

II. SYRIAC INSCRIPTIONS IN DEIR AL-SURIAN: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THEIR WRITERS AND READERS

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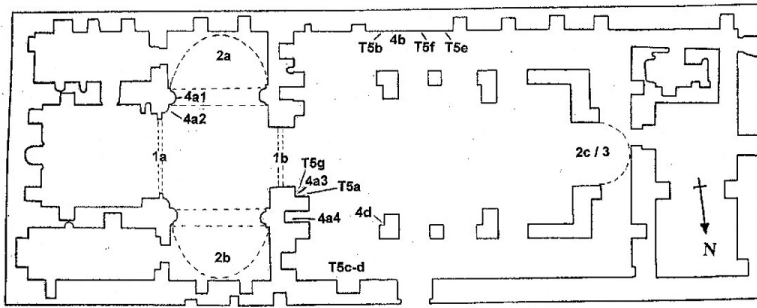
[26] In recent years, a number of Syriac texts have been uncovered in the Church of the Virgin of the Monastery of the Syrians (Egypt). They are written on the walls of the church and were covered by later layers of plaster. Their discovery took place in the framework of an Egyptian-Dutch project, headed since 1995 by Karel Innemée (University of Leiden).

[27] Adding these to the texts previously known, we now have a fairly important collection of Syriac writings preserved in this church, which for about eight centuries (c. 800 – c. 1600) was the heart of a lively center of Syriac Christian culture in the Egyptian desert. Here it is my aim to give a general overview of the texts and to reflect on the purposes which they fulfilled as well as on their wider cultural contexts.

[28] The texts are diverse in time, technique and function. A further distinction may be made according to their status, either as conveyers of independent messages or as explanatory notes on paintings. Finally, in many cases Syriac writing is accompanied by writing in other languages, Greek, Coptic, and (rarely) Arabic. This aspect may also shed light on the conditions under which the texts were written and read.

[29] In the following survey, I shall start with the texts which have been known already for a long time and then proceed to the discoveries of the past ten years. A plan of the church (Plan 2 below) locates the texts and the paintings (with their relevant number and letter of the alphabet).

Plan 2. Full Plan of the Church of the Virgin
of the Monastery of the Syrians (Egypt).



1. SYRIAC INSCRIPTIONS FROM THE TIME OF MOSES OF NISIBIS

[30]

Up to the present day two impressive wooden doors, going back to the early tenth century, are in use in the church. One [1.a] closes the *haikal* (i.e., the sanctuary or altar room), the other [1.b] stands between the *khurus* (i.e., the space between the *haikal* and the nave of the church) and the nave. In both cases, the jambs and the lintel on top of them carry Syriac inscriptions [cf. Leroy 1982, 63–4].

- a. In the oldest inscription, incised in the wood (running from the right end of the lintel to the left end and continuing on the left jamb from top to bottom), the building of the altar (*madbho*) is attributed to Moses, head of the monastery (*rish dayro*), and is dated to “the days of Mar Gabriel and Mar Yuhannan, patriarchs, in the year 1225 of the Greeks, the fifth of the month *Iyor*” [cf. Strzygowski 1901, 365; Evelyn White 1933, Plate LXIV; Leroy 1974, 154–5].
- b. The second inscription, in a different hand, again starts at the right end of the lintel (on which it is written in bas-relief) and continues on the left jamb (now as an incised text), from top to bottom, and then on the right jamb, again from top to bottom. It dates the erection of “this door” to the year 1238 “in the days of the blessed patriarchs Mar Cosmas and Mar Basil” and states that “Moses, the head of the monastery, from the city of Nisibis” had taken care of it and had paid for it [cf. Strzygowski 1901, 367; Evelyn White 1933, Plates LVIII–LIX; Leroy 1974, 154–5 and 159].

