p. 8.

⁸ Elif Keser-Kayaalp, *Preservation of the Architectural Heritage of the Syriac Christians in the Tur 'Abdin: Processes and Varying Approaches*, in "TÜBA-KED", 14/2016, p. 59.

⁹ Mesut Alp, *Mardin from tales to legend*, MST Project, 2015.

¹⁰ Sebastian Brock, *From Ephrem to Romanos: Interactions between Syriac and Greek in Late Antiquity*, Aldershot: Variorum CSS 664, 1999, p. 22.

holds significance not only due to its sacredness but also because it is seen by the Syriacs as their homeland, where their cultural traditions and heritage are deeply rooted. Herman Teule emphasizes this importance by stating that the end of the Syriac presence in Tur'Abdin will be the end of the Syriac identity (2012, s. 56). However, many of these buildings have either vanished or are at risk of being demolished. The Syriacs built not only religious structures, but also villages, roads, and castles in this region. However, most of the buildings that have survived today are religious structures, and therefore mostly religious buildings are included.¹¹

Even though Syriac literature may not have produced many renowned historians, numerous historical writings in Syriac have survived. These often take the form of annual chronicles, which serve as valuable resources for understanding the political, social, and economic history of the Middle East, particularly between the 4th and 14th centuries AD. Among the most significant of these are *The Chronicles* of Michael and Abu'l Faraj. According to modern historians, many of these have not always received as much attention as they should have.¹²

Saint/ Mor Abhay¹³

In the Syriac liturgical tradition, saints hold a significant place. Among the saints whose names are mentioned both during their lifetime and thereafter, Saint Mor Abhay¹⁴ occupies a prominent position. The information concerning Mor Abhay utilized in this study is derived from field research notes conducted in 2012 with the clergyman Priest/Hori Gabriel Akyüz of the Forty Martyrs Church in Mardin, as well as from my doctoral dissertation titled *Narratives of Mardin Syriacs in the Context of Sacred Space* and literature review.¹⁵

Mor Abhay and his brothers were born in Rekman village. This village is in the Mesopotamian region of Mardin, known as Beth Nahrin. Mor Abhay and his brother Mor Zuko settled in Beth Hamoro Monastery after

¹¹ Keser-Kayaalp, *Preservation...*, p. 58.

¹² Sebastian Brock, *Studies in Syriac Christianity, History, Literature and Theology*, Variorum, US, 1992, p. 7.

¹³ Mor in Syriac means Saint. The use of Mor Abhay in the text is considered appropriate.

¹⁴ A Summary of Information on the Seven Children Sleeping in Ephesus in the *Life Story of Mor Abhay* from the Beth-Hamoro Monastery in the North West of Mardin was obtained from interviews with Priest Gabriel Akyüz in 2012. The information in question can be accessed from the following sources in the literature. Uygur, *Narratives...* and Gabriel Akyüz, *The Great awakening Ashâb-ı Kehf in Lice*, Editors: Hatip Yıldız, Abdusselam Ertekin, Davut Adlıg, Abdullah Cengiz, İstanbul, Sonçağ Akademi, 2021, p. 77-101.

¹⁵ *Life Stories of Saints*, Syriac Manuscript, No: 275. Story consists of 70 pages.

their parents died. They became priests and then deacons. While Mor Abhay became a saint, Mor Zuko was an anchorite in the cave. This cave is named Mor Zuko Cave. After Mor Abhay worked as an episcopo of Nikaia (Nicaea), he lived an anchoritish life in Kayseriye of Cappodocia.¹⁶ It is assumed that Mor Abhay, who lived 120 years, passed away on July 15th. If we were to chronologically sequence the periods during which the miracles associated with Mor Abhay and the Seven Sleepers transpired, we would approach this topic through an examination of the era pertaining to Seven Sleepers/Yemliho and his companions, as well as the reign of the emperor reigning during that time:

- Decius' sovereignty years: AD 249-251
- Teodosiyos II' sovereignty years: AD 408-450
- Death occurred during Decius' reign.

Priest of Forty Martyr Church, Gabriel Akyüz, interpreted considering these dates: if Yemliho and his friends indeed entered their period of slumber in the year AD 250, their resurrection would have occurred during the 38th year of the reign of Emperor Theodosius II. Adding 38 years to 408 AD, the resurrection event would then be situated in the year 446 AD. Consequently, it can be deduced that the duration of Yemliho and his companions' slumber spanned from the year 250 AD to 446 AD, amounting to a total of 196 years.

