



Portal to Antiquity Hasankeyf, Turkey

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On the banks of the Tigris River, where the brown water slowly winds through canyons and past lush green plains, sits Hasankeyf. Carved into the hills in the southeastern section of Anatolia near the Iraqi and Syrian borders, Hasankeyf may be the oldest continuous settlement on earth, according to archaeologists, who date it back at least ten thousand years. The town of approximately three thousand residents rises straight up into the limestone cliffs and boasts over four thousand caves.

This ancient Mesopotamian city has spanned nine civilizations. The Romans tread here and built a fortress to watch over their eastern provinces. Under the Byzantine Empire Hasankeyf became a religious center, a bishopric for Christians. When the Arabs conquered the city in 640 AD, the new settlers built a bridge over the Tigris, no doubt facilitating the invasion in 1260 of the

Mongols, who sacked the city while the residents hid in caves. On a lucrative trading route in northern Mesopotamia, Hasankeyf fell to the Ottomans in the sixteenth century and was ruled by that empire. Today this town by the Tigris is part of the Kurdish-dominated region of Turkey.

For centuries Hasankeyf stood as a guard over the Anatolian Peninsula at the Gate of northern Mesopotamia. However, today the town faces its greatest threat, one that challenges its very existence. The Turkish government, in partnership with a consortium from Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, plans to build a dam that will flood the area and bury the homes, the caves, and the antiquity—more than three hundred medieval monuments and eighty-three archaeological sites—of Hasankeyf under the waters of the Tigris. The Ilisu Hydroelectric Dam is scheduled for construction fifty miles downstream near the

border of Iraq and Syria. The flooding will create Turkey's second largest reservoir and submerge Hasankeyf up to the halfway mark of its fifteenth-century minaret. It is estimated eighty additional villages and fifty- to sixty-thousand people will be displaced in the region as the waters spread over approximately 120 square miles.

In ancient times the Assyrians named the town *Castrum Kefa*, "castle of the rock," which the Arabs translated *Hisn Kafyfa*, "rock fortress." A legend recounted four hundred years ago by Kurdish writer Cheref-Ouddin, prince of Bitlis, in *Marvels of the Kurdish Nation*, tells of an Arab prisoner named Hasan who was sentenced to death and imprisoned in the fortress high above the Tigris. As a last request he asked to ride his horse one more time in the courtyard of the fortress. Hasan rode faster and faster until suddenly he jumped with his horse over the fortress wall and into the river 500 feet below. The horse didn't survive, but Hasan escaped. The startled witnesses peered over the wall and one of them called: "Hasan Keif?" (Hasan, how?). From that time on, the story goes, the town has been called Hasankeyf.

Through the centuries citizens of Hasankeyf have fallen under siege and had to find refuge literally inside their land by burrowing caves into the hillsides. These caves still exist. As one climbs up the path from the river into the town and then farther up stone steps to the caves, antiquity is palpable. One passes the minaret from the El-rizk mosque, built by the renowned Ayyubib sultan Suleiman; the visitor sees the fifteenth-century circular Zeynelbey Tomb decorated with blue bricks in geometric patterns, then views the ruins of the small palace and the remains of the gates of Hasankeyf Castle, built from the sand-colored stone that makes the whole town look as if it grew out of the cliffs.

Hasankeyf Castle, built by the Byzantines in 363 AD, rises on the cliffs above the river. The stone from which it was hewn was extremely hard, thus it became known as "the Rock Castle," one of the most secure in the eastern part of the Byzantine Empire. One can still see on its walls the original designs and the writing in the stone. Secret steps from the castle lead to the Tigris River, and secret water passageways still exist through the rocks. The castle was a religious center for approximately 330 years during the Byzantine Empire and reconstructed in 1101-1231 by the Artuks, serving as their capital. In 1260 AD when the Mongols

invaded, residents hid in this castle as well as in the neighboring caves. The remains of the east and west gates can be seen among the ruins.

In the nineteenth century the Kurdish chiefs lived in the castle high above the valley, where one can now stand in the ruins, looking out the portals to the blue sky and the panoramic view of the rolling green hills and countryside below.

Today the path to the town is dotted with craft stalls, where local artisans sell jewelry, rugs, bags, and textiles. Much of the younger generation has left for the nearby cities of Batman or Diyarbakır, but children dressed in brightly colored clothing run over the hillsides or ride on donkeys and sell the souvenirs of the artisans whose studios are in the caves.

At the top of the stone steps, tourists can lunch in the larger caves. Carpets and pictures cover the walls, and traditional Turkish meals of kebabs, rice, and vegetables are served. Diners lounge on the carpets and cushions and old wooden couches and listen to Turkish music. The caves are cool in the summer heat and warm in the winter.