[31] The two dates, 1225 and 1238 of the Greek, i.e., the Seleucid era, correspond to the years AD 913/14 and 926/27 (the month of *Iyôr* of the former date is May 914). This must have been a period of intensive building activities, which in all probability were not limited to the “altar” (which may stand for the *haikeal*) and “the door,” but also included other parts of the church. It may not be without significance that in both instances the Coptic patriarch (respectively Gabriel and Cosmas) is named before his Syrian counterpart (respectively Yohannan and Basil).

[32] The two long inscriptions, nicely shaped and clearly written, kept alive the memory of Moses of Nisibis, one of the most illustrious archimandrites of the monastery. They could not fail to attract the eye of the visitors and of all those who attended liturgical services, as far as such people knew Syriac. For those ignorant of that language Moses had something else to offer: the doors themselves have a number of carved panels, inlaid with pieces of ivory. The oldest door has six vertical rows of seven panels, the later door four rows of six panels. Most of the panels have geometric motifs; only the top layer has, for both doors, representations of saints, accompanied with their Greek names, written in inlaid ivory. The oldest door has, from right to left: Severus, Ignatius, Mary, Emmanuel, Mark, and Dioscorus. All names, except that of Emmanuel, are preceded by Ο ΑΓΙΟΣ or Η ΑΓΙΑ. The other door has: Mark, Emmanuel, Mary, and Peter. Here also, three names are accompanied with ΑΓΙΟΣ or ΑΓΙΑ; the article, however, is not Greek, but Bohairic Coptic, i.e., Ⲙⲓ and ⲧⲓ (for Mark only the Ⲑ remains). One wonders whether the choice of Coptic was a deliberate (albeit symbolic) one. Was this the language with which most of the people who filled the nave were familiar? Whatever the answer to this question may be, Moses’ doors already confront us with three languages, which in his day must have existed side by side in the monastery: Syriac, Greek, and Coptic.

[33] This is an appropriate point to mention a wooden reliquary, which is now stored in the museum of the monastery but which in earlier days must have had a place in the church. Its decoration is very similar to that of the two wooden doors and must date back to the time of Moses. It has seven figures of saints with ivory inlay. All of them have the relevant name in Greek, including in most cases the Greek article [cf. Evelyn White 1933, 195–6 and Plate LXIII].

2. INSCRIPTIONS ON THE WALL-PAINTINGS IN THE THREE SEMI-DOMES

[34] Until ten years ago, only three wall-paintings were known to exist in the church. They decorated the two semi-domes at either end of the *khurus* as well as one semi-dome at the west end of the nave. Although no exact dates can be provided, most scholars assume that these paintings belong to the same decoration program, which must have been carried out around the year 1200 or at the beginning of the thirteenth century [cf. Leroy 1982, 65–74 and Plates 107–46].

- a. The southern semi-dome of the *khurus* has a double painting, representing in the left half the Annunciation to the Virgin, in the right half the Nativity. In the painting of the Annunciation, Mary and the Archangel are identified by their Greek names (ΑΓΙΑ ΜΑΡΙΑ and ΑΡΧΗΑΓΓΕΛΟΣ ΓΑΒΡΙΗΛ). The words of the Archangel (Luke 1:28: “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you”) are quoted in Greek as well as in Syriac (Estrangela). The latter text, however, written horizontally in four lines, includes the addition “blessed among women,” which is part of the Peshitta reading of Luke 1:28. The Nativity scene has the name of Joseph in Greek and Syriac, that of Mary only in Syriac (*Maryam yoldat ‘Aloho* “Mary the Mother of God”—the latter word written as “lwhl”). In the upper part of the painting, the following Syriac text is written horizontally in two lines: “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and good hope to men,” again exactly corresponding to the Peshitta text of Luke 2:14.
- b. The northern semi-dome of the *khurus* has the Dormition of the Virgin. There is only one inscription, viz., the Syriac name of Jesus Christ, written horizontally above Jesus’ head in the center of the painting.
- c. The semi-dome at the west end of the nave, in its pre-1988 situation, had the Ascension. In the lower half of the painting, the apostles are represented with Mary. Over the head of each of them, the Syriac names are written from right to left: Matthias, Simon the Cananaean, Lebbaeus called Thaddaeus, Jacob son of Alphaeus, Matthew the tax collector, Andrew, Mary the Mother of God, Simon Cephas, John, Jacob, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas. This list is very close to the Peshitta

