

Romualdo Fernández Ferreira, *Símbolos Cristianos en la Antigua Siria – rumūḫ masīḥīyya fī sūriyya al-qadīma*, Patrimoine Syriaque 4, Kaslik, Lebanon: Université Saint-Esprit de Kaslik, 2004, 368 + viii pp.

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In this bilingual Castilian and Arabic monograph are collected and classified in a new way all the symbolic figures published by F. in ten earlier books (including the four ‘inventories’ co-authored by Pasquale Castellana and Ignacio Peña). The region from which the material is collected is the limestone massif west of Aleppo, between ‘Afrin and Apamea. After an introduction and a reflective excursus (Chapter I: ‘Decoracion and simbologia’, pp. 19-58), more than a hundred pages are devoted to the symbol of the cross (Chapter II, pp. 59-162), thirteen to symbolic inscriptions (Chapter III, pp. 163-76), thirty-five to symbols found at places where paganism and Christianity lived cheek by jowl (Chapter IV, pp. 177-212), eighteen to the human figure (Chapter V, pp. 213-20), nine to animals and birds (Chapter VI, pp. 221-30), nine to trees and plants (Chapter VII, pp. 231-40), fifty-four to architectural elements (Chapter VIII, pp. 241-92), eleven to sepulchres and reliquaries (Chapter IX, pp. 295-306), forty-one to stylites and recluses (Chapter X, pp. 307-348) and four to incomprehensible symbols (Chapter XI, pp. 349-52). The conclusion is less than two pages long (pp. 349-352). The rear is brought up by abbreviations, a bibliography, indexes of toponyms and eight maps.

As a work of reference this is an extremely valuable publication. There are 224 photographs, more than 200 pages with sketches of symbols, often with as many as twelve symbols per page – probably more than 2,000 symbols, all classified and ordered. The text, on the other hand, is limited by its relatively narrow field of bibliographical reference (only one of the fifty-four titles, composed of primary sources and secondary literature mixed, is in German and that is spelled wrong, which does not inspire confidence) and by a tendency to vague generalization, of which the following is an example: “The primitive Syriac Church was that which inherited the most from the traditions of the Mother Church of Jerusalem, as is confirmed – amongst many other proofs – by the Syriac Eucharistic Prayer, known as that of St James of Jerusalem.” (Reviewer’s translation.)

F. is one of the greatest living connoisseurs of the remains of late antique Christian buildings in north-west Syria. As a disciple of Bellarmino Bagatti his attention was above all directed, during field-trips which must have required more than a quarter of a century, towards the symbols inscribed or painted on the stones in his beloved Syria. We are fortunate that he has now had the opportunity to classify this work and present it, in a new thematic arrangement, to the scholarly public. It seems certain that it will afford, simply by enabling many readers to compare symbols from various places, new insights into the “mentality and the religiosity of the people who lived in the period to which it refers”(p. [5]), even if F.’s expectation that “the science of symbols should one day enable all the material encountered by archaeologists to be interpreted” seems unwarranted (p. 41). A good corrective to this optimism is the final chapter, on “Incomprehensible figures.”