

## PROJECT REPORT

### A Memorial for Abbot Maqari of Deir al-Surian (Egypt)

#### Wall Paintings and Inscriptions in the Church of the Virgin Discovered in 2014

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In June 2014 the conservation and research team of Leiden University<sup>1</sup> continued its work on the doors and the wall paintings in the church of the Holy Virgin in Deir al-Surian. In the course of this work a new set of paintings and two major inscriptions, one in Syriac and one in Coptic, were uncovered on the southern wall of the nave, a discovery which sheds new light on a painting uncovered in 1996, the Three Old Testament Patriarchs in Paradise.<sup>2</sup> At that time this painting was interpreted as an illustration of the daily prayers for the dead<sup>3</sup> and tentatively dated to the 11th century. The recent discovery of additional paintings and of two inscriptions provides new evidence for the date and for a more complex iconographical analysis. The present report discusses the newly-found paintings and contains an edition and translation of the Syriac and Coptic inscriptions.

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<sup>1</sup> The team consisted of Ms. Monika Czerniec, Ms. Urszula Dabrowska, Ms. Kalliopi Tsitsiloni, Mr. Piotr Jarosinski, Mr. Maciej Sęczawa, Ms. Marlena Koczorowska, Mr. Cristobal Calaforra (field-director) and Dr. Karel Innemée (project-director). The inspector of the SCA during this season was Mr. Beltagi Mashhout and Mr. Dahi Shaaban Hasan Ali (Department of Conservation) accompanied the mission. The team would like to thank His Grace Bishop Mattaas, Abbot of Deir al-Surian, and the Fathers for their cooperation and hospitality. The project has been generously sponsored by the Dioraphte Foundation, The Netherlands.

<sup>2</sup> K. C. Innemée, "Recent Discoveries of Wall-Paintings in Deir al-Surian" (Hugoye 1:2 [1998]), 292.

<sup>3</sup> *The Coptic Liturgy of St. Basil* (Cairo: St. John the Beloved Press, 1993), 16.

### Lay-out of the total composition

On the eastern part of the southern wall of the nave three scenes are depicted, accompanied by a panel with two inscriptions. Judging from the red border that surrounds the composition and the style of painting it is clear that we should consider the paintings and the inscriptions to be conceived as a whole, both in style and in iconography. An important key to the final iconographical interpretation and the coherence is contained in the inscriptions. Before coming to this synthesis, however, we should examine the separate panels, starting with the painting of the Three Patriarchs.

## II. PAINTINGS AND TEXTS DISCOVERED IN EARLIER SEASONS (Karel C. Innemée)

### The Three Patriarchs in Paradise

The painting of the Three Patriarchs has an almost square shape and is set between two blocked windows (fig. 1). It shows Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob sitting next to each other, each with three small naked figures on their lap. The Patriarchs are serving fruit to these figures while similarly sized figures harvest fruit from four trees in the background. The naked figures do not show any characteristic of gender. Although there are no inscriptions identifying the figures, it is evident that the composition can only be a representation of the Three Patriarchs in Paradise. The theme does not appear in Christian iconography earlier than the 9th century and it often occurs in the context of the story of the poor Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31). Only later is it used more frequently as part of Last Judgment scenes.<sup>4</sup> In Egypt we find an example of the Three Patriarchs with the poor Lazarus and the rich man in the 13th century wall paintings of St. Anthony's monastery,<sup>5</sup> while a more or less contemporary example of a Last Judgment with the Three Patriarchs can be found on the western

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<sup>4</sup> E. Lucchesi Palli, "Abraham," in *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, ed. E. Kirschbaum, I (Rome: Herder, 1970), col. 30.

<sup>5</sup> E. S. Bolman, "Theodore, 'The Writer of Life,' and the Program of 1232/1233," in *Monastic Visions. Wall Paintings in the Monastery of St. Antony at the Red Sea*, ed. E. S. Bolman (Cairo: American University Press, 2002), fig. 4.25; G. J. M. van Loon, "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Paradise in Coptic Wall Painting" (Visual Resources 19 [2003]), 67-79.

wall of the church of Mar Mussa al-Habashi near Nebk in Syria.<sup>6</sup> In most of the representations the Three Patriarchs are represented as nearly identical bearded men of advanced age. Representations of Paradise as a garden with trees are much older and may be found in 4th century Christian art, as there is a clear parallel between Paradise in the hereafter and earthly Paradise or the Garden of Eden. The fruit trees in the background and the fact that the Patriarchs are feeding the blessed fruits may reflect the influence of such literary compositions as the *Hymns on Paradise* by Ephrem the Syrian. There are several references to fruit and fruit trees in this text, of which the following is an appropriate example:

Should you wish  
to climb up a tree,  
with its lower branches  
it will provide steps before your feet,  
eager to make you recline in its bosom above,  
on the couch of its upper branches.  
So arranged is the surface of these branches,  
bent low and cupped  
– while yet dense with flowers –  
that they serve as a protective womb  
for whoever rests there.

Who has ever beheld such a banquet  
in the very bosom of a tree,  
with fruit of every savor  
ranged for the hand to pluck.  
Each type of fruit in due sequence approaches,  
each awaiting its turn:  
fruit to eat,  
and fruit to quench the thirst;  
to rinse the hands there is dew,  
and leaves to dry them with after  
– a treasure store which lacks nothing,  
whose Lord is rich in all things.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> B. Snelders, *Identity and Christian-Muslim Interaction. Medieval Art of the Syrian Orthodox from the Mosul Area*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 198 (Louvain: Peeters, 2010), 77, pl. 3.

<sup>7</sup> St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise*, IX.3-4, transl. S. Brock (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 137.



numerous eyes.<sup>9</sup> The cherub in the painting is of the same size as Macarius and has a human face with piercing eyes, the head surrounded by a halo. These elements correspond with the text, but three heads have been added, following the description of the cherubim as they appear in the vision of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1).<sup>10</sup> From behind his halo the heads of three animals appear: a lion on the left, a cow's head on the right, and a bird's head on top. The creature has six wings, painted in green and covered with eyes, two of which cover the body, except for the feet, which appear from underneath. One glimpses his two hands from beneