THE CILICIAN MOUNT ARARAT

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Vahe H. Apelian, Columbus OH, 9 August 2010
Much like Mount Ararat, *Gassios Ler* (Կասիոս Լեռ) has been a silent witness to the lives of the Kessabtsis since the original inhabitants set foot at the mountain slope. The mountain rises from the Mediterranean Sea shore and flanks Kessab in the north. It commands a majestic view to the traveler approaching Kessab. *Gassios Ler* may very well be regarded as the Cilician version of Turkish-occupied Mount Ararat.

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Ler in Armenian means mountain. The Armenian name of the mountain, *Gassios*, is thought to have evolved from Cassius. Syria was once a Roman province and several “Cassius”s were governors of Syria. Although the Kessabtsis refer to the mountain as *Gassios Ler*, its official name in Arabic is *Jabal Aqra* ("Bare Mountain") because of its sparse vegetation. Its summit is approximately 1,800 metres (5,000 ft) and commands a magnificent view of the Mediterranean, *Moussa Ler* of the famed *Forty Days of Mussa Dagh* by Frantz Werfel and parts of the historical Antioch through which Apostle Paul traversed, spreading Christianity.

The very first stamps of the new Republic of Armenia depicted Mount Ararat even though the mountain is in Turkey. Much like Mount Ararat, *Gassios Ler* is part of Turkey as well. However, the Kessabtsis continue to relate to it as their own. Historically, it was part of Armenian Cilicia. The mountain, along with parts of the region (Sanjak of Alexandretta), including part of the Kessab, was annexed to Turkey in 1938-1939. Present-day Kessab was incorporated into Syria, thanks to the appeals of the local Armenians to the European powers. It is claimed that Cardinal Aghajanian played a decisive role in securing present-day Kessab as a remnant of the historical Cilicia. Kessab retains its Armenian inhabitants to this day, while the rest of Cilicia is depopulated of its once-thriving Armenian population.

Up to its annexation to Turkey and once a year, on the Sunday nearest to August 15, Kessabtsis used to go on pilgrimage to the ancient ruins on the slopes on *Gassios Ler,* to celebrate the Feast of Assumption. Kessabtsis called these ruins Ballum. Some historians claim that a temple dedicated to Greek god Apollo stood there once. At one time for the Kessabtsis, the word Ballum and the Feast of

Assumption were intertwined if not synonymous. Both of my parents as youngsters used to accompany their parents to celebrate the Feast of Assumption at Ballum on *Gassios Ler*.

The Feast Assumption is an important religious celebration to Catholic and Orthodox Christians as the day that Virgin Mary was received into Heaven. However, all the Kessabtsis, irrespective of their denominational affiliations, celebrate the feast. Grapes are brought to the church and are blessed after Divine Liturgy. Kessabtsis would not eat grape until the feast. I remember well my paternal grandmother Sarah forbade me to pick grapes from vines until their blessing. The Feast of the Assumption is a major festivity for the Kessabtis who continue to celebrate it with *davul* and *zurn*a and feast on *harissa*.

Gassios Ler, unlike Mount Ararat, has one summit. In the gorge between the snow-capped twin peaks of Mount Ararat our legendary King Ardavast remains chained, accompanied by his faithful dogs who unceasingly lick his chains to free Ardavast to liberate Armenia. No such legendary figure inhabits *Gassios Ler*. Both mountains however, remain silent witnesses of our turbulent history, stretching from the slopes of Mount Ararat to the slopes of *Gassios Ler* and its surroundings within the famed historical Armenian Cilicia.