

PROJECT REPORTS

Deir al-Surian (Egypt): New Discoveries of January 2000.

Since 1995 a Dutch-Polish-Egyptian team is doing research and conservation work on the wall-paintings of the church of the Holy Virgin in Deir al-Surian (Egypt). Since then a number of paintings and inscriptions have come to light from behind a layer of 18th century plaster. They have given us a new insight into the history of this monastery, its church and its community. In the following two reports Karel Innemée and Lucas Van Rompay give a preliminary account of the fieldwork in January 2000.

I. Wall-Paintings.

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1. Introduction.

During the previous campaigns it became evident that the church of the Virgin has been decorated and re-plastered a number of times. Three layers of painted plaster can be distinguished. The first layer of plaster must have been applied soon after the building was completed, in the middle of the seventh century. The oldest painted decorations on it probably date back to the second half of the 7th century. These paintings, as far as they have been found, are of a decorative character, showing geometrical motifs, crosses and peacocks. It seems that this layer was covered, partially with whitewash, partially with lime-sand plaster, before the paintings were completed. A second layer of paintings was begun, probably around the year 700. This layer was decorated with paintings that show a certain iconographical and stylistic coherence, as far as the paintings in the *khurus* are concerned. The lower part of the walls of the whole church interior was decorated with a dado-zone of 2 meters high, imitating marble inlay work and columns. The figurative paintings were made over this level. The dado and the figurative paintings directly over it in the *khurus* probably belong to the first half of the 8th century. Subsequently the higher parts of the walls in the *khurus* and the walls of the nave must have been decorated. Not only paintings, also inscriptions were added in the following centuries. This process must have continued until the

third layer of painted plaster was applied at the beginning of the 13th century.

In 1998 and 1999 work was concentrated in the *khurus*. During the campaign of January 2000 work was resumed on the southern wall of the nave, right of the previously uncovered painting of the Three Old Testament Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. As before, only undecorated 18th century plaster was removed. Initially only the upper part of the wall, over a height of 2 meters, was investigated and consolidated. Here a number of inscriptions on layer 2 and remains of paintings on layer 3 were found. After that, a part of the decorative lower zone of the wall, belonging to layer 2, was uncovered. In the following paragraphs the remains of paintings will be discussed per layer (Fig. 1).

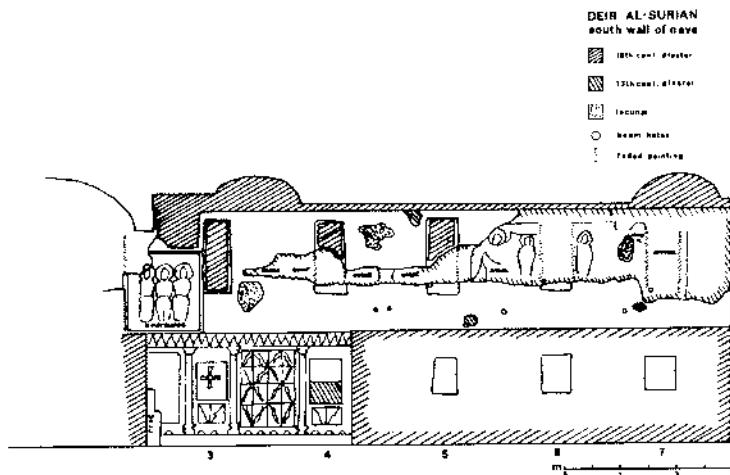


Fig. 1: Western part of the southern wall of the nave with schematic indications of the paintings.

2.1. Paintings on layer 2.

2.1.1. The lower decorative zone (Fig. 2).

During the last part of the campaign 18th century plaster was removed from a stretch of about three meters on the lower part of the wall. In this area no remains of 13th century plaster were found: the 18th century plaster was directly on top of layer 2. In this area an important part of the lower decorative painting (dado)

was found. This dado consists of regular panels of painted marble-imitation, between painted columns, supporting an architrave. At intervals of approx. 2 meters there are niches in the wall. Each niche is flanked by two painted columns, while below and between the niches there are panels with painted imitation of inlaid marble.

This decoration belongs clearly to the earliest phase of paintings in the church. It is very much similar to the dado in the *khurus* of the church [cf. Innemée 1999, Fig. 2]. The basic composition is the same, while there is a difference in the way the columns have been decorated. Whereas the columns in the *khurus* have decoration of diagonal lines, the columns found on the southern wall have a pattern of flowers on their shafts. Doubtlessly the dados in the nave and in the *khurus* belong to the same period and should date back to the beginning of the 8th century.

The painting of the Three Patriarchs was added in a later phase (possibly ca. 1000 A.D), but so far no evidence has been found that on other parts of the southern wall there was any other painting over a level of 2 meters. On the other hand several inscriptions, most of them in Syriac, have been found higher on this wall.

2.1.2. Remains of a painting on the easternmost column.

During the first season in 1995 a window was opened on the easternmost column in the southern nave (window 26) [cf. Innemée 1999, Fig. 10). This revealed a fragment of a painting belonging to layer 3. This painting was damaged before the 18th century replastering and after removing all of the 18th century plaster from this lacuna, a capital of the column and a part of a painting belonging to layer 2 appeared. On the eastern face of the capital a text in Syriac was found, while on the northern face a Coptic text was found. Underneath fragments of a painting are visible. Unfortunately too little is visible to identify this painting; it just provides us with the evidence that the columns of the church were adorned with paintings prior to the replastering of the early 13th century.

2.2. Paintings on layer 3.

On the upper part of the southern wall several fragments of paintings belonging to layer 3 have been found. Apart from the paintings in the three half-domes of the church and the painting of



Fig. 2: Part of the lower decorative zone.

St. Dioscorus, not more than scant remains of layer 3 had been found so far. So far these are the best preserved remains of this layer. It seems that in most other places the 13th century plaster was removed in the 18th century, before replastering the interior. These newly discovered fragments will be described from left to right.

2.2.1. Three mounted saints and a standing figure (Fig. 3).

Directly right of the painting of the Three Patriarchs there is a fragment in which a figure on horseback, turned towards the right is visible. Only part of the breast and back of the horse with a fragment of the horseman are visible, but it is evident that he was wearing a military costume, judging from the *pteriges*, the armour protecting his waist. Immediately right of him there is a standing figure, depicted frontally and holding a cross. Right of him there is a second soldier on horseback, also turned towards the right. This horseman is facing another one who is almost symmetrically in front of him. Since only a narrow strip of the composition has survived, there are no ways to identify the persons. The only thing that can be said is that the riders are dressed in military costumes. It is most likely that they are saints, but we cannot even speculate about their identity.



Fig. 3: Remains of a mounted figure and a standing person.

2.2.2. The Three Men in the Fiery Furnace (Fig. 4-7).

Further to the right there is a large composition, depicting the story of the Three Men in the Fiery Furnace, an episode from the Book of Daniel (3:1–30). The lower part of the composition is missing,

while the figure of the middle of the three men has faded away altogether.



Fig. 4: The Men in the Fiery Furnace.

The angel, dressed in white, is standing left, holding a staff in his outstretched arms, protecting Ananias, Misael and Azarias, who are facing him. All three are dressed in Persian costume, short tunics, trousers, a cloak and a bonnet on the head. Their gestures are identical, holding their hands raised in front of them. Of the middle of the three men only very vague contours have survived. This must be due to a blocked window under the 13th cent. plaster. Possibly humidity has permeated the plaster and destroyed the painting. Right of the men and the angel there is the small figure of king Nebuchadnezzar, seated on a throne under a canopy. In front of him there are three standing men. This part of the painting is again heavily damaged, so that identification of these men remains uncertain. They could be the three Hebrews in dispute with the king before their conviction, judging from the raised arms of the men. Another possibility is that they are the king's servants, following his orders to light the fire of the furnace as high as possible. Another detail that is difficult to explain is the axe, represented under the seat of king Nebuchadnezzar. Is this just a tool for cutting the firewood or should we attach a symbolical meaning to it?

