

The Scent of Stones Wafting from the Depth of History

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In the course of my travels and sails around this ever shrinking world, and the leaps in technology, which had by the Millennium, touched every field (cultural, creative, economical, and scientific), I became aware of the customs and the heritage of the various nations; their aesthetic and cultural development as well as their perception of the arts and literature. Interest in architecture and the preservation of relics- the legacy and essence of mankind- became paramount, for it depicts and records the knowledge, development, and progress of Man.

History tells us a great deal about the various discoveries which have led to our status quo, it tells us about the brilliant advances in industry and production which have both contributed to the social and scientific bloom we now enjoy.

This awareness prompts us to look back with a critical and open eyes, and contemplate the childhood of Man as it were, back to the very first beginnings; to Iraq – the birthplace of Sumerian, Assyrian and Babylon civilizations. The discovery of writing, was the pinnacle of their achievements which they applied to inscribe of their knowledge, sciences, legislations, and poetry manifested in the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh.

The Greeks played no lesser role in the advancement of science, and the expanding the horizons in philosophy. They were later followed by the Egyptian Pharaohs and the Phoenicians who dwelled in the Middle East. Later came the Romans whose Empire stretched both directions East and West, they occupied several countries such as Turkey, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. The trails they left behind reflect their supremacy in culture and their civilization. Evidences of this could be found in Jordan (whose capital is Amman) where the Grand Amphitheatre could be seen, a construction akin to a modern sport arena, capable of holding thousands of spectators.

You will also find the city of ‘Jareh’ with spectacular sites of great significance, which could be similarly found in other cities such as Al-Fuhais and the village of Um-Qais.

If you were to go to Syria via Jordan, you will see cities still left intact such as Tadmor and Busra, and the city of Aleppo where the famous 'Aleppo Fortress' lies. Further still heading in the direction of Lebanon, you will come across the recent archaeological finds - which I had the pleasure of witnessing last year- in the capital city of Beirut discovered in the course of the re-construction program in the aftermath of a 15 years civil war.

There is also, the vast city of Baalbek which holds the finest Roman ruins, temples in particular, such as the spectacular temple allocated for the worship of the Gods (Bacchus and Jupiter) the like of which could also be found in Southern Lebanon such as in the cities of Sidon and Sour, and the Northern cities such as Tripoli and Gabel as well.

Of the Romans relic in the West -Britain in particular- I am not very knowledgeable of. I am aware of Hadrian, the Roman Emperor who founded a kingdom once upon a time (in the first century AC to be precise) and built fortresses, trenches, and walls to defend it. He erected a wall (similar to that of China), to fend his land from occupation, and ward off invaders like himself, as well as barbarians and others who might be after his English territories. The great Emperor then forfeited taxes from all visitors entering the city through the gates of the Wall.

This solid construction is 72 miles in length, it starts at the city of Bowness and ends in the city of Wallsend.

During my participation (amongst poets from all over the world), in the 'Writing on the Wall' project which was hosted by the Northern city of Newcastle my fleeting encounter with this city offered me an opportunity to witness the trails of this invader, the ruins are now in the safe guard of secure and caring hands, who are eager to preserve this heritage most of which was exhibited in Museums and public squares. The Wall however, continues to exist free and unrestricted in the open air.

There I was, next to this stoney splendid fence - referred to as 'Hadrian's Wall'- which I visited on more than one occasion and viewed it from various angles. It was situated in a scenic location of extreme charm and beauty, a place where magic speaks, and bewilderment embodies visions of nature.

To the North, the English countryside with its brilliant verdant hue and blues. Pastures, steppes, plains all saturated with the unique smell of the countryside. Hays, hoes, lambs and the river all sleep peacefully on the

banks of the trees. Cutting across this exalting, fragrant and endearing climate of magic, Hadrian's Wall penetrates. A historical wall of natural beauty, in spite of the ragged stone, is gentle.

From the pores of its stone grew the fuzz of the tender grass of the fields, transforming it to a green velvet, stretching to cover the rocks like skin. It was here that I saw the Roman Temple of the God of the Sun "Mithras" who (according to Roman mythology), befell a bull and later met his death in suspicious circumstances, later translated and transformed into daily rituals and customs still practised by the inhabitants to-date.

Hadrian's Wall penetrated the hills, embraced by the curving little lakes. In the distance, a lonely enchanting tree stood hugging the skies, in a valley with two narrow hills. It is Robin Hood's tree, that witty robber defender of the poor. How besotted I was as a child with him, I saw films about him in Baghdad cinemas (screened in the sixties simultaneously with an Arabic T.V series) in those romantic days of Black and White. Along the Wall, tourists and walkers with their back packs would arrive from long distances, to inhale the breath of the past and the scent of that historical stoney construction.

In Newcastle and suburbs such as Segedunum and Arbeia, I managed to visit several Museums all showing the Roman relics and archaeological finds: metal armouries, Iron shirts, swords and helmets and even sandals all made of iron- the attire of the Roman Knight.

On show also were photographs and documentary films as well as the everyday tools used by the Roman Knights; coins with Emperor Hadrian's portrait, plates and utensils, mills and hoes, jeweller y, costumes, glassware, rubberstamps and such like.

What attracted my attention was the invites to social functions, particularly to the ones held by Ladies of the Manors. One card requested (his mother) socks for the Christmas present. The Romans had undoubtedly lived a comfortable and luxurious lifestyle.

An Arab visitor such as myself cannot fail to note the extreme interest and care exercised by the custodians of these relics as well as the general public interest in all things great and small. The relics were sometimes used or replicated as souvenir, in the form of key holders, various designs, pens and other such like commodities on sale for the tourists.

In the Northern English city of Newcastle I also noted, that people spoke without mincing any alphabets unlike the London English Cockney which even my own children can now speak to perfection!

Through the Poetry workshops we held in the various schools, and the Poetry evenings held throughout Newcastle, people seemed friendlier and warmer somehow. This is attributed most probably, I believe, to the sea, river, hills and forests surrounding it, which seems to prompt one to contemplate and create. The eloquent recitals of the various poets who seemed somewhat bonded with this city, consolidate my views.

This city aspire to extend bridges across, and heartily greets the other, as if in solidarity with Man. This spirit I felt was indeed reflected in this event and through the various activities which took place in Newcastle with the participation of various artists and poets.

These activities bore real cultural fruits, much owed to the efforts of the organisers (UK Arts Council) under the auspicious supervision of Mr Steve Chettle.

Many poems were written about the Hadrian Wall, most prominently perhaps was that of W. H. Auden entitled 'Roman Wall blues'. There were other texts also written by Northern writers about the importance of this wall, and on other Roman relics such as the Vindolanda Fortress.

Writers from all over the world were inspired by these Roman ruins, as indeed I was when I wrote the poem 'Hadrian's Wall' and other poems moved by the beauty of this place some. These influences, were manifested in my poems in the form of mythological symbols in poems such as a "Mitheras Temple" and 'A Skeleton in Arbeia Museum' which all aspire to recapture the mythical climate of the time and location.

In our tours we saw numerous places where the Romans left their imprints and dreams behind. In commemoration of those bygone days these various events and activities intentionally took place at a close range from these sites; the Wall, as well as in citadels and fortresses nearby.

In Segedunum, there was an evening event attended by a huge crowd, which listened eagerly and quietly to the various recitals. The evening was rich in variety of expressions. How history with all its majesty glittered in that recital hall.

I recited the poem “Hadrian Wall’ in Arabic, (thereafter translated by a Moroccan poetess Hafsa Alamrani). Much to my surprise it was warmly received by the audience who seemed impressed with the sounds and music of the poem. Various well known poets took part in events of that evening, and managed to capture the audience with their eloquent delivery, such as: Bill Herbert and Peter Mortimer and the delicate poetess Linda France.

Apart from the event in Segedunum, there were other evening recitals taking parts all over Newcastle. Katrina Porteous soared with her tame poems, capturing the mood of the audience in that country pub, in the bosom of the surrounding hills, where the twilight rocks listened tenderly to the music of the Irish Bag Pipes.

The Romanian poet Denisa Comanescu recited several of her beautiful poems one evening in a friendly village and was attended by lovers of literature and arts.

In addition to the poetry recitals held, we participated in poetry workshops also at the local schools, a most precious experience, for it was my first recital ever in an elementary school (my previous readings were to a much older audiences -university students- in France and Poland).

This new experience, my first in Newcastle schools, was a unique and enchanting encounter, and the most pleasurable. I recited in both languages Arabic and English, while the children listened in a dreamy daze and not without astonishment. They were most bright, and asked various poignant questions: Why did you leave your country? Why do you write poetry? Another asked: What were your favourite game as a child?

Important big questions, the like of which I had encountered on various occasions from grown up journalists!

Those children returned me back to my childhood and brought me closer to poetry. Did not the French poet Charles Baudlier once said: “Poetry is my new found childhood”!