**A MILESTONE THE THEATER OF EPHESUS WITNESSED**

I’ll start my story with the city of Ephesus, which was the largest and the most important city of the world in the 1st Century A.D. With a population of 250.000, you can compare it, say, with New York or Tokio today. During the 1st Century A.D. in Ephesus ,the Jews and others practised their own religion freely whether they believed in the Anatolian, Greek, Roman or the Egyptian religions. However, they were also enjoying being the home of Artemis, the Mother Goddess, who had always been bringing wealth and prosperity to Ephesians for centuries. Her home, The Temple of Artemis, which is one of the seven wonders of the world, locates in Selçuk now visible with its foundations only.  
 Meanwhile a new religion, Christianity, was just getting established in Jerusalem. The apostles who were trying to spread Christianity, were expelled from Jerusalem between 37-42 A.D. St. Paul came to Ephesus in 53 A.D. for a short visit but he managed to gain some followers. When he was leaving the city, his disciples told the Apostle that they would very much like to see him back in Ephesus again. They told him that not only were there 250.000 people living in the city but there were many others coming to Ephesus every day from various places for trade and religious purposes. So, if he were able to pass onto them the word of God then they could go back to their towns and do the same. They said that the people in the most remote parts of Anatolia. where St. Paul could never find time to go in his lifetime, could hear the word of God. St. Paul agreed to come back.  
 After a while St. Paul kept his promise and returned to Ephesus and stayed there for 3 years. The only place where he could preach for the first time was the synagogue because the Jewish also believed the same God, but after three months of preaching he was forced to leave the place. Tyrannus, an Ephesian teacher, offered his hall. So, St. Paul transferred his preaching to the hall of Tyrannus. There, not only was he trying to pass the word of God onto the Ephesians, but he was also creating miracles in the name of God. He was blessing the aprons and the handkerchiefs of the ill people and he was getting them well. His fame was growing bigger and bigger in the city every day. As a result Christianity rapidly gained popularity in Ephesus. Meanwhile he also established the Church of Ephesus.  
 One day a large group of St. Paul’s disciples went to the governor of the city and told him that they wanted to listen to Paul in the theatre. Just for this once, the governor allowed Paul to give a speech publicly. Actually, the governor had no other choice but give the permission because whether he allowed it or not, he realized that, the people were determined to listen to Paul anyway. The word went around the city fast and soon the Ephesians started pouring into the theater. There were 35.000 people squeezed in the theater, anxiously waiting for the lecture of this man who was talking about a God that they had never seen or touched before. But the jeweller Demetrius and others who earned a living by making and selling silver statues of Artemis, were quite distressed by the popularity of this new religion.  
 Just before the Apostle came into the theatre, Demetrius came running down the steps. He stood in the centre of the orchestra and with a very persuasive tone he started talking to the Ephesians. He was saying “If you let this man talk to you, half of you will be Christians immediately, and in not more than 2 years time, half of Anatolia will be Christians. Do you know what he says ?” The Ephesians were very confused, they didn’t know what to answer. He carried on saying, “If you believe in the words of his God, then you’d believe that there would be no man-made gods. If everybody believes in that, then to whom are we going to sell the silver shrines of Artemis, who will come to show respect to our Mother in her temple?” What Demetrius was really asking was that if they were to believe in Paul, how were they going to make their living. The Ephesians immediately realized what sort of threat St. Paul was for them, so they started a riot. For two hours, 35.000 people in one voice cried out the same word “Great is Artemis Ephesia, Great is Artemis Ephesia.” Their voices were carried out into the streets. The ones who didn’t know what was going on in the theater, hearing the voices, realized that there was something wrong. Some people were running up the marble streets, some running down. One was shouting one thing and another was shouting another. There was an absolute chaos in the streets.  
 St. Paul was insisting that he would not leave the town. He was sure that his turn would come and he would be able to speak to the Ephesians. Although he wanted to face the crowd in the theatre, those around him wouldn’t let him.  
 Thousands of people in the theatre were so provoked by Demetrius that they wanted to go out and kill the Apostle. Just at that second, the city clerk came into the theatre and stopped the shouting. He must have realized that this was no simple riot. They were too mad to know what they were doing. After they killed St. Paul and his friends, they could go around killing all the other Roman citizens, forgetting why they had started the riot. To save himself and his Roman friends lives in the city, the city clerk told them that ‘’unless you go away peacefully, the Roman authorities may look upon the incident as a riot against the Romans and impose the usual penalties, which are very high fines.  
 The Ephesians loved money only when it was in their own pockets so they gave up killing Paul but get rid of him in a different way. St. Paul was taken to the rock building at the top of the hill at the end of the city walls. They put him into a boat in the harbour and sent him to Kavala in Greece.  
 The messages which St.Paul wanted to give in the theater of Ephesus were than written in the letters of St. Paul to the Ephesians. These messages can be read in the Bible under the headline of “The Epistles of Apostle Paul to the Ephesians” Who knows, maybe, if Paul were allowed to talk to the Ephesians in this theatre, he would not have written the letters to the Ephesians and the Bible would have had one chapter less.