The Seven Sleepers/Yemliho and his friends according to Syriac narrative

Anna Tozzi Di Marco in her study *The Seven Sleepers/Ashāb al-Kahf tale and cult: two case studies in Turkey (Ephesus) and Jordan (Al-Rajib)* evaluates the narrative from the perspective of Christian and Muslim narrative traditions as follows:

The story of the Seven Sleepers/Ashāb al-Kahf is a religious and cultural heritage shared by Christians and Muslims that transcends the boundaries of time and space. I argue that the story of the Seven Sleepers/Ashāb al-Kahf is a religious and cultural heritage shared by Christians and Muslims that transcends the boundaries of time and space. It could be considered an interreligious myth linking the three monotheistic faiths, as comparative religious studies have shown, since its multi-confessional nature is common to many shared holy shrines and sanctuaries in the Mediterranean region.¹⁷

¹⁶ Uygur, *The narratives...*; Akyüz, *The Great awakening...*

¹⁷ Anna Tozzi Di Marco, *The Seven Sleepers/Ashāb al-Kahf tale and cult: two case studies in Turkey (Ephesus) and*

According to Brock and Taylor, one of the oldest variants of the narrative of Yemliho and his friends can be seen in 6th-century Syriac texts. It is thought that, at the end of the 6th century, Gregoire de Tours learned about the myth from a Syriac called Johannon and translated it into Latin with his help. The narrative has been translated into many languages.¹⁸ Notably, their story found inclusion in the western *Golden Legend*, which stood as one of the most widely read works of the later Middle Ages.¹⁹ For the various versions of this legend see Act. Sanct.²⁰

The evolution of this legend reached its culmination, at the latest, with the establishment of the present version of the Qu'ran. It is conceivable that variations between the Greek and Syriac renditions of the tale were overshadowed by the narrative presented in the Qu'ran.²¹ Furthermore, Islamic sources, including the Qu'ran and Muslim tradition, mention individuals known as informers to Muhammad, with Kusa Ibn Sa'id being among them. On the other hand, if the Syriac text was translated from Greek, it is not known.²² It is strongly possible that the *mushriks*²³ of Mecca might have learned the Ashab al-Kahf myth from the Syrians, with whom they were in close touch.²⁴

The story, which has several variants in Christianity, Islam, and public narratives, changes according to the narrative.²⁵ Some of the divergent elements: if they were seven or eight people, whether they had a dog, for how many years they stayed in the cave, for how many years they lived after they woke up, and other details.

Jordan (*Al-Rajib*), in "EURAS Journal of Social Sciences", Volume 3 Issue 1, April 2023, p. 245-260.

¹⁸ Sebastian Brock, D. Taylor, *The Hidden Pearl, The Ancient Aramaic Heritage I*, Italy, Trans World Film, 2006, p.157.

¹⁹ Tony Devaney Morinelli (tr.), *The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus*, Erişim Tarihi, 20.05.2023.

²⁰ Jul. vol. vi. p. 375 ff., and Ignazio Guidi, *Testi Orientali Inediti sopra i Sette Dormienti di Efeso*, Atti de Accademia de' Lincei, ser. 3, torn. xii. The Greek Acts are in Migne, Patr. Grec. vol. cxv. p. 428. A Syriac version similar to our author's is in Add. MS. 14,641. *The Syriac Chronicle Known as that of Zachariah of Mitylene*, translated Into English By F. J. Hamilton, D.D.\And E. W. Brooks, M.A, Methuen & Co. 36 Essex Street, W.C London, 1899.

²¹ Bartłomiej Grysa, *The Legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus in Syriac and Arab sources- a comparative study*.

²² More deatails: Gwendolyn Collaco, *With Sleep Comes a Fusion of Worlds: The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus Through Formation and Transformation*, Senior Capstone Projects. Paper 3, 2011.

²³ *Mushrik*: polytheist.

²⁴ Necati Demir, *The Historical Process That Arpasus and Arabisos Transforming Into Afşin With Background Of Eshab-ı Khef*, 2012, pp. 101-111. (Editors: Seydihan Küçükdağlı, Serdar Yakar), International Symposium On Religious Tourism and Eshab-ı Khef' 20-22 September 2012 Kahramanmaraş.