list of Matthew 10:2–4 (except for the name of Mary, which has been added, and the name of Matthias, which replaces that of Judas Iscariot, *cf.* Acts 1:26). The upper half of the painting shows Christ enthroned. To the right of his head the Greek letters XΣ are visible (the left part, which was damaged, must once have had ΙΣ), and a bit lower, near his elbow the Syriac ܡܪܝܡ is written vertically from top to bottom, most probably corresponding to the Syriac name ܡܪܝܡ on the other side, which must have disappeared. In the left and right corners of the painting, the sun and the moon are represented. Both celestial bodies have their Syriac and Coptic names, each of them written vertically, to be read from top to bottom (the Syriac “moon” and the Coptic “sun”) or from bottom to top (the Syriac “sun” and the Coptic “moon”).

- [35] Considering the paintings in the three semi-domes, we may conclude that Syriac is the predominant language. Whereas in the painting of the southern semi-dome [2a] an attempt has been made to achieve some balance between Syriac and Greek, the latter language is completely [2b] or nearly completely [2c] absent from the other paintings. Only the third painting [2c] had two isolated Coptic words.

3. THE NEW PAINTING OF THE ANNUNCIATION

- [36] In 1988, a fire broke out in the church and caused damage to the painting in the western semi-dome [2c]. After the removal of the remaining parts, a new painting revealed itself, representing the Annunciation [*cf.* Van Moorsel 1995]. The Virgin Mary and the Archangel Gabriel, standing in the center, are accompanied by four prophets, Moses and Isaiah on the left, Ezekiel and Daniel on the right. With the exception of the Virgin, the names of the figures are written below them, in Greek characters and with the Greek article (... Ο ΠΡΟΦΗΤΗΣ). Between the Archangel and the Virgin, the words spoken by the former to Mary are written in Greek (“Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you”). A more prominent place, however, is taken by the texts written on the open book rolls carried by each of the prophets. These passages, taken from the prophets’ biblical books (and seen as referring to the Virgin and to Christ’s birth), amounting to nine, ten, eleven, and thirteen lines of text, are in Bohairic Coptic. Not only do they give the whole

representation an entirely Coptic outlook, they also add to its didactic character, which is more outspoken here than in the paintings discussed above. The people who regularly saw this painting and these texts must have been Coptic Christians. As for the date, discussions are still going on among art-historians. Although, it can be ascertained only that this painting is older than the one on the upper layer (and thus must be prior to *c.* 1200), a date as early as the eighth century cannot be excluded. It must have been visible until *c.* 1200, when this Coptic painting was replaced with the painting of the Ascension which has so much Syriac on it.

4. THE NEW DISCOVERIES: WALL-PAINTINGS

[37] Since 1995, a number of new paintings have been uncovered [cf. Innemée 1998a, 1998b, 1998c]. Some of them fit into the general pattern described above, others present us with an entirely different situation.

- a. Some of the newly discovered paintings are much older than those previously known. The Virgin Galaktotrophousa [4a1] may in all likelihood be dated to the seventh century, and the military saint, probably Sergius [4a2], is perhaps only slightly later. The names of both are exclusively written in Greek. Other paintings applied on the same layer of plaster—elsewhere in the church—likewise show figures that are identified by their Greek names only, such as Joseph (the Old Testament son of Jacob?) [4a3] and Simeon Stylites [4a4]. The most recent discoveries, made in January 1999 in the *keburus*, include saints having their name in Greek (Victor, Cosmas and Damianus) or in Coptic (Gregory the Armenian) [see Karel Innemée's contribution to the present issue].
- b. The impressive painting of the Three Patriarchs (eleventh century?) has no text at all.
- c. There are paintings which—as far as the languages are concerned—may be compared with the painting of the Annunciation in the western semi-dome [3]. This is particularly true of the representation of the story of the eunuch of Candace, on the south wall of the *keburus*. In both scenes, figures are identified by their Coptic names: “the black (man) of Candace” and “the eunuch.” More importantly, however, the eunuch holds a tablet in his hand, which is inscribed with a

