Rana Sabbagh, Fayez Ayash, Janine Balty, Françoise Briquel Chatonnet, and Alain Desreumaux, *Le martyrion Saint-Jean dans la moyenne vallée de l'Euphrate: Fouilles de la Direction Générale des Antiquités à Nabgha au nord-est de Jarablus*. Documents d'archéologie syrienne XIII (Damascus: Ministère de la Culture: Direction Générale des Antiquités et des Musées, 2008). Pp. 54.

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One of the most problematic aspects in Syriac studies is the lack of an extensive, extant, and identifiable corpus of sites and structures, particularly given the number of such locations mentioned in various Syriac texts. Thus, every discovery carries with it the potential of providing confirmation of the physical context mentioned in the sources, but more importantly furthering our knowledge of the social and cultural world of the early Syriac churches. *Le martyrion Saint-Jean dans la moyenne vallée de l'Euphrate: Fouilles de la Direction Générale des Antiquités à Nabgha au nord-est de Jarablus* provides a brief and preliminary introduction to the salvage excavation of one room of a Syriac martyrion at the site of al-Nabgh al-Kebir in Syria. It is to be hoped that this report foreshadows a longer manuscript when more extensive excavations have been completed.

The focus of this brief book is a single mosaic floor which was unearthed by accident in the region of Jarablus. The mosaic consists of two connected and contemporary pavements, one of which includes a lengthy Syriac inscription. Since this excavation was undertaken as a salvage operation, the excavators were unable to extend the project further than the boundaries of the mosaic (7). Nevertheless, given the significance of this find to Syriac studies, the decision to publish these preliminary results is to be applauded, although the data might have been better published as an article or a preliminary report. The title is somewhat deceptive, since only one room has been unearthed as yet. The reference to a martyrion comes from the Syriac inscription, but in fact the complete context of this mosaic remains unknown. The book consists of four sections: a brief discussion of the context of the site; a very short section on the archaeological material found in conjunction with the mosaic (Rana Sabbagh and Fayez Ayash, 9–10); the analysis of the mosaic (Janine Balty, 11–22); and the analysis of the Syriac inscription (Françoise Briquel Chatonnet, and Alain Desreumaux,

23–28). These sections are followed by sixteen coloured plates detailing the ceramics, the mosaic, and the inscription.

The first of the short sections which make up this work details the finds located above the mosaic. It is clear from Sabbagh and Ayash, the authors of this section, that there was no undisturbed stratigraphy, since the ceramic assemblage involves twenty-two forms which range from the Hellenistic period to the Abbasid period (9). The publication of this material is thus of very limited value, and can only be used to suggest a possible lifespan for the habitation of the site. Only proper stratigraphical excavation of the entire site will provide evidence for the length and nature of occupation of this site.

In the second section, Balty introduces and describes the mosaic. Measuring 9.59 X 5.34 (to 5.37) m (11), this pavement is a remarkable find. The western half of the mosaic consists of a primarily geometrical design made up of octagons and hexagons surrounded by other geometrical forms. Each of the octagons contains a central geometric or figural motif. The eastern half of the mosaic consists of two registers with four small panels separated by vegetation. The mosaic is bounded on three sides by a patterned border while the fourth side (the easternmost side) consists of a two-part Syriac inscription divided by a step or the start of a staircase (11).

Balty's presentation of the mosaic is thorough, and she presents a strong case for dating the two mosaics as a unit. She dates them to the very end of the fourth century or the beginning of the fifth century based on stylistic analysis with comperanda in Syria and Palestine. According to Balty, the presence of animals and floral motifs in the large geometric mosaic, and the layout in the smaller eastern mosaic, dates it to at least at the end of the fourth century (13–17). She bases her analysis on other mosaics, some securely dated and others dated solely through stylistic relative chronology.

An important question addressed by Balty involves the evidence for iconoclastic or iconophobic activity. Several images were removed and carefully repaired by the Christian community associated with the church or complex. While Balty agrees with scholarship which suggests that this activity can be linked to the

Edict of Yazid II in the early eighth century,[1] she also indicates that the presence of iconoclastic activity in this mosaic widens the geographical scope of the discussion: "Mais jamais jusqu'ici, pareilles manifestations d'iconophobie n'avaient été découvertes hors d'Arabie et de Palestine—où elles ne sont d'ailleurs pas systématiques."(17). In fact, while the presence of this iconophobic or iconoclastic activity in inland Syria may be linked to the same activities elsewhere, it bears considering that not all of this activity is necessarily linked to the same cause. For example, official Byzantine Iconoclasm and the preferences of local clergy have been suggested as other possibilities.[2] Further excavation will hopefully clarify the dates of this particular iconoclastic activity, and add to the overall question of the causes of this activity in the region.

The final section of this book is an analysis of the Syriac inscription. Given the current lack of further contextual evidence for the structure that housed this mosaic, the Syriac inscription provides perhaps the most significant amount of historical data. Although missing its dating formula, the inscription indicates the names of the two abbots who oversaw the installation of the mosaic; two deacons of the church; the two mosaicists; and, perhaps most importantly, indicates that the structure was a martyrion dedicated to St. John. The inscription was done in two hands. Briquel Chatonnet and Desreumaux have provided a reconstruction of the dating formula which roughly corresponds to the stylistic dating evidence provided for the mosaic, placing the inscription in the earliest part of the fifth century. This date is confirmed by their palaeographic analysis, which situates the mosaic within the Edessan tradition but also suggests that the script contains transitional elements which indicate the shift from *estrangelo* to *serto* in the region (26–28). The publication of this inscription is extremely important, given that it is one of the earliest examples of a Syriac inscription in the region.

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[1] Balty relies heavily on the discussion in G.W. Bowersock, *Mosaics as History* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 91–111.

[2] See, for example, Katherine M.D. Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 203–204.

Overall, this short book does a valuable service in providing a brief, preliminary publication of one small part of a salvage excavation of a Syriac complex on the Syrian Euphrates. This structure provides a rare snapshot into the cultural milieu of the Syriac church in Syria in the late fourth or early fifth century. Indeed, more than anything, this chance find indicates the desperate need for increased scientific excavation of Syriac sites—and the subsequent excavations and publications of the martyrion of St. John will be of particular importance to Syriac studies.