The theme of the three Hebrews was very popular in Coptic tradition and several representations are known from Coptic wall-

paintings [cf. Van Loon 1999, 67–176]. There is, however, too little evidence yet concerning the paintings of layer 3 to explain their place in its iconographical programme.



Fig. 5: Detail—the angel.



Fig. 6: Detail—one of the men.



Fig. 7: Detail—king.

2.2.3. The Prophets Daniel and Habakkuk (Fig. 8).

In the far right of the eastern wall there has been a representation of the prophet Daniel, standing frontally. Also this painting has almost completely disappeared, due to a blocked window underneath. Only the vague traces of a standing figure in Persian costume can be distinguished and it is due to a detail that we are able to identify the painting. At the right edge we see an angel, lifting a man by his hair. This must be the prophet Habakkuk, being brought to Babylon to feed Daniel, an episode from Daniel 14. The theme is not very common in early Christian iconography. One of the few examples is the panel on the wooden door of Sta. Sabina in Rome (5th century) [Jeremias 45, Taf. 38]. The newly discovered painting is the only example of the theme in Coptic art so far.



Fig. 8: The angel abducting Habakkuk.

2.2.4. Standing patriarch (Fig. 9).

On the easternmost column in the southern nave, a window from the 1995 season (window 26) was enlarged to show the total painting. The painting shows a standing figure in a costume that has both monastic and liturgical elements. He wears a monastic hood (*galansuwa*) in combination with a tunic, an *epitrachelion* and a *phelonion*, decorated with nine medallions, containing portraits of Christ, two angels and six saints, maybe apostles. This remarkable outfit has a counterpart on the column on the opposite side of the nave, where patriarch Dioscorus was represented [Innemée 1998a, 149, Fig 6]. This could mean that the painting uncovered now also represents a patriarch, may be patriarch Severus of Antioch, who also occurs as a counterpart to Dioscorus in the wooden doors between the *khurus* and the *haykal*.

3. Observations concerning the architecture.

As in the southern wall of the *khurus*, in the southern wall of the nave a number of blocked windows were found and as in the *khurus* they correspond to the niches below. In Fig. 1 they are indicated and numbered 3–7 (nrs. 1–2 being to the left, on the part of the wall that has not yet been investigated). These blocked windows confirm the idea that was already proposed earlier, namely that the church was freestanding at the time of its construction and that only after the construction of the outer wall of the monastery (in the 9th century?) the windows lost their function. During the 13th century refurbishing of the building the windows were blocked with limestone and mud mortar and plastered over. In the lower left corner of each window a hole with remains of a wooden beam were found. These may be the remains of the scaffolding that was put up in the church during these renovation works.



Fig. 9: Standing patriarch.

II. Syriac Inscriptions

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During the conservation campaign that took place in the Church of the Virgin of Deir al-Surian, in January 2000, the upper layer of plaster, dating from the eighteenth century, was removed from parts of the southern wall of the nave. This allowed the thirteenth-century layer to become visible in some places, showing portions of the iconographic programme which most probably must be dated to the thirteenth century. In other places—where the thirteenth-century layer had apparently been in such a poor state of preservation that it was removed before the newest layer of plaster was applied in the eighteenth century—direct access was gained to an earlier layer of plaster. This layer is the so-called “second layer,” which is found throughout the church and which received paintings and texts between the seventh and twelfth centuries [cf. Innemée—Van Rompay 1998, 169].

