

# OLDEST SYRIAC CHRISTIAN INSCRIPTION DISCOVERED IN NORTH-SYRIA

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In February of 2007, a mosaic pavement was fortuitously discovered in the village of al-Nabgha al-Kebira in the canton of Ghendura (in the Jarablus area) to the north-east of Aleppo<sup>1</sup>. That mosaic is of exceptional interest not only due to the quality of its décor and the date of its inscription, but also for what it reveals about the cultural and religious history of Syria at the outset of the Byzantine era.

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<sup>1</sup> The Syrian mission of Aleppo headed by Dr Yusef Kanjo launched an emergency excavation campaign in February 2007, that unfortunately has not been able to excavate further than the mosaic itself. On the request of the Syrian General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums, and in the context of the Syro-French mission (dir. F. Briquel Chatonnet and N. Kabbad) who collects Syriac inscriptions for the volume “Syria” of the *Recueil des Inscriptions Syriaques*, we studied the monument and its inscription (Ayash, Sabbag, Balty, Briquel Chatonnet and Desreumaux 2008). In June 2010, we were able to visit the place, thanks to Dr Kanjo, and to study directly the mosaic that had been recovered with earth immediately after the excavation and was at that moment cleared to prepare its removal to Aleppo museum. On this occasion, we made a new full-size drawing directly on the inscription, drawing which is published here.

The mosaic pavement (picture 1) is 9.59 m long by 5.34 to 5.37 m wide. From west to east, it is composed of two adjoining panels of unequal sizes, jointly encased in a 60cm-wide border. The west side panel, 380 cm wide, is over 540 cm. Its motif consists of a complex geometrical pattern, with a combination of octagons, rectangles and lozenges encompassing flora and fauna designs. The smaller panel on the east side (260 by 380 cm.) consisting of two strips of trees and animals, bears traces of iconoclasts damage.

The whole pavement may be dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D.; the high quality of the mosaic points to the presence of local “avant-garde” workshops, probably an itinerant workshop from Antioch. The eastern part of the mosaic, on each side of a two-stepped threshold leading to a still-to-be-excavated locus, bears an inscription, which, on that side, takes up the space devoted to the geometrical border on the other three sides. As nothing is missing from the inscription, it seems likely that the mosaic was placed after the steps had been built, either during the construction of the building or as a later decorative attempt. Unfortunately, the beginning of the inscription is damaged, but it is highly likely that the few partially preserved lines were the opening lines—indeed, a rather wide space was left free above the first line of scripture, which is aligned with the first line of the border, as is the last line of scripture. The inscription appears in black against a white background. The letters seem to have been set up first, and the background subsequently arranged around them, the “stroke width” being that of a tessera (0.8cm). The text is equally distributed with 11 lines on each side of the threshold; it reads from left to right (from north to south). The lines appear vertically as one stands in the room facing eastwards<sup>2</sup>. The inscribed surface on the left is 105 by 53 cm, the one on the right is 109 by 57 cm.

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<sup>2</sup> As is the case for a great many ancient and medieval Syriac inscriptions; the verticality of the Syriac writing corresponds to the usual practise of scribes. For neat examples of such mosaics inscriptions, see the inscription of the Bethlehem Basilica of the Nativity (Kühnel 1993, p. 203 & pl. XII) and the one that is preserved in the Der ez-Zor museum, specifically as regards the disposition of the cross (Briquel Chatonnet 1996). About vertical direction of Syriac writing, see Desreumaux 2009.



Picture 1.

The interspace is 9.5 cm. The average size of letters is 4.5 cm; the tallest letter, **ܕ**, being 7.5 cm, and the smallest one, **ܝ**, being 3 cm.

The existing text reads as follows; on the left (picture 2):

ܡܚܕ[.....]  
 ܡܚܕ[.....]  
 ܡܚܕ[.....]  
 ܡܚܕ[.....]  
 ܡܚܕ[.....]  
 ܡܚܕ ܡܚܕ ܡܚܕ  
 ܡܚܕ ܡܚܕ ܡܚܕ  
 ܡܚܕ ܡܚܕ ܡܚܕ  
 ܡܚܕ ܡܚܕ ܡܚܕ  
 ܡܚܕ ܡܚܕ ܡܚܕ  
 ܡܚܕ ܡܚܕ ܡܚܕ

On the right (picture 3)

ܡܚܕ ܡܚܕ ܡܚܕ  
 ܡܚܕ ܡܚܕ ܡܚܕ  
 ܡܚܕ ܡܚܕ ܡܚܕ  
 ܡܚܕ ܡܚܕ ܡܚܕ  
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Which can be translated as:

“[...] this martyrion was mosaiqued<sup>3</sup>, which is in St John. In the days of Father Superior Mar Barnaba the work was started in that martyrion, and in the days of Father superior Mares this work was completed. Lord, in the kingdom, remember deacons Theodotus and

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<sup>3</sup> The verb that is used here, derives from the Greek *kubos*, “cube”, hence “tessera”. It is not a word that is commonly used in Syriac.

Cosma, and mosaist Noah, and John, who all undertook the charge for Our Lord and have mosaiqued this house so that whoever readeth shall pray for them.”

The two parts of the text are of two different hands, both in their paleography and in the way the tesserae are arranged. They were probably manufactured by two distinct craftsmen, possibly working side by side. These may have been the same Noah and John whose names are quoted in the inscription. The space between letters, on the left panel, lessens towards the end of the line, indicating possibly that, when the first craftsman reached the end of the sentence, and realized he couldn't transfer a part of his clause onto the other side, he then had to cram his letters into the remaining space. On the whole, the inscription is regularly justified, the left-hand part being encased in a regular margin of five white tesserae and the right-hand part in a six-tesserae margin.

### Paleographic study

The inscription is written in estrangelo script, similar to that of the early Christian documents. Typically so with the letters, *ܐ/ܝ*, *ܟ*, *ܕ*, *ܝ*, *ܡ*, *ܢ*, *ܥ*, *ܦ*.<sup>4</sup> Some of the letters appear to have shapes that bear witness to how ancient the inscription is.

*ܐ* appears under two different shapes. One of them is the same estrangelo that can be found in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries Edessenian inscriptions and does not feature the footing that is common to the earlier Christian Syriac texts—manuscripts or inscriptions—from the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. onwards. The second shape is simpler and consists of a vertical line, foreshadowing the serto form, yet differing from serto in an obviously oblique ductus and a ligature on the left. That form is observed in the 240's Syriac cursiva parchments in the central Euphrates region. It no longer appears—to our knowledge—in the 5<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts.

*ܡ*, with their u-shaped symmetrical endentments, differ from both the estrangelo and the Edessan forms. However, in standard ancient scriptures, letter shapes with a somewhat similar ductus can

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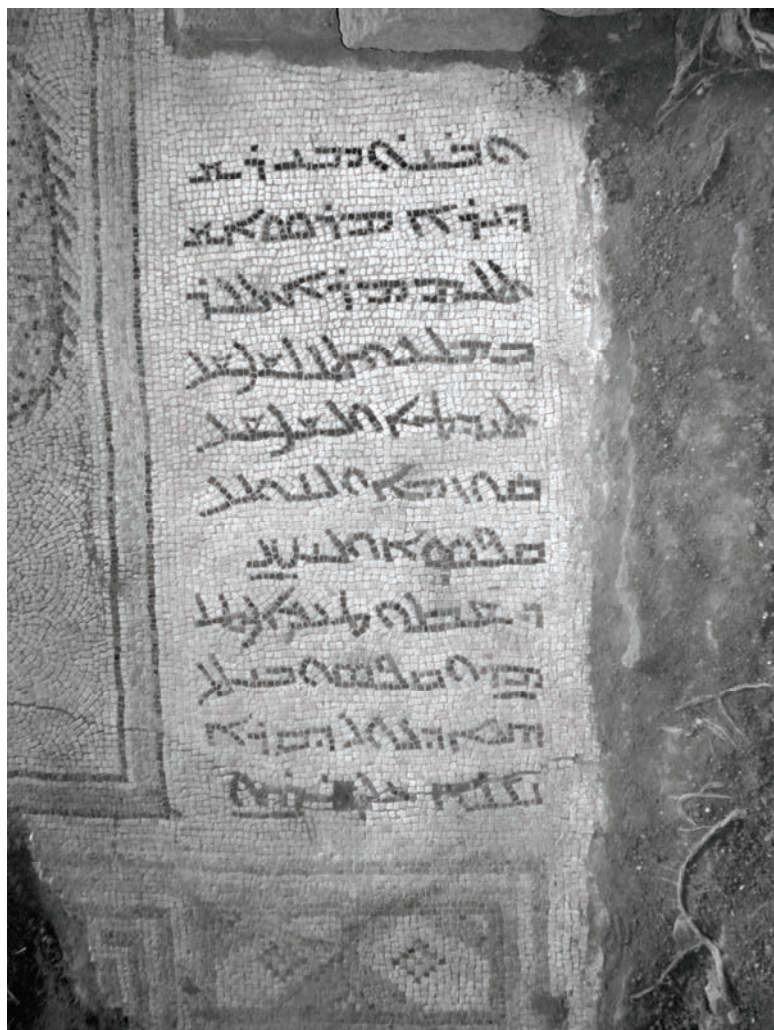
<sup>4</sup> All letters are attested, except for the gomal.



Picture 2.

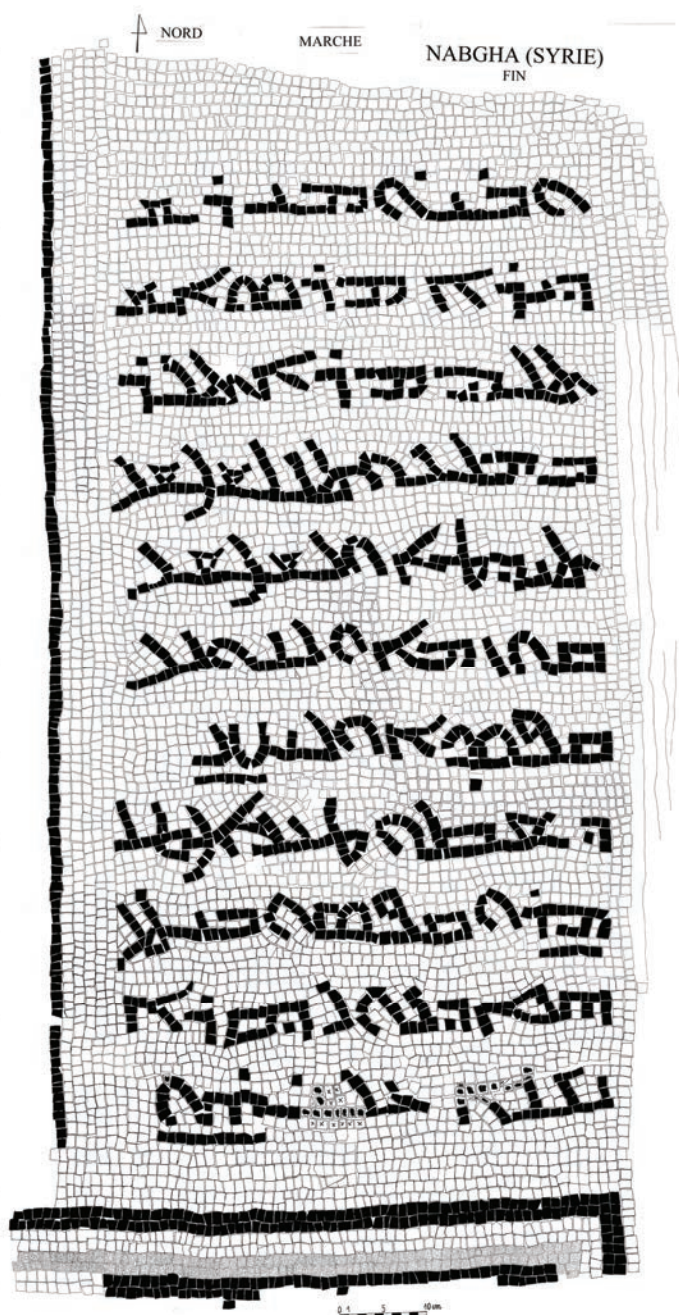






Picture 3.





be found, especially on the parchments from the middle Euphrates<sup>5</sup> area.