**THE ARGUMENS CONFIRMING THE PRESENCE OF THE HOUSE OF VIRGIN MARY IN EPHESUS**

There are no archeological evidences to prove that the Virgin Mary ever spent her last years here in Ephesus. Neither a sarcophagus with her name, nor an inscription have been found around the city so far. However, in some cases religious legends, traditions, and works of literature from the early ages of the Church support the belief that she spent some years in Ephesus and died there, which makes the place a Biblical site. Some Christian authorities calculate that she lived there for 9 years with some intervals until her last day. Now let’s discuss the arguments that are used in order to prove her presence in Ephesus.

1. According to St. John’s Gospel, before his death, Jesus pointed at St. John from the cross and said to his mother, “Woman, here’s your son” and then pointed at the Virgin Mary and said to St. John, “Here’s your mother. Behold her.”There and then, he put his mother under St. John’s care. St. John confirms the result of this statement long after Mary’s Assumption in his writing by saying “And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home.” But they were forced to leave Jerusalem, like many other apostles and disciples sometime between 37-42 A.D. and came to Ephesus. Some sources claim that St. Mary Magdalen accompanied Mary and John, and that it took them 5 weeks to reach to Ephesus via Cyprus. From that time on, this trio of “the second holy family”, which was formed at the foot of the cross, rarely got separated until their last days in Ephesus. St. Gregory of Tours (538-594) wrote, “In Ephesus is found the place where the apostle John wrote the Gospel and in that city Mary Magdalen rests.” Her sarcophagus was found in the Cave of the Seven Sleepers, which is less than 1 km. away from Ephesus.   
    It has been proved that John spent his last years in Ephesus. If John’s area of apostolic work centered about Ephesus, Mary would have lived there, too, because she was under St. John’s care. And the presence of Magdalen’s tomb in Ephesus suggest at least an opinion that she, too, travelled with Mary and John. The Patriarch of Jerusalem, Modestus (630-634), wrote that Mary Magdalen went to John after the death of the Virgin to inform him of her death. As a proven historic fact, there is no basis. But if St. John was in Ephesus and his burial place is within the Basilica dedicated to him, and if Mary Magdalen was in Ephesus Grotto of the Seven Sleepers, then it is most likely that the Virgin Mary died in Ephesus too.