The texts that will be presented here briefly were applied on this second layer. They are to be found to the right of the painting of the Three Patriarchs, in a zone of approximately 2 meters high and 3 meters wide, above the decorative lower zone of painting (which itself reaches up to a height of approximately two meters from the floor). In our description we will move from the front to the back of the nave. In addition to the inscriptions on the southern wall, we will discuss a few fragments of text which have been uncovered on the capital of the easternmost column in the southern nave.

1. Inscriptions on the southern wall.

This part of the wall abounds with remnants and traces of inscriptions, written by different hands and in different periods. I have numbered them from 1 to 19. There are formal inscriptions as well as more informal ones, which both in their content and in their graphic presentation remind us of our present-day graffiti, applied by visitors or passers-by [cf. Van Rompay 1999, 39]. While the large majority of the texts are in Syriac and are always written vertically, from top to bottom, there are also a few lines of Coptic, written horizontally (nos. 1, 4, and 5). In some cases the ink or paint has faded so much that the readability is very limited. Some texts may have been washed off. Additional damage and loss of

pieces of plasters add to the frustration of the present-day beholder and student.

A few inscriptions of this part of the wall have been known since 1995–1996. This holds true for the large Coptic inscription which borders on the painting of the Three Patriarchs (no. 1) [Innemée—Van Rompay 1998, 171] and—on the other side of the section to be studied presently—for the inscription by Petros bar Ishaq, dated to the period between AD 932 and 940 (no. 18) [Jenner—Van Rompay 1998, 96–9; Innemée—Van Rompay 1998, 174–5] and accompanied with some words of an earlier graffiti-like text (no. 19) [Jenner—Van Rompay 1998, 96, with note 42]. Inscription no. 2 has also been briefly mentioned in an earlier survey [Van Rompay 1999, 42].

Awaiting the final edition of all inscriptions in the church, I here would like to present some of the latest discoveries. My observations are based on an analysis of photographs taken by Karel Innemée as well as on an inspection *in situ*, in April of this year. The present drawing indicates the position of the texts, along with the number of lines (even when only a few characters of a line are visible).

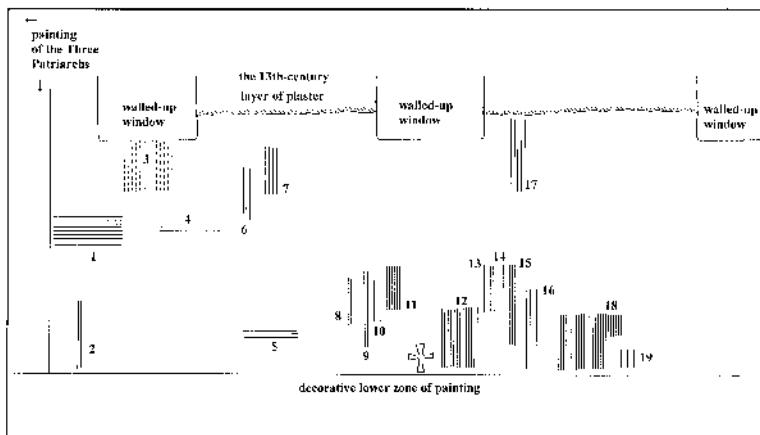


Fig. 1: Drawing of a section of the southern wall,
with the location of the Coptic (horizontal)
and Syriac (vertical) inscriptions on the second layer of plaster.

Whereas the Coptic prayer, which borders on the painting of the Three Patriarchs (no. 1) can be read with relative ease, two

other Coptic inscriptions (nos. 4 and 5, consisting of two and three lines of text respectively) are in a poor state of preservation. The same is true for most of the Syriac inscriptions on the left side of the wall. In the section which bears no. 3, traces of one or more Syriac inscriptions can be detected, of which next to nothing can be read. These texts seem to be younger than the Coptic inscription (no. 1), which may date back to the tenth century. Syriac texts nos. 6, 7, 8, 10, 13, and 15 only show a few characters and occasionally one or two words (e.g. [day]rō briktō, “the blessed [monas]tery,” in no. 6, and Tagritōnō[y]ō, “Tagritan,” i.e. from Tagrit, in no. 15). Particularly tantalizing is no. 9, which shows a monumental Estrangela script similar to that of the Maruta inscription [Jenner—Van Rompay 1998, 101–2]. In the first line [šna]t ḍlep ..., “the year thousand ...” seems to indicate the presence of a date; in the second line the name of a certain Athanasius is partly visible. Of inscription no. 11 only a few words and characters remain, although the ink of this inscription is blacker than in most other cases. The first line contains the word hattōyō “sinner,” the second line must have included a proper name.