²⁵ For detailed information see Grysa, *The Legend...*

In my Ph. D. dissertation titled *Narratives of Mardin Syriacs in the Context of Sacred Space* I conducted fieldwork on the miracles attributed to saints. Among the saints investigated in my research there is Mor Abhay. During this period, I focused on exploring the relationship between Mor Abhay and the Seven Sleepers. The data utilized in my study were drawn from a compilation of miracles attributed to Mor Abhay, who purportedly witnessed the miracle of the Seven Sleepers. Also, as we know, the hagiographical narratives are important for Syriac literature and tradition. It is accepted that saints and martyrs are commemorated on the date of their death rather than their birthdays. The believers built monasteries and churches for saints and martyrs. The Church writes their names on the calendar. Thus, believers remember and memorize their good manners.²⁶

Various versions of the story of the Seven Sleepers exist in Greek, Syriac, Coptic, and Georgian.²⁷

Which resources did Priest Gabriel Akyüz utilize regarding the Seven Sleepers?

1. Great Poet Episkopos Jacob of Serugh (*Suruçlu büyük Şair Episkopos Mor Yakup*) (b. 450 – d. 521).
2. Ahisnoyo Mor Philoxynos from Menbec (b. second half of the 5th century - d. 523). (*Menbecli Mor Filüksinos/Ahisnoyo-Mor Filüksinos*).
3. Logician Zekariye/ Zğaryo Mlilo (b. 465 – d. 536) (*Zğaryo Mlilo/Mantikçi-Zekariye*)
4. The Assyrian Mor Yuhanon (d. 507 -d. 587), Ephesus Bishop from Egil origin. (*Eğil kökenli Efes Episkoposu Süryani Mor Yuhanon*).
5. *The Chronicle* (8th Century) written by an unknown priest from Zuqnîn between 313-485 AD. (*Zuqnînli adı meçhul bir rahibin 313-485 yılları arasında yazdığı Vakayiname*).
6. Patriarch and Historian Mihoyel Rabo (b.1126 - d.1199). (*Patrik ve Tarihçi Mihoyel Rabo*).
7. Church and world history book (12th century) written by an unknown Syriac priest from Urfa. (*Urfalı adı meçhul Süryani bir rahibin yazdığı*

²⁶ Akyüz, *The Great awakening...*

²⁷ Encyclopaedia Britannica, (2008). "Seven Sleepers of Ephesus", Encyclopædia Britannica Online: <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9066942>, Date of Access: 12.05.2012.

kilise ve dünya tarih kitabı).

8. Mor Ğrigoriyos from Malatya Yuhanon Bar Ebroyo/Abul Farac, *Church History* written by Mafiryani (b.1226 - d. 1286). (*Malatyalı Mor Ğriğoriyos Yuhanon Bar Ebroyo/Abul Farac, Doğu- Mafiryani'nın (d.1226 - ö. 1286) yazdığı Kilise Tarihi*)

9. *Life Story of Mor Abhay.*

Priest Gabriel Akyüz primarily relied on two key resources to elucidate the narrative of the Seven Sleepers. The first resource is *Seven Children Sleeping in Ephesus in the Life Story of Mor Abhay* from the Beth-Hamoro Monastery in the Northwest of Mardin, found within the Syriac manuscript titled *Life Stories of the Saints*.²⁸

The sources attributed to the legend of the Seven Sleepers include the *Legenda Aurea* by Jacobus di Voragine (1230-1298) and the Qu'ran, specifically in its chapter *The Cave*. This narrative is widely manifested in Christian and Muslim Pardons and Pilgrimages across Europe and the Muslim world. It recounts the story of seven young Christian men who, during the reign of Emperor Decius (about 249-251 AD), refused to worship him as a self-proclaimed deity and sought refuge inside a cave in Ephesus to escape persecution for their Christian beliefs. According to the narrative, they fell into a deep sleep and remained so for 309 years, awakening as witnesses to the concept of Resurrection. The legend, as ritualized in both Christianity and Islam, encapsulates a common thematic thread shared by both faiths.²⁹

Yemliho³⁰ and his friends

The narrative expounded by Hori Gabriel Akyüz concerning the Seven Sleepers can be succinctly encapsulated as follows: the incident involving Yemliho and his friends, narratives referred to as Ashab al-Kahf in Arabic, can be articulated as follows (as is commonly understood).

In the the Syriac resources, it took place in Ephesus. During the Roman Empire Christian people were facing great suppression, tyranny, and massacres. The spread of the Christianity was a great threat for Rome.

