

# RECENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS IN TAKRIT AND THE DISCOVERY OF SYRIAC INSCRIPTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

*During the 1990's Iraqi archaeologists uncovered impressive Christian buildings in a site outside Takrit called Chenisa. A large church was excavated, bearing traditional Syriac architectural features, such as the bema and the "beth-qadishe" (graves of holy men), and containing Syriac inscriptions dated to three well-known Metropolitans. A large inscription found in the Hall, bearing the name of "the Abbot Mar George" and the name of another "monk," strongly suggests that the excavated site was a Syriac monastery. Inside Takrit, a church was excavated, containing graves of ecclesiastical leaders, including "Athanasius, Metropolitan of Takrit;" his name and title appear in his personal seal in the shape of a cross made of silver. The church was the headquarters of the Metropolitans of Takrit. This is suggested by a marble inscription containing the words "Metropolitan of Tag[rith]," found in a seemingly administrative section beside the church*

- [1] During the 1990s Iraqi archaeologists excavated two sites in and around Takrit, one located in the city's ancient citadel, and another, called al-Chenisa, located outside the city, on the east side of the Tigris. In both sites, remains of Christian buildings, including several graves and an important number of Syriac inscriptions, came to light. The Iraqi Department of Antiquities had graciously given me the permission to publish the inscriptions, after I photographed them at the Iraqi Museum during the summers of 1997 and 1998.

### SITE OF AL-CHENISA

- [2] An extensive complex of buildings was uncovered, including a church, reception hall, cells, and a wide open courtyard. Impressive walls with towers surrounded the complex on its four sides, and the whole looked like a fortification. Under the galleries of the courtyard several graves were uncovered, and in one, a coffin, made of wood included a carved plank showing a Syriac traditional cross. Another grave included a small cross made of black wood beautifully carved. The reception hall, accessed through a sophisticated entrance, offered one large inscription mentioning "the Abbot Mar George," and below it the name of 'Abd al-Nur the "Monk" is shown. In the same section, a box containing coins was also uncovered. The coins of Caliph al-Nasir li-Din-Allah (1180–1225) indicate that the monastery was still functioning at least until the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Elsewhere in this section, the name of "Bar-[Sawmo] the Monk" and an interesting curse formula were uncovered written on the walls.
- [3] The monastic church has a traditional plan: the nave is tripartite, a *bema*, accessed through three steps, stands in the middle of the church, and the Sanctuary is separated from the church through a wall. Near the altar, three *tablitho*-plaques were uncovered, bearing inscriptions dated to three Metropolitans of Takrit. The earliest one mentions the name of "[Yu]hanon Bar Kipho" who was Metropolitan between 686 and 688. The date given in the plaque, Seleucid 1021 (AD 709/10), contradicts the dates traditionally given to John Bar Kipho (he was followed by Denha II, 688–728). These dates are based on the computations of Bar-Hebraeus, but the date provided by the plaque does not correspond to the results of this 13<sup>th</sup> century famous author. The

second plaque belongs to “Bishop Mar Joseph,” who administered Takrit for a short while after 774.

- [4] The third and last plaque mentions the name of “Athanasius our Metropolitan.” The plaque was originally made for the Upper church of Hassonitho. We know that Athanasius I became Metropolitan of Takrit in 887, died in Takrit, and was buried in the Church of Sergius and Bacchus in that city (see below). Since there is evidence that he died in Takrit (see the *Ecclesiastical History* of Bar-Hebraeus), and because of a possible connection between the church of Hassonitho mentioned in his plaque and his well-known problems with the people of Hassonitho discussed by Bar-Hebraeus, one would like to attribute the plaque to him.

- [5] Underneath Room 7, beneath the apse of the church, a vaulted gallery was found, containing niches which were most probably parts of the graves in which holy men were once buried. If this were the case, we would have here a *beth-qadishe*, lit. “place of holy men”, that is a burial place of the ecclesiastical leaders. *Beth-qadishe* is part of the traditional plan of the West Syriac church. We have a good example of a vaulted crypt with burial niches in the monastery of Mor Gabriel in Tur-`Abdin, and niches in the *beth-qadishe*, in the Monastery of Mar Matta in the north of Iraq.

## THE CITADEL OF TAKRIT

- [6] Here a church was excavated. It was rectangular in plan, and divided into three naves by two sets of round columns. The altar was accessed through three steps, and stood up on a rectangular platform called in Syriac *qastromo* or *qanke*—an area reserved for the choir. The platform is annexed by a narrow passage protruding from its centre on the west side. This architectural feature is familiar in the architecture of the East Syriac church, and is called *shqaqona* “the narrow passage.” Its existence in the church of Takrit suggests that the west Syriac people also knew it, though this might be the only case where it is attested. The orientation of the altar directly to the east reflects the ideal Syriac architecture, the east being the source of light and light was identified with Jesus in Syriac Christianity.