Inscription no. 12 (Fig. 2).

Of this text thirteen lines are visible. The first five lines all lack the initial part. Damage has affected all other lines and of the last lines only a few characters have been preserved. We are dealing with an obituary text. The script is a very regular and beautiful Estrangela, which is similar—though not identical—to the script of an inscription on the northern wall, which is also an obituary [Innemée—Van Rompay 1998, 180: C.5.2; photograph on p. 202]. The ink of this inscription has become yellow ochre; the original colour was probably much darker, as can be seen from the last preserved words.

The photograph (Fig. 2) shows the complete inscription, of which lines 1–3 may be read as follows:

[... ḍlm]ō bónō mlē ḍqōtō
 [...] l-’atrō d-[n]bē wa-d-hadwōtō
 [...] os ‘ahō w-dayrōyō nakpō

“[(Has departed from)] this [worl]d full of afflictions
 [...] to the land of blessings and delights
 [...]os, chaste brother and monk.”

In the following lines, which are badly damaged, the virtuous life of the deceased monk (whose name must have stood in the third line) is mentioned and the hereafter is described in paradisiacal terms. No remnants of a date seem to be visible.

The wording of this inscription is very similar to that of an obituary inscription in the Monastery of Mar Moses near Kfarzê (Tur Abdin). This is dated to AD 1172/3 and begins as follows: *n̄paq men 'olmō mlē 'ōgōtō w-kul nesyōnē w-šanni wa-h̄zaq l'-atrō d-tubē wa-dge(')wōtō ...* “Has departed from the world full of afflictions and all trials, and has left and embarked for the land of blessings and of pleasures ...” (Palmer 1987, 85–7).



Fig. 2: Inscription no. 12—Obituary of a deceased monk.



Fig. 3: Inscription no. 14—
Prayer of Simeon (or Solomon).

Inscription no. 14 (Fig. 3).

This text of two lines has the same phraseology as the Maruta inscription [Jenner—Van Rompay 1998, 101–2], although this one, written in a rather awkward mixture of Estrangela and Serto, seems to be much younger. The name of the person is Š[emr]un (Simeon) or possibly Š[leym]un (Solomon). The text can be read as follows:

*n̄ebed Môryô râḥm[é] ...] b-yanw[mô]
d-dinô ‘al Š[emr]un [...]*

“May the Lord have mercy [...] on the da[y]
of judgment over S[ime]on [...].”

Inscription no. 16 (Fig. 4).

This text of four lines is written in Serto. It deserves our special attention because of the date it contains. The photograph shows the full text, of which the first two lines run as follows.

1. *‘ettayybet ‘enô Yu[ba]nnôn bar [..]s[..] ‘Amedôyô (?) [b-N]isan
yarhô Šnat ‘arba’mô w-NH d-Tayyôyé*
2. *bô[é ()]nô men ‘Alôbô rahmê ‘al hambay [..]by [.. ha]b li hartô
fôb[tô]*
1. “I have been present here, I, Yu[ha]nnôn, son of [..] from Amid (?), in the month of Nisan, the year four hundred and 55 of the Arabs
2. [I] be[g] from God mercy over my sins [.. gi]ve me a goo[d] end.”