²⁸ The Life Stories of 11 Saints, Syriac Manuscript, No: 275, comprising 70 pages. The second resource is an inscription authored by an unidentified Assyrian priest from Urfa (B. - D. 1234), (Syriac, Print, 2004, Mor Efremon Monastery, Netherlands, p: 110. akt Akyüz, 2021, p. 105.

²⁹ Herbert W. Mason, *The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus*, in "Existenz" 8/1, 2013, p. 31-66.

³⁰ It is used in the text as Yemliho based on the Syriac pronunciation.

Seven friends who converted to Christianity had to escape from Ephesus because of their great fear. They sheltered in a cave, which was on a mountain at high altitude. As darkness fell, they started praying: "Oh God, give us a solution and end this case". Eventually, God took their souls so that they could set an example for people in the future and prove resurrection after death. And they drifted into a sleep that lasted for years. The owner of the cave dreamt: In your cave, you have seven people who escaped from Decius' tyranny and died. Go into the cave, write these dates on a metal plate, and leave it with them. Close the cave and do not touch them. The owner went to the cave to verify his dream; upon inspection, he found that his dream had indeed come to fruition. There were seven youths in the cave, lying dead on the floor. He wrote the dates and explanation that stated their escape from Decius' tyranny on the metal plate, left the plate with them, closed the cave, and went back to his village. After that in Theodosius' time they were resurrected. The epithet ascribed to Theodosius encompasses his reputation as an emperor characterized by his devout and fervent adherence to the tenets of Christianity. During his reign, there was unrest in the world of Christianity. Christians divided into two groups because of the resurrection issue. Some people claimed that there was no such thing as resurrection; people vanish like grass after they die. As the emperor did not know how to solve this problem, and what to do about it, he was very upset. So, he did not leave his palace for days.

Regarding the relationship between Theodosius and Mor Abhay, it is noteworthy that Mor Abhay held a significant position as Theodosius' special metropolitan, hailing from Mardin and of Syriac descent. Curious about their emperor's concerns, the people sought counsel from Mor Abhay, prompting discussions on potential solutions to the predicament. Meanwhile, as they deliberated, news of the resurrection of the seven youths reached the emperor. According to the narrative, amidst hunger and trepidation, the youths found themselves trapped as the cave began to close around them, prompting their contemplation on the identity of the one who sealed the cave. Returning to the narrative of the Seven Sleepers; They decided to send Yemliho to the city to buy some bread. In this way, they could hear what rumors there were about them within the city's environs. Yemliho saw a big cross at the entrance of the city and was surprised. When he saw the crosses all over the city that he had to leave because of his beliefs, he thought he was dreaming. He entered the city and saw that even the clothing of the people had been changed. Everyone talked in

Jesus Christ's name, and he understood them because the language was not altered. He entered a bakery to buy bread. When the baker saw the old money, he was really surprised and asked Yemliho if he had found a treasure. Yemliho replied,

I'm a poor man; I did not find any treasure either. Let me explain the case. I took the money from here yesterday. My other six friends are waiting for me in the cave. We escaped from the city because we were afraid of Decius. And today, there are crosses everywhere. I do not know what happened in this city; I am as surprised as you.

Nobody could make sense of what he said. The baker thought that if anything this man said was real, then a great miracle was happening in the city. The baker and his friends told this miraculous event to the metropolitan of Ephesus. They brought Yemliho to the church and talked to him with the metropolitan and his metropolitan friend. They could not believe in what he said, so they went to the cave to see the miracles of God and to confirm the event's trueness. A great council with Mor Abhay and the Emperor went to the cave. When they entered, they saw that what Yemliho told them was true; they saw the metal plate and read it. So they could verify the situation. The emperor was really happy about what happened. The miracle spread all over the empire. Thus, the issue of resurrection among Christians was solved. When the time between Decius and Theodosius' lifetimes is calculated, they slept for about 200 years and died after everyone saw them. In all sources discussing the Seven Sleepers, there is no definitive information regarding the duration of their slumber. They are reported to have entered a miraculous sleep while attempting to protect themselves from being compelled to practice pagan religious activities³¹ and to evade the persecution of Decius.³² It is stated that this sleep lasted for 187 years.³³ Accounts vary, however, with durations of 307, 158, 197, and 353 years also being mentioned.³⁴ During the reign of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Emperor Theodosius II (AD 408-450), the

³¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica (2008). "Seven Sleepers of Ephesus", Encyclopædia Britannica Online: <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9066942>, Date of Access: 12.05.2012.