↯ have pointed shapes, forming an angle and are almost indistinguishable from ↱.

Particularly noteworthy are ↯; next to the classical estrangelo forms—slightly more squarish due to the mosaic technique, one observes a tall and narrow shape in the second part, a half-moon opened to the left, with ligatures on each side connecting to the center of the crescent. The only known equivalent patterns may be found on 3<sup>rd</sup> century middle Euphrates parchments and on the colophon of a manuscript dating back to the early 6<sup>th</sup> century<sup>6</sup>.

The ↱ in a final position stands on its own, even though it is usually linked to the left—particularly so in the word ܡܣܚܐ, where it appears as a mere underscore at the end of the word.

↱ either endorse the usual rectangular estrangelo shapes of ancient inscriptions or more trapezoidal shapes.

Another striking feature is the incongruous alignment of the ↱ that is set entirely above the top ruling and connected to the next letter by its bottom loop.

The ↱ has the shape of an empty triangle whose bottom tip is sometimes missing, while the top side is sometimes concave.

Some ligatures are unusual: ↱ linked to the upturn of the following ܐ, or ↱ linked to the vertical stroke of the ↱ in the word ܡܣܚܐ.

Lastly, *seyome* do appear, yet in a very disjointed pattern.

Several paleographic features thus clearly rank this inscription within the Edessenian corpus<sup>7</sup>. Cursive strokes are frequent, as is usual in mosaic inscriptions<sup>8</sup>. What we have here is a less normative form of writing than in estrangelo manuscripts, bearing some cursive features that are akin to Serto<sup>9</sup>. This indicates how ancient the text is within the Syriac corpus. Frequent hyphenation of words, unusual in Syriac, is another sign.

<sup>5</sup> Teixidor 1989; 1990; 1991–92.

<sup>6</sup> Ms BL Add. 14542, f. 94r. See Healey 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Drijvers and Healey 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Healey, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Briquel Chatonnet 2001.

### Some linguistic remarks

Here again, clearly archaic features abound:

The absence of semi-vowels—ܣܠܝܢ instead of ܣܠܝܢܐ, ܪܝܢ instead of ܪܝܢܐ, ܚܝܝܢ instead of ܚܝܢܐ, and ܡܝܢܝܢ instead of ܡܝܢܐ. Conversely, there is a ܐ in ܕܐܠܐ.

The use of ܐ for ܐܐ, in ܪܝܢܐܠܐ for ܪܝܢܐܠܐܐ. A similar form is attested in Edessenian inscriptions, such as the inscription found in a cave near Kabhaydar<sup>10</sup> with the expression ܪܝܢܐܠܐܐ used for ܪܝܢܐܠܐܐܐ ‘tomb’.

The form ܝܠܐ for ܝܠܐܐ is attested in a manuscript of the “vitae patrum”<sup>11</sup>. It is an imperative verbal form.

One last striking feature is the alternating uses of ܡܠܚܘܬܐ and ܡܠܚܘܬܐܐ which in no way aims to express nuances, as in both cases the words are merely meant to connect a specific date to a particular Father Superior of the monastery.

### Onomastic study

The onomastic range is varied, featuring Greek names such as Theodotos and Cosmas, alongside an Aramean name under its Greek form (Mares), under its original form (Barnaba), and two anthroponyms drawn from the Bible (Noah and Yuhanon). The name ܪܝܢܐܠܐ is not yet attested in Syriac, but the transcription ܝܠܐ for Theo seems to be fairly common<sup>12</sup>. The name θεόδωτος is very ancient and commonly found in the Hellenistic and Roman world; it may also be found under the form of θεόδωτος<sup>13</sup>. The name Κοσμάς is widely used in the ancient Byzantine world<sup>14</sup>. The name Μαρτίς is also an old Hellenistic name that was used in late antiquity and in the protobyzantine world. It is the name of a famous monk

<sup>10</sup> AS 59 in Drijvers and Healey 1999, line 3.