Coptic text, taken from the book of Isaiah (as referred to in Acts 8:32–3). Unlike the bare identifications or short explanations found in most other paintings, the tablet of the eunuch, as well as the open book rolls of the prophets in the Annunciation serve to integrate the text fully into the painting. Here again, didactic purposes are obvious. These have Coptic as their vehicle and, therefore, Coptic Christians must have been the people to whom they were addressed.

- d. Some remnants of paintings have been identified which go back to the same thirteenth-century program to which the paintings of the three semi-domes belong. On the easternmost column in the northern part of the nave, parts of a representation of Dioscorus the patriarch (of Alexandria) can be seen, with his name written in Greek and Syriac.
- e. Finally, the lower part of the dome covering the *keburus* has a long Coptic inscription probably running all around the inner part of the perimeter of the dome. Unfortunately, only isolated words and names have been read so far. Irrespective of the representations shown on the inner side of the dome (which have not yet been identified), this impressive text, which the faithful standing in the *keburus* would have experienced no difficulty in reading, must have given this part of the church an entirely Coptic outlook.

[38] In conclusion, most of the newly discovered paintings applied on the second layer of plaster (which received its decoration between the seventh and the end of the twelfth century), have Greek or Coptic names and additional texts in Coptic [3 and 4c]. It is only the later, probably thirteenth-century, layer which has provided us with at least one additional Syriac name [4d].

5. THE NEW DISCOVERIES: COMMEMORATIVE TEXTS

[39] Fortunately, a number of independent Syriac texts have been discovered which largely compensate for the poor harvest of Syriac writing found on the paintings themselves [cf. Jenner & Van Rompay 1998, Innemée & Van Rompay 1998]. Some of them are applied on the second layer of plaster and must have co-existed with the paintings for a long time. These texts are either painted or written on the walls. It seems possible to draw a rough distinction between the major texts, which are fairly long, have literary

qualities and are executed with care (apparently by experienced writers), on the one hand, and short, more informal graffiti-like texts, which mention only a name, followed by some sort of supplication (“Pray for me”), on the other.

[40]

The major texts commemorate one or more persons, the visit of a person, or building activities. They contain names and in some cases a date. The way some of these texts have been carried out proves that they served—in addition to, and independently from, the paintings—as integral parts of the decoration of the walls. The main texts are listed here in chronological order.

- a. The shortest and at the same time most remarkable text is the one mentioning “Saintly Cyriacus, patriarch of Antioch.” It is found in the front part of the nave, left of the door leading into the *keburus*. Written on a vertical line, from top to bottom, it is reflected, as in a mirror, on the right side of the same line. Its ornamental aspect certainly struck the visitor, who must, however, have had a more than superficial knowledge of the Syriac alphabet to decipher the artfully shaped message. Since Cyriacus was patriarch between 793 and 817, the text must have been written in that period or shortly thereafter. This patriarch may have contributed to establishing or consolidating the Syrian presence in the monastery.
- b. A beautiful text, written in big Estrangela characters, left of the painting of the Three Patriarchs, commemorates “Maruta, son of [...] of Tagrit, and Papa his son.” A date around the year 800 would appear plausible. There seems to be no relationship between this text and the adjacent painting, which is, however, on the same layer of plaster (and must be later than the text).
- c. The north wall of the nave has a number of inscriptions, written on various layers of plaster. The great number of texts may be due to the fact that a relic shrine was placed here (perhaps the one briefly mentioned above, *sub* 1). The oldest of the Syriac inscriptions seems to be the one that commemorates building activities in the monastery carried out jointly by “... Ma[ttay] and Jacob ... in the year [thousand and hun]dred and thirty of the Gree[ks], in the days of our blessed and God-clad patriarchs [Mar Jac]ob and M[ar] Dionysius of Syr[ia ...],” i.e., the year AD 818/19, the first year of Patriarch Dionysius of Tel-Mahre (818–45), whose name is written after that of Jacob, Patriarch of Alexandria (819–30).