Yuhannan’s visit is dated according to the Muslim era, just as Petros bar Ishaq’s visit (Jenner—Van Rompay 1998, 96–99; Innemée—Van Rompay 1998, 174–175). Nisan of the year 455 of the Arabs corresponds to AD April 1063. The city of Amid, present-day Diyarbakir (the reading is not absolutely certain) has not yet been found in the inscriptions, although it is regularly mentioned in the colophons of the manuscripts.

Inscription no. 17 (Fig. 5).

This text, written in a very regular, somewhat pointed Estrangela, is found at a considerable height, more than three meters from the floor. The entire text is well-preserved.

*Sunodiqê d-Môr(y) Diyon[u]sius [P]atr.
d-(‘)Anti'yokia d-Sur şéd Môr(y) Qurilloz
d-(‘)Aleksandria Šnat ‘ole[p] w-ŞŞ
d-Môq[.]. b-yanmay Môr(y) Yuha[nnôn]
[d-Ta]grit.*



Fig. 4: Inscription no. 16—Note of a visitor AD 1063.

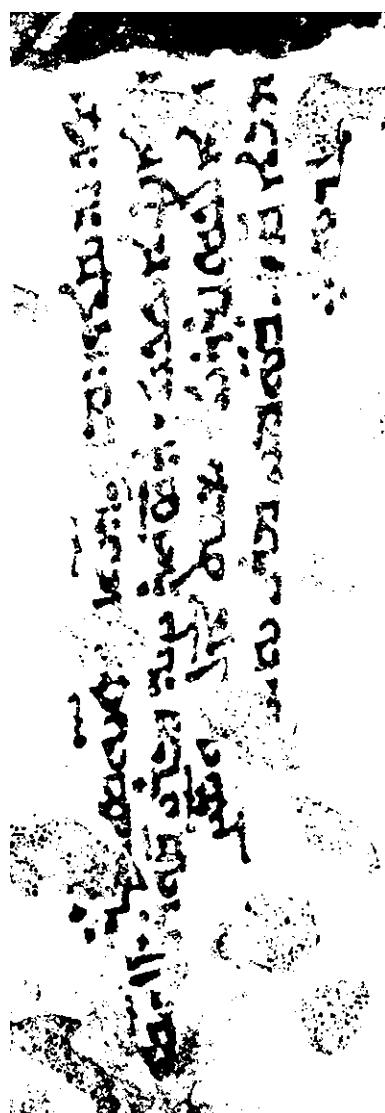


Fig. 5: Inscription no. 17—
Mention of a synodical letter AD 1077–8.

“Synodical (letter) of Mar(y) Dion[y]sius [P]atriarch
of Antioch of Syria to Mar(y) Cyrilus
of Alexandria, the year thousand and 390
of the Macedonians, in the days of Mar(y) Yuha[nnan]
[of Ta]lgrit.”

The year 1390 “of the Macedonians” (i.e. of the Seleucid era) corresponds to AD 1078–9. The ecclesiastical authorities mentioned here can be identified. The Syriac-Orthodox patriarch Dionysius V Lazarus was elected in A.Gr. 1388, i.e. AD 1076–7, and died after a pontificate of (slightly more than) one year, probably in December 1078. The Coptic-Orthodox patriarch Cyrilus II was enthroned in March 1078. Yuhannan IV Saliba was *maphrian* of Tagrit between 1075 and 1106. As is common in other inscriptions, as well as in manuscripts, little crosses have been placed above the names of the patriarchs. Short lines have been placed above both the words written in abridged form and the letters used as numerals.

The use of official terminology as well as the elegant writing indicates that we are dealing here with a formal message endorsed by the authorities of the monastery and executed by a professional scribe. The Greek loan word *Sunodiqē* may be used in Syriac as well as in Christian Arabic for “a synodical letter,” in particular for the official letter which a newly elected patriarch sent to his fellow patriarch(s) to express his feelings of collegiality within the community of orthodox churches. The exchange of such letters was common between the patriarchs of the non-Chalcedonian sister churches of Egypt and Syria. Our inscription must have served to announce the existence of such a letter to the monks and to the visitors.