<sup>11</sup> Payne Smith 1879–1901, IV, col. 4437.

<sup>12</sup> Payne Smith 1879–1901, IV, col. 4427, s.v. ܡܠܚܘܬܐܐ for Theodulos and ܡܠܚܘܬܐ for Theodosios.

<sup>13</sup> D. Feissel, *Bulletin Épigraphique* 1989, n° 921.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. in Gaza towards the middle of the 6th century AD, (*Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* (SEG) 50, 2000, n° 1489), in the Sinai in the 2nd half of the 6th century, etc.

of the days of Saint Theodoret of Cyr<sup>15</sup>. The form on the inscription is probably a *scriptio defectiva* of ΜαϞις, or may even be the less common form ΜαϞας<sup>16</sup>.

As to Barnaba, obviously a Semitic form, it was a popular name in the Judeo-Hellenistic world and was still in use in the Roman and Byzantine periods. It can be found on Greek Christian inscriptions as βαρνάβας.

The first father superior bears the title of Mar, while the other one does not. A tentative hypothesis to explain this difference is that the second superior may still have been in office when the inscription was being made. From which we may infer that the title was not yet in use in connection with any kind of ecclesiastic function, as was to be the case in later times and still is today.

### Dating the inscription

It is highly likely that the missing beginning of the inscription bore its date. In keeping with traditional usage, it probably started with the phrase ܡܠܟܐ, followed by the year number in full letters. The final ܐ certainly corresponds to number 7 (ܐܘܬܐܢܐ). If it corresponds to the digit of the hundreds, and given that the comput used in the Syriac world was that of the Seleucids, known as “era of the Greeks”, this means that the inscription may be dated from the 400s, i.e. the 5<sup>th</sup> century, a hypothesis that is in keeping with our paleographic and linguistic observations. It is also relevant to the iconographic analysis of the mosaic panel.

The seven-letter ܡܠܟܐ ܡܠܟܐ is a likely hypothesis, since the first preserved line, that is slightly longer, has eight letters.

At the end of the second line, one clearly reads the letters -ܡܠܟܐ, preceded by the upturn of a letter that may be a ܡ. Number -ܡܠܟܐ “eight”<sup>17</sup>, is the likeliest option. It may have been preceded by ܡܠܟܐ, the end of the digit of the hundreds, and of the copula ܐ. As the *nun* does not have a final form, -ܡܠܟܐ was connected to the

<sup>15</sup> *Histoire des moines de Syrie* XX (Sources Chrétiennes 257, 1979, p. 64–69). And, of course, such is also the name of the host of Saint Simeon on his arrival in Telnishin.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, in an Apamene inscription dated 550 A.D. (SEG 48, 1998, n° 1849).

<sup>17</sup> One might also think of a ܡܠܟܐ “four” but on the first photographs the ܡ was clearly visible.

following word, which was probably ܡܚܕܐ: had it been another digit in the tens, it would have been disconnected and would have implied the desinence ܐ at the end of ܡܚܕܐ. It is therefore quite logical to suggest an opening that may have read:

ܡܚܕܐ ܡܚܕܐ  
ܡܚܕܐ ܡܚܕܐ  
.....ܡܚܕܐ

The inscription may date back to 718 AS, i.e. 406/407 of the Christian era.