- d. The other inscriptions on this part of the north wall are badly damaged. In addition to the one just mentioned [5c], two other Syriac texts have been identified, together with two short Coptic texts and a few lines in Arabic (the latter apparently belonging to a later period).
- e. The south wall of the nave has an inscription commemorating the visit to the monastery of “Peter son of Isaak [...], from Mosul ... in the year [th]ree hundred and twenty and [...] of the Arabs,” which is between AD 932 and 940.
- f. To the right of the painting of the Three Patriarchs, there is a Bohairic Coptic pious text, in beautiful handwriting, distributed over nine lines of text. There is no date and the writer does not reveal his identity, except for the fact that he is a “sinner».
- g. To the left of the door leading from the nave into the *keburus*, in the same corner where the Cyriacus inscription is found [5a], a long Syriac text has been uncovered, applied on a partial overplastering. It begins with a date: 1477 (or 1467) according to the Greek era, which is AD 1165/66 (or 1155/56). Unfortunately, the text is difficult to read, because of damage. Problems in the monastery are mentioned, including the absence of any Syrian priest for ten years, and the danger of destruction. A patriarch is mentioned and it is said that “with the grace of God everything came to completion», which may refer to building activities.

6. THE NEW DISCOVERIES: GRAFFITI

[41] Syriac graffiti have been found on various places on the walls of the church. They are much shorter than the major texts discussed above. Mostly a proper name is mentioned and the reader is entreated to pray for that person. The writers of the graffiti may have been visitors who had traveled all the way from Syria and Mesopotamia or perhaps members of the Syrian community in Cairo or elsewhere in Egypt.

[42] It is difficult to date these texts, especially since paleographic criteria can hardly be used for less experienced handwriting, such as that found in most graffiti. Some of them, however, are old. As a matter of fact, the last lines of the Peter inscription [5e: between 932 and 940] are much shorter than the preceding ones, obviously in order not to overwrite an older graffito, which reads: “I, Athanas[ius], sinner, pray for me.” To the left of the painting of the

Three Patriarchs, there are two graffiti (written in the same hand or by two very similar hands), respectively for Habbib and for Yohannan, son of Habbib. Another, more expanded text is found to the right of the same painting. The name of its writer, however, cannot be read.

[43] The genre of the graffiti had already been known in the church for a long time. Firstly, the wooden doors of the early tenth century, especially the one between the *keburus* and the nave, have a number of Syriac graffiti, written in ink on the frames around the decorated panels. One was incised in the wood by a certain Abraham, who also noted the date, namely the year 1780 (A.Gr.), i.e., AD 1468/69. [cf. Evelyn White 1933, 188]. Secondly, a number of Karshuni graffiti (some of them amounting to several lines and therefore to be regarded rather as real inscriptions) were seen by Evelyn White on a consecration cross, preserved as part of the filling of a lateral doorway leading to the north *baikal* [cf. Evelyn White 1933, 203–4 and Plate LXXII]. To date, these Karshuni texts no longer seem to be visible. To my knowledge, none of them have been deciphered.

7. SURVEY

<i>Date</i>	<i>Independent Syriac Text</i>	<i>Representation with Text</i>	<i>Language on Representation</i>
7 th cent.		Virgin [4a1]	Greek name
c. 700		Sergius [4a2]	Greek name
700–1200		Annunciation [3]	Greek + <u>Coptic</u>
700–1200		Eunuch of Candace [4c]	Coptic
c. 800	Cyriacus inscription [5a]		
c. 800	Maruta inscription [5b]		
818/19	Building activities [5c]		