³² Drabble, M. (ed.), (2000). "Seven Sleepers of Ephesus", *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Oxford University Press. Online: <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t113.e685>, Date of Access: 14.04.2012.

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ Ersöz, *Ashâb-ı Kehf...* pp. 465-467.

entrance to the cave was reopened, awakening the sleepers.³⁵ Additionally, there is a version where the entrance was destroyed by laborers hired by a shepherd intending to convert the cave into a barn.³⁶ In the subsequent part of the narrative, Yemliho and his friends died in a short time. The emperor wanted to make golden coffins for them in memory of this miracle. But he dreamed about Yemliho and his friends. They told him, "Do not bury us in golden coffins! It will be unfair. We are made of earth, and we want to become the earth. Just close the cave over us. Leave us alone in there." And so, the seven sleepers got their wish. The Emperor's private metropolitan, Mor Abhay, who saw Yemliho and his friends, protected the saints' bones, and he was originally from Mardin. He dreamt about this situation on the day that the emperor was going to die. Thus, he left Istanbul with his two friends and went to Adıyaman in Southern Turkey. He passed Euphrates and built himself a monastery known as Mor Abhay Monastery. On the night of the king's death, Mor Abhay, together with his disciple Andreos, left Constantinople and travelled to Jerusalem. They did not take any wealth/money or clothes from the riches of the royal treasures. They took only five thousand five hundred (5500) bones of the saints. The king had collected 38,000 bones of saints and martyrs and tested them with fire to know whether they were saints or not. Eight thousand (8,000) bones that were not damaged by the fire, came out intact. From Jerusalem they travelled to Beroa/Aleppo and from there to Manbaj. From there they came to the area of the city of Shamishat, which was built on the banks of the Euphrates River. They entered a tunnel in an ancient rock. There Mor Abhay built a monastery and made a special place for the bones of the saints he took with him. Although this monastery was known as the Monastery of Mor Abhay, it was also known as the 'Monastery of the Stairs' because they went up and down the stairs to the monastery. Moreover, Theodosius built a church in Adıyaman for the bones of 5000 saints and appointed Mor Abhay to protect these bones. Mor Abhay lived in this monastery until the end of his life and thus his name is always remembered in Syriac ceremonies.

Seven Sleepers in Syriac Liturgy

The Seven Sleepers are recognised as saints by Christians and commemorative ruins and religious services are held for them in the

³⁵ Encyclopaedia Britannica (2008) "Seven Sleepers of Ephesus", Encyclopædia Britannica Online: <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9066942>, Date of Access: 12.05.2012.

³⁶ And, *Ottoman -Islamic...*

Orthodox Church as well as in the Latin Catholic Church.³⁷ The importance of the Seven Sleepers narrative is evident in the realm of knowledge, particularly in the domain of Syriac Christians. The telling of stories and the recitation of psalms in the context of religious observances lend significance to this narrative. The assertions of the Metropolitan of Diyarbakır-Mardin, Saliba Ozmen, who emphasises that the psalm dedicated to the narrative of Yemliho and his friends occupies an important place among the liturgical psalms of the Church, lead to a significant distinction. This important psalm is attributed to Mor Jacob and it follows a poetic structure which is characterised by a septet syllabic meter.

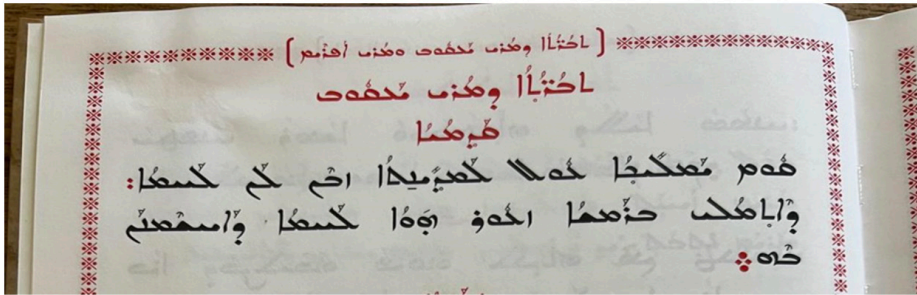


Photo 1: Sükrü Aktaş from the Mor Gabriel monastery sings this Syriac psalm, which is about the Seven Sleepers. This psalm was translated by Yuhannun Vergili.