- [7] Four entrances offered access to the church, two of which are located to the west. The two other entrances are located to north, and had witnessed a curious development. While the north east entrance was made narrow once upon a time, the north west

entrance was modified to become the *mīhrab* of a mosque that shared with the church its north wall (see below). Near the east wall and before the altar, an opening was uncovered in the floor leading to two underground chambers, separated by a common wall. The east chamber was found empty, but it offered access to the second room through an opening made inside the wall. Inside the second room, three graves were uncovered, which must have been violated, since the bones were found scattered on the floor in a haphazard manner. Grave 3, a shaft dug inside the ground, contained a wooden coffin made of four discarded door leaves. The remains of a bishop buried with his staff were uncovered.

- [8] The building west of the church consisted of four rooms of different sizes. Room 1 seems important since it contained a half-circular recess in its east wall. Room 4 contained a well. The role played by this complex is not very clear, given the architectural renovations that have taken place in it at earlier phases. But it is safe to believe that it served at least once as the administrative quarters of none other than the Metropolitan of Takrit himself. Near the entrance of Room 3 of this complex, a fragment of a white marble slab was found, inscribed with the phrase “Metropolitan of Tag[rith].” The phrase, which does not seem to be part of a funerary inscription, meant in all likelihood to identify the complex as administrative quarters.

- [9] To the north of the church a mosque, rectangular in plan, was built. The most interesting aspect of this plan is its half-circular *mīhrab*, decorated with half-columns at its both corners. Originally, the *mīhrab* was the north-west door of the church, a fact which suggests that the mosque was built after the church had been abandoned by the Christian population of Takrit. The higher floor of the mosque also indicates its late date. That the land where the mosque was built was part of the church is made clear by the results of the excavations conducted below the mosque. Underneath the floor of the mosque, another floor was found with remains of walls covered with mortar as was also the case of the floor. The lower floor was in fact an extension of the floor of the church, and it continued much beyond the borders of the mosque on the east side. Two underground chambers were uncovered inside the mosque, between the wall of the *mīhrab* and the set of columns facing it. After lifting a round cover found on the floor, an opening led to the chambers, one of which gave access to other

buildings located outside the mosque and which overlooked the Tigris. These underground chambers reminds one of the two other similar ones found inside the church, some of which contained scattered remains of Syriac holy men.

- [10] Outside the mosque, a grave was also uncovered east of its north wall, containing a wooden coffin from which bits of wood and corroded nails of iron survived. The skeleton was that of the highest West Syriac ecclesiastical authority in Mesopotamia. He was buried with his seal, consisting of a beautiful cross of silver, skillfully fashioned. The rounded ends of the horizontal part and the bottom end of the vertical part of the cross bear a finely written inscription in *Estrangelo*, which reads as follows: "Athanasius the Metropo(litan), Metropolitan of Tagrith".

### **ATHANASIUS THE METROPOLITAN**

- [11] We have encountered a Metropolitan bearing this name, and suggested that he was Athanasius I who died and was buried in Takrit. We take a further step and say that the tomb uncovered outside the mosque was the final resting place of this same person, and the seal in the shape of the cross was his own seal. Moreover, since we know the name of the church where Athanasius I was buried, we dare say that the church beneath the mosque is none other than the Church of the Martyrs Sergius and Bacchus, and hence it is not the Green Church suggested, though hesitantly, by the Iraqi archaeologists. The church of Sergius and Bacchus was built in Takrit around 675, by the Metropolitan Bar-Isho who administered the city from 669 to 683. He is said to have made it extremely beautiful, and it was there that he set his administrative quarters. In fact, it continued to be the residence of the Takritan Metropolitans until the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, when the Church of Ahudemme (most probably the "Green Church") replaced it in this regard. The phrase "Metropolitan of Tag[rith]" inscribed on the white marble about which we talked above, and which was found in the same ruins, makes good sense in this context. Several Metropolitans were buried in this church, including John the Elder, our Athanasius, Sergius, and Cyriacus.

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The full lecture, including the publication of all the Syriac inscriptions found in Takrit, will be published in the *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies*. The *Journal* will also include the transcripts of the lectures to be given in the 2000–2001 programme of the CSSS.

To obtain a copy of the *Journal*, contact [www.gorgiaspress.com](http://www.gorgiaspress.com).