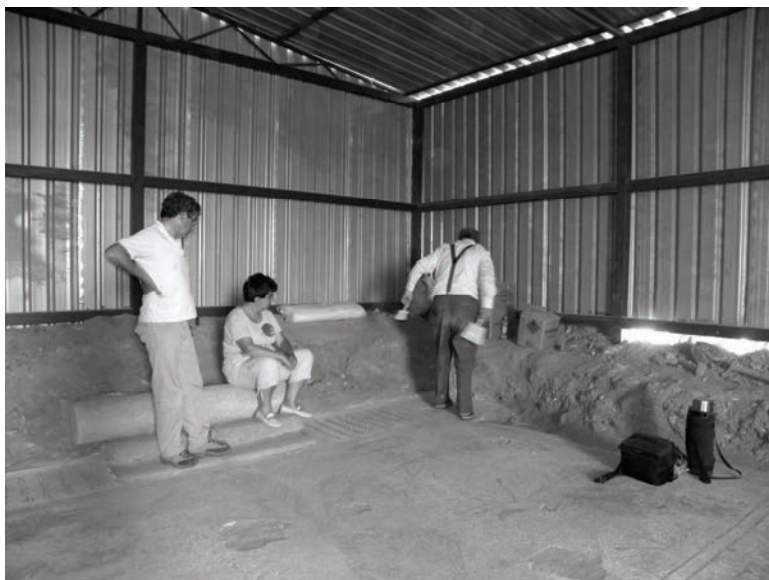
The text bears evidence that the paved locus of this mosaic belongs to a monastery whose two successive superiors, Barnaba and Mares, and two deacons, Theodotos and Cosmas, are named in the inscription itself. The church this martyrion belonged to was dedicated to Saint John, possibly John the Baptist, to whom many churches were dedicated in Syria and Palestine in the early Byzantine period. The name of the monastery, which is not necessarily that of the church, is still unknown. The two above-mentioned superiors, to our knowledge, are not mentioned in any historical document.

The inscription is unquestionably one of the most ancient dated Christian Syriac inscriptions found in Syria and in the Syriac world; it may even be the most ancient Syriac document to this day<sup>18</sup>, as it is anterior by a few years to the famous Edessa manuscript BL Add. 12150, that dates back to 411 A.D. The discovery clearly indicates how very ancient a number of ecclesiastical institutions and organizations were. At the outbreak of the fifth century, the function of “Father Superior of a monastery” is clearly attested. Furthermore, the layout of the churches testifies that, as early as that remote period, churches harbored a locus called *beit sobdo*, or “martyrion”; the expression is likely to refer to a part of the building, as revealed by the expression *dabmar Yuhannon*, “qui est dans (l’église) Mar-John”. What we have here is a historical finding of exceptional value.

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<sup>18</sup> Until now, the inscription in Dar Qita (Littmann 1934, n°4) dated 482 Antioch era, i.e. 433–434 A.D., was thought to be the oldest one. See also the recently discovered Rabbula inscription (Briquel Chatonnet, Desreumaux and Moukarzel 2008).





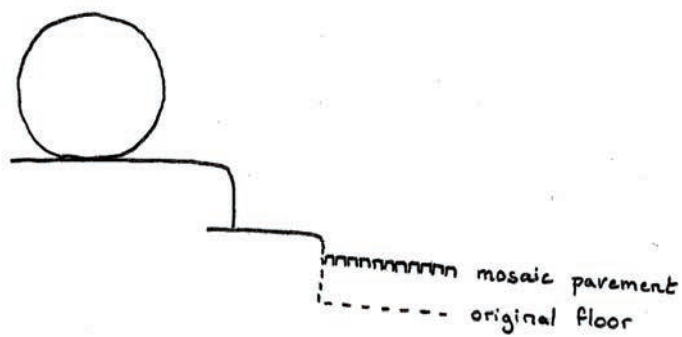
Picture 4.

The careful cleaning we did in 2010 around the inscription, to make a new drawing, allowed us to find that the join band of the mosaic leans against what appears to be the first step leading to the shrine and is at a level a little lower than this step (pictures 4 and 5).

Correspondingly, it could be higher by about 10–12 cm than the initial ground floor contemporary of the stair steps. The laying of the mosaic would thus correspond to a later phase in the history of the martyrion: if it had been embodied in the initial project, the height of the first step would have been adapted to the mosaic pavement. The column is probably lying fallen on the top step and the shrine was accessible by two steps. We can therefore hypothesize that the martyrion itself predates the mosaic and dates from the late 4th century.



Picture 5.



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