“Yemliho, wake up! Get into the city/ Buy us bread.
As last day’s supper was less” (Vergili, 2015)

³⁷ Ahmet Aras, *The Legend of The Seven Sleepers in The Anatolian Culture*, International Symposium On Religious Tourism and Eshab-ı Khef, 20 - 22 September 2012, Kahramanmaraş, p. 145-155.

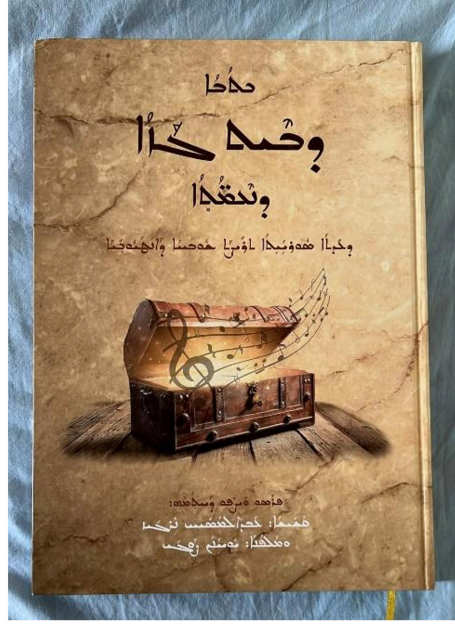


Photo 2: Furthermore, in the Bethgazo³⁸ music makam book, Yemliho and his companions are mentioned in the first eight verses of the hymn of Mor Jacob.

In his hymn to the Seven Sleepers, St. Jacob of Serugh initially records that the two wise men who witnessed the event, wrote down what happened on lead plates, and later writes that the emperor Theodosius, who had come to Ephesus upon invitation, took the plate and began to read it.³⁹

Sebastian Brock prefers to use the terms ‘poem, sermon, poetic sermon, a kind of hymn or liturgical sermon (*mêmrâ*)’ to emphasise the different qualities of the text of Mor Jacob of Serugh. In this case, the use of the terms ‘poem’ or ‘monumental memra’ makes sense.

Conclusion

In the multicultural and multireligious context of Mardin, there are no direct traces of the Seven Sleepers narrative. However, during my thesis consultations with Gabriel Akyüz, a Syriac narrative emerged, both in oral

³⁸ Published by Priest Abdülmesih Nergiz and Malfono Yuhanun Savcı (2022), p.197.

³⁹ Sebastian Brock, *The Place of Syriac Literature among the Middle Eastern Literatures*, in “Religious, Cultural and News Magazine”, Mardin, Kurkmo Mardin Syriac Orthodox Metropolis of Mardin, 2007, 6, 3448.

accounts and written sources, featuring Mor Abhay, a saint of significant importance in Syriac tradition. Through this study I have explored the relationship between the Seven Sleepers and the Syriac Mor Abhay of Mardin. This story is important in Syriac tradition and belief, as it is in almost all religions. According to Hanna Dolabani's book, *History of Mardin*, in addition to his duty of protecting the bones of saints and 40 martyrs, Mor Abhay was a saint who witnessed the miracle of the Seven Sleepers, and it is also significant that Mor Abhay built a monastery on the relics of saints, which is important in the Christian tradition. For this reason, the narrative of the Seven Sleepers is important in Christian and Islamic sources alongside public narratives.

As a result, this narrative, which occupies a significant place in the history of religions, intersects with Mor Abhay, one of the saints who holds an important position in the Syriac saint tradition. Unlike other accounts focusing solely on the narrative of the Seven Sleepers, this study has aimed to highlight Syriac Mor Abhay as one of the witnesses to the miracle of the seven individuals who slept in a cave for centuries and then awoke. Miracles and testimonies, which are pivotal in Christian tradition, play a crucial role in the dissemination of religious beliefs. After witnessing this miracle, Mor Abhay's act of gathering the holy and miraculous relics of saints, proving their authenticity, and subsequently traveling to Adiyaman to build a monastery, further underscores his significance.

In short, Mor Abhay not only bore witness to a miracle but also performed miracles himself, solidifying his prominent place as a saint in Syriac liturgy. This study emphasizes the intertwining of a universally significant religious narrative with the unique contributions of Mor Abhay, shedding light on his enduring role in Syriac tradition and belief systems.