In 1978 the Turkish government declared Hasankeyf a site for conservation and thus legally protected. This designation put a halt to the dam project, which was originally conceived in the 1950s. However, in the 1980s and '90s fighting erupted in the southeastern region between the Turkish government and the Kurdish guerrilla group, the PKK. Ankara reversed itself and approved the hydroelectric dam. Opponents of the dam project claim these events are linked.

The residents today are hoping for a miraculous escape equal to that of their namesake Hasan. So far they have eluded their watery end. In 2001 the Ilisu Dam project was suspended and then abandoned by its partners after international pressure, but new partners were found and the project resumed. Another stay of execution was temporarily granted in December 2008 when the insurers from Germany, Switzerland, and Austria insisted that the Turkish government had not conformed to World Bank standards on protecting the region's inhabitants, environment, and cultural heritage. They gave the government 180 days to comply. An evaluation will be made after July of this year.

Advocates of routing the waters elsewhere or stopping the dam altogether are hopeful this last stay will save the town, but the Turkish government already broke ground for the dam in 2006 and has built a structure in the river. The

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With a Long Breath

Zaradachet Hajo

With a long breath
and unwavering conviction
You became the stone cradle of humanity.
In the light of the sun
and the protection of the darkness
you bore children tirelessly –
Amed, Heskiv, Ninawa,
and Gilgamesh
nurtured them
into flowers of civilization.

Now they want to steal the tongue of Amed
and drown Heskiv in your belly
but your old power
and your young fury
feed the resistance of your children.
How long is thy breath,
Tigris river, the cradle of humanity?

Note: Translated from Kurdish by the author. Amed is the old name of Diyarbakir (before Islamization). Heskiv is the old name of Hasankeyf (before Islamization); it means “concave” in Kurdish. Ninawa is the Arabic name for the biblical city of Nineveh in present-day Iraq.

Zaradachet Hajo (b. 1950, Syria) is a Kurdish writer and linguist, born in southwest Kurdistan / Syria in 1950. He studied linguistics, German, and Iranian languages at the Free University of Berlin and wrote his doctoral thesis on Indo-Iranian language studies. He has been teaching at universities in Berlin, Bremen, and Hamburg since 1982 and has served as president of the Kurdish Centre of PEN since 1999.

government says the structure is for transporting equipment from one side to the other, but opponents fear that it is part of the dam and that the government will go ahead with the project in spite of the reluctance of its partners.

The drama unfolding is one worthy of literature or at least a good political thriller. It includes the story of the Hasankeyf villagers, many of whom have been holding on for decades. The mayor has protested by living in a cave. Nineteen villages nearby are said to have already been evacuated at gunpoint and homes burned.

Hasankeyf could be saved by designating it as one of UNESCO's World Heritage sites. The World Monument Fund has listed Hasankeyf as one of the world's 100 Most Endangered sites, but a UNESCO designation must be requested by the Turkish prime minister, who has not done so.

The Turkish government insists that the hydroelectric dam is necessary to generate electricity, water, jobs, and prosperity for the region, one of the poorer areas of Turkey. The government says it plans to create a new town and a cultural park as well as a water park on the edge of the reservoir, where it will transfer some of the archaeological treasures of Hasankeyf. It has said it will build new houses for villagers higher up the mountain. The villagers protest that the cost of these new homes far exceeds the compensation they have been offered by the government. The opposition further argues that the dam will only last fifty to seventy years and produce just 2 percent of Turkey's electric needs, and that most of the electricity generated will go to areas other than the Southeast. They argue that the dam is part of a plan to obliterate Kurdish culture. How can one move a cave or a tomb or structures built into the rocks? they ask. Only if future generations don scuba gear will they be able to view the antiquities of Hasankeyf under four hundred feet of water.

The struggle to save Hasankeyf and the region, which has its own ecosystem and rare animals and birds, has taken a toll on inhabitants in the years since the project was first proposed. The population of the town has almost halved as residents have moved away or postponed investment in their homes and businesses. The care of the ruins has been neglected. Additional sites of ruins have not been developed. Archaeologists have suggested only a third of the antiquities in the area have been excavated.

The drama is also larger than the residents and has a geopolitical context. It includes the relationship of Turkey to its proposed membership in the European Union; it includes the Chinese potentially stepping in to partner if the European countries step away; it includes the threat that Syria and Iraq feel from Turkey damming the waters of the Tigris River just upstream from them; it includes the European Court of Human Rights, which agreed in 2006 to hear the case against the dam lodged by archaeologists, journalists, and lawyers.

At present Hasankeyf abides and will continue for at least another few years. Those looking to visit one of the cradles of civilization would find the journey well worthwhile across the southeastern plains of Turkey, up the cliffs to the cool caves of Hasankeyf.

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