**THE CURCH OF THE VIRGIN MARY**

1. When St. John and the Virgin Mary came to Ephesus together, they first stayed in a section of a great building in the shape of basilica. In the 4th century, this great basilica was converted into a cathedral, which was called the Church of the Virgin Mary. Bishop Hypatius identified her name in a long inscription in the narthex of the church. This church is known to be the first church named after Virgin Mary in the world. In the early times of Christianity a church was named after a person only if he or she lived in that place. So, the presence of the Church of the Virgin Mary in Ephesus confirm her presence here through a religious tradition.
2. On the other hand the Ecumentical Council of 431 A.D. was held in this Church of the Virgin Mary in Ephesus. The minutes of the council indicate that four or six years after the death of Jesus, Mary and John came to Ephesus. Although other Councils were usually held in Nycia, 100 km. to the east of Istanbul, for this particular council they picked Ephesus. The dogma decided upon in Ephesus was the Divine Motherhood of the Virgin Mary. If there were no tradition of Mary’s being in Ephesus, then should they have chosen Ephesus to decide on this particular subject ?
3. Local traditions are handed down from generation to generation. One of those traditions faithfully transmitted from the elder to the young is to make an annual pilgrimage to the House of Virgin Mary on August 15th to commemorate the Assumption of her. If Ephesus didn’t have such a belief and tradition why should the local people keep visiting the House despite the hot weather. This also confirms her presence there.
4. Finally, we should also have a short look at the Basilica of St. John. After St. Paul was beheaded outside the city wall of Rome in 64 A.D. St. John became the leader of the Church of Ephesus. Despite his old age he travelled the steppes of Anatolia and tried to spread Christianity. But Romans arrested and took him to Rome. They tortured him and sent him to the Island of Patmos, which is not for from the south coasts of Aegean Sea in Anatolia. He wrote the Apocalypse there. When the Roman emperor Domitian was stabbed to death by one of his servants, Christians were relieved. St. John returned to Ephesus and started writing his Gospel. According to his will, he was buried in the church which bears his name in Selçuk. But at first his tomb was all alone. In the 4th Century, when Christianity started gaining strength in Ephesus, a small basilica with a wooden roof was built over his grave, and during the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (527-565) the present church of which we can see the remains today was built. His burial place has received a lot of respect and admiration since its earliest times and it became a religious site to visit. The tomb also gave rise to a legend which says John was not dead but has been sleeping. It was believed he showed signs of life by sending dust out with his breath. The dust, called manna, was used to cure the sick. So, the church was also visited by sick people and invalids for the healing powers of the dust. Every year, on May 8th, the people of the area came in large groups to lay flowers on the tomb of the Apostle. So, in conclusion, St. John lived his last years and died in Ephesus after the Virgin Mary died in Ephesus, as well.

**DID MARY EVER GO BACK TO JERUSALEM AFTER SHE HAD BEEN EXPELLED FROM THERE**

The answer is, yes, she did. It’s believed that she lived her last 9 years in Ephesus. However, after 3 years she settled in Ephesus, she longed for Jerusalem, her home, so much that John took her there. As soon as she got Jerusalem in the dusk of the evening, before they went into the city, she visited the Mount of Olives. It is written in the Gospels and in the Acts of the Apostles that the Mount of Olives was the place where Jesus rose to heaven. This mount has been a site of Christian worship since ancient times and is today a major site of pilgrimage for Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants. She was so sorry that she could hardly hold herself upright, crying “my son, my son”, so John and Peter had to support her.  
 She came to Jerusalem once again 18 months before her death. When she came before the door behind the palace, where she had met Jesus sinking under the weight of the Cross, she, too, sank to the ground. She was in great pain with the memories of her son everywhere. People around her thought she was dying because she was so weak and was fainting very often. So, they made some preparations for her burial. She herself chose a cave in the Mount of Olives to be buried and the Apostles had a sepulcher with her name on it prepared. During this time it was announced several times that she was dead, and the rumour of her death and burial was spread about in Jerusalem and in some other places. By the time, however, the sepulcher was ready, she had recovered and was strong enough to journey back to her home in Ephesus where she did, in fact, die 18 months later. The sepulcher prepared for her on the Mount of Olives was already held in honor, and later a church was built over it. However, some believers of the Orthodox Christianity have always claimed that the Virgin Mary died in Jerusalem and was buried there.