Now, information about the beginning of the pontificates of Dionysius and Cyrilus is provided in Michael the Syrian’s Chronicle as well as in the Arabic *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*. The section on Patriarch Cyrilus in the latter work has Mawhub ibn Mansur ibn Mufarrig as its author, a Coptic layman from the entourage of the patriarch, who must have been well informed about ecclesiastical affairs of his day [Den Heijer 1989]. For the Syriac-Orthodox Church this was a period of great confusion. After the death of Patriarch Yuhannan bar Šušan (November 1072), the bishops could not agree on a new patriarch, the unpleasant monk ‘Abdun being one of the candidates.

Eventually, lots were drawn and Basil, monk and administrator of the Monastery of Barsauma, near Melitene, was designated. He was enthroned in January 1074, but died after a year and a half, in July 1075 [Michael XV,4—Syriac: Chabot IV, 1909, 580; French: Chabot III, 1905, 174]. The Arabic *History* notes that a synodical letter from Patriarch Basil did not arrive and that his name was not mentioned in the churches of Egypt; instead, the name of Yuḥannan, Basil's predecessor, continued to be mentioned [Atiya—‘Abd al-Masih—Burmester 1959, Arabic: 206; English: 320]. After Basil's death, the rebel ‘Abdun tried his luck again. By using bribery, he could win some support, but the majority of the bishops did not recognize him. A number of them (thirty-four, according to the Arabic *History*) assembled in the Monastery of Barṣauma and elected Lazarus, abbot of this monastery, as the new patriarch. Although he anathematised himself forty times in order to escape the election, the bishops forgave him this offence and forced him to accept the patriarchate, under the name of Dionysius (V). He was enthroned at the end of Lent in 1077. According to Michael, he lived one year as patriarch, without having consecrated a bishop [Michael XV,5—Syriac: Chabot IV, 1909, 581–582; French: Chabot III, 1905, 177]. Barhebraeus, in his Chronicle, repeats the information provided by Michael and adds that Dionysius died in December 1078 [Abbeloos—Lamy I, 1872, 453–456]. This is what Syriac historiography has to tell us about the uneventful pontificate of Dionysius V.

The Arabic *History*, which does not mention ‘Abdun's rebellion, but speaks of a long vacancy, reports that Dionysius, upon his election, wrote a synodical letter (*risalat sunodiqâ*). This letter, the *History* states, was brought to Egypt by a Syrian priest whose name was Thomas and who later became bishop of Baghdad [Atiya—‘Abd al-Masih—Burmester 1959, Arabic: 207; English: 320]. This must be the letter mentioned in our new inscription! By highlighting it in the inscription, the monks must have expressed their support for the new patriarch. The fact that a Syrian priest was involved, who may have had some connections with Deir al-Surian, may have been an additional reason why this event received special attention.

However, there is a further complication with regard to this letter. A few pages further in the *History*, it is said that the letter, written by Dionysius, was addressed to Patriarch Christodulus.

This patriarch, however, was no longer alive when Thomas arrived in Egypt (Christodulus died in December 1077 and Thomas arrived, according to the *History*, in the month of Hatûr, i.e. November, of 1078). Thomas then replaced the addressee's name with that of Cyril and delivered the letter to the new patriarch. Thereupon, "(the letter) was read in the churches of Egypt, and his (Dionysius) name was recited in their sanctuaries, and prayers were said for him in them at the time of the Prayers and Liturgies, as was the custom, and he (Cyril) wrote to him (Dionysius) a Synodical Letter in answer to this Letter" [Atiya—'Abd al-Masih—Burmester 1959, Arabic: 210; English: 327].