<i>Date</i>	<i>Independent Syriac Text</i>	<i>Representation with Text</i>	<i>Language on Representation</i>
913/14	Inscription on door [1a]	Saints on wooden panels	Greek names
926/27	Inscription on door [1b]	Saints on wooden panels	Greek/Coptic names
		Reliquary	Greek names
932–940	Peter inscription [5c]		
1165/66	Destruction + building [5g]		
13 th cent.		Annunciation + Nativity [2a]	Greek + Syriac
13 th cent.		Dormition [2b]	Syriac
13 th cent.		Ascension [2c]	Greek + Coptic + <u>Syriac</u>
13 th cent.		Dioscorus [4d]	Greek + Syriac

[N.B. When for the same representation more than one language is mentioned, the underlined one is the most prominent.]

8. SOME FURTHER OBSERVATIONS

[44] As far as the names and short explanatory notes on the paintings are concerned, it may be concluded that Syriac only appears in the thirteenth century. The earliest paintings only have Greek; in the next phase we find mainly Coptic [3 and 4c].

[45] The absence of Syriac from the paintings prior to the thirteenth century is not a great problem. As a matter of fact, there is a perfect parallel in the wall-paintings of the monastery of Mar Musa, near Nebek, in Syria. Here, it is only on the paintings of the third layer, datable to c. 1200, that Syriac names and explanatory notes appear, whereas the paintings of the earlier period (second half of the eleventh century) have only Greek for that purpose [cf.

Dall'Oglio 1998, 14–6]. The conservative rules of the genre—as in the case of icons—may explain the persistence of Greek for many centuries, even when this language was no longer understood by the majority of the people.

[46] The paintings that have Coptic as the most prominent language, i.e., the Annunciation [3] and the scene of the eunuch of Candace [4c], seem to suppose the use of the church for liturgical services in Coptic, for a (predominantly) Coptic congregation. The same conclusion may be drawn from the presence of the long Coptic inscription in the lower part of the dome which covers the *keburus*. It cannot be ruled out that these paintings belong to the eighth century and therefore antedate the Syrian presence in the monastery. However, whatever the date of their origin may have been, these paintings must have remained visible for a long time, well into the Syrian period, probably even until the twelfth century. This may suggest that even in this period the church was used as a Coptic church. It is only around the year 1200 that a new decorative program was planned which had Syriac as its main language.

[47] In the same period, however—roughly between 800 and 1200—a number of Syriac texts were written on the walls to commemorate important persons, on the occasion of certain visits, and when building activities were completed. With the exception of a few Coptic pious texts (which have no historical data), all these texts are in Syriac. Syriac must, therefore, have been the official language of the monastery.

[48] The picture which seems to emerge from this description is that from *c.* 800 onwards, the monastery was mainly a Syrian monastery—as indicated by its name—but that at the same time the church played a certain role for the local population. Syriac was the official language, used in writing by the monks and by the visitors from the Syro-Mesopotamian homeland, who saw the monastery as a stronghold of their culture in the Egyptian desert. Coptic, on the other hand, was the language of those who regularly came to the monastery to attend liturgical services and find spiritual nourishment. The absence of Arabic in this period is noteworthy, the more so since three major Arabic inscriptions have been found in the Monastery of Mar Musa in Syria, already referred to above, to be dated to the eleventh and twelfth centuries [cf. Dall'Oglio 1998, 15–6; Muwazzin 1998, 71–3].

- [49] These first observations and reflections are based on the limited amount of data known so far. We certainly have to take into account the possibility that the situation may have been fluctuating and that the balance between Syriac, Greek and Coptic may have been changing in the course of the period under discussion. However, the idea that Deir al-Surian was a monastery which united within its walls (and literally on its walls) different cultural traditions deserves to be further pursued.
- [50] Moreover, the study of the languages found on the walls and on the paintings of Deir al-Surian in Egypt may benefit from a comparison with other wall-paintings in the Syrian area, especially in Syria and Lebanon, which bear witness to a similar linguistic complexity (Greek, Syriac, Arabic) [for the Lebanese wall-paintings, see most recently Sader 1997].

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