**HOW WAS THE HOUSE OF THE VIRGIN MARY IN EPHESUS DISCOVERED**

After Virgin Mary and St. John arrived in Ephesus for the first time, they stayed in a section of a large basilica for a short time. Remember that this basilica would be converted into the Church of the Virgin Mary after about 350 years. Mary and John didn’t feel themselves safe enough in the center of the city, so St. John moved her to a House he had prepared for her on Bülbül Dağı, the mount of Nightingale. As time went by, the location of the house was forgotten and it fell into ruins. However, the villagers of Şirince didn’t forget their Mother and they kept visiting the House to pray for centuries, and they also did their best to keep the House in good condition. Some of them used to call the building “monastery”. They didn’t forget the House because their ancestors were the earliest Christians in Ephesus who were searching for a secure location from the pressure of the Romans. Yet, shortly after the Middle Ages, the location of the House was often discussed again and again by some Christian authorities but they couldn’t reach a conclusion.  
 The place where the Virgin Mary lived for the last nine years of her life, the place of her Dormition, the site of her Assumption, was discovered through Anne Catherine Emmerich. Sister Emmerich had never left Germany because she was invalid and spent most of her time in her bed, but she had visions of the house and its surroundings. Before she died in 1824, the German Poet, Clement von Brentano, sat at her bedside over the course of her illness and recorded her visions in French, but they waited for 50 years to be published with title of The Life of the Virgin Mary. In fact it was not until 1880 when a copy of Brentano’s work caught the attention of the French abbot, Julien Gouget, the head of a monastery. He travelled to Ephesus by the way of Smyrna, to find Mary’s House and he did it. But still the story of this special house was little known because some church authorities didn’t want to believe in the presence of the House. A decade later, in 1891, a Lazarist father, Eugene Poulin of the Sacred Heart College in Smyrna had the occasion to read “The Life and Dolorious Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ” by Emmerich during a timetabled reading session. The account of the book moved him so much that he got a copy of her book “The Life of the Holy Virgin”, which gave descriptions of the Virgin Mary’s House, her death and her burial. When he told others of this book, they didn’t find the story very believable. So, to find out what was the truth about the House, they put together an expedition team, which included Paulin. The House was discovered almost by chance. Here is how it happened : On their search, they became thirsty and asked some local women working in the field where they might get some water. The women told them to go to “the monastery” up the mountain. The “monastery” was but a pile of stones and some badly built houses, and most importantly, there was a ruin of a building with no roof but with some walls standing in the centre. A spring of water was coming out from under the house. Its construction and the building plan seemed to match the description given by Emmerich and recorded by von Brentano. So, the party asked about the burial sites nearby. One of the inhabitants knew about the location of the tomb of St. Mary Magdalene.  
 On their second visit to the same place they found an old stone cistern, which was connected to the house. It had Hebrew inscriptions. That evening they heard from the locals that for generations, the people in the neighborhood had a habit of going to that spot to pray to the Blessed Virgin. When Poulin studied the House more closely he was certain that the dimensions and the floor plan were the same as Emmerich’s descriptions. And later the archeologists discovered that the foundations of the House dated backto the 1st century. They also found some pieces of coal in the hearth on the floor with a different colour of marble from the 1st century during the excavations.  
 After its discovery, the building has been restored to its present state. You can see a red line on the walls outside the building. The wall under the line belongs to the 1st century and they are original. The elements above the line are from 6th-7th century, when the Byzantines restored the building. This proves that the House was of great importance for them at that age, too. The building itself looks more like a small church with a cross shape, but the room on the left, which served as a cloakroom, disappeared. The one of the right was Mary’s bedroom. The water supply comes from under the pink coloured marble floor covering in this room and goes to the fountain on the second terrace to the west of the House. Many people from all over the world believe that when you drink this water, you get rid of your illnesses, and you recover from your disabilities.  
 Most of religious experts who visited the House accepted it as the House of the Virgin Mary. The patriarch of Izmir, Monseigneur Timoni, after serious research, gave permission to conduct religious ceremonies here in 1892. In 1961, Pope John XXIII put an end to the disagreement still going on over the location of the House by announcing it as a place of pilgrimage. Benedict XVI visited the House, and therefore indicated the importance they placed on the House.  
 The whole area around the house is so peaceful and has such a very tranquil atmosphere that it’s like on open-air sanctuary. One will notice the ribbons and colourful materials tied to the branches of the trees which are the offerings left there by those whose wishes have come true. Giving offering to the gods for something that has been asked of them as old a tradition as the history of religion. In this region people worshipped the Mother Goddess Kybele 4000 years ago, the Mother Goddess Artemis until 2000 years ago. And since then people have been asking for the help of their Mother Mary.