Finally, the reference in our inscription to the (metropolitan) bishop of Tagrit, Yuḥannan (IV Saliba), should probably not be explained by the fact that it was he who consecrated the new patriarch, but rather by the special relationship which always has existed between Deir al-Surian and the Syriac-Orthodox community of Tagrit. Like many of his predecessors, Yuḥannan had to cope with various problems in Tagrit. Within the Syriac-Orthodox Church his position was also far from unproblematic, as a paragraph in Michael's Chronicle implies [Michael XV,5—Syriac: Chabot IV, 1909, 581; French: Chabot III, 1905, 177; Barhebraeus: Abbeloos—Lamy III, 1877, 303–12; Fiey 1963, 322–3].

In conclusion, it may be said that this recently discovered five-line Syriac inscription in a certain way bridges the gap between Coptic-Arabic and Syriac historiography on this turbulent episode in the eleventh century. The walls of the church seem to have served for public announcements—like mural newspapers—giving us an impression of how contemporary events were recorded and perceived. At the same time, one can easily imagine that the monks of Deir al-Surian were particularly sensitive to all matters involving the official relations between the Syriac-Orthodox and the Coptic-Orthodox Churches.

2. Inscriptions on one of the capitals (Fig. 6, 7, and 8).

On the easternmost column in the southern nave a saint has been uncovered, painted on the thirteenth-century layer of plaster (see Innemée, above, 2.2.4). In the halo of the saint, part of the thirteenth-century layer was lost and filled in with eighteenth-century plaster. When this was removed, the second layer came to light, showing parts of inscriptions.

Fig. 6 shows two faces of the capital, the one on the left, i.e. the eastern face, showing a Syriac inscription (written vertically), the one on the right, i.e. the northern face, a Coptic inscription (written horizontally). The Syriac text can be read as follows:

*bu nasmek[kun ... (?)]
da-smayyô*

“He will make [you (?)] recline [...]
of heaven.”

One is tempted to read “He will make you recline at the table (*pôturô?*) of heaven,” assuming that there would be, after the verb form of the first line, enough place for a noun. This might be a reference to the Eucharist, which in Syriac tradition is often described as a heavenly meal [Youssif 1984, 372–374 and *passim*]. It cannot be ruled out, however, that the reference is to life in the hereafter, which would be fitting in the context of an obituary. The Coptic inscription (Fig. 7) is difficult to interpret. In the first line one may read “In the name (PAN) ...”. My colleague Jacques van der Vliet suggests to read in the first letters of the second line the ending of the formula API (imperative) Φ MEBI (for -MEY I), “Remember ...”, followed by EN ΑΓ [ΑΙΗ Η] (?), “in love (?).” After the name of the person to be remembered, the third line may have the remnants of the words “his son.”

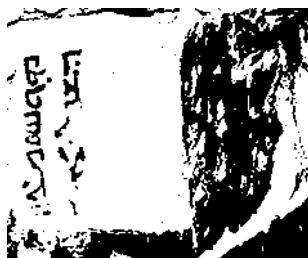


Fig. 6: Syriac and Coptic inscriptions
on the capital of a column.

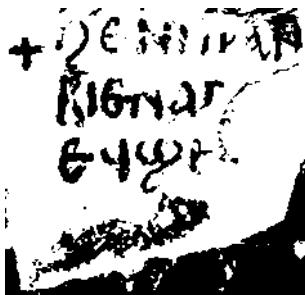


Fig. 7: Coptic inscription on the capital.



Fig. 8: Detail of the capital: Traces of a Syriac inscription.

Below the Coptic inscription, just on the spot where the thick thirteenth-century layer of plaster begins, there are traces of a Syriac inscription, written vertically (Fig. 8). Although next to nothing can be read, there must have been five lines of writing. Now, above the first letters of the second and fifth line, one finds the little crosses which usually accompany the names of patriarchs. It is legitimate, therefore, to suppose that two patriarchs, of Antioch and of Alexandria, were named in this inscription. If only after *l-Môr(y)* in line 2 as well as in line 5 one or two more letters could be read! They would allow us to identify the patriarchs and give us a clue to the date of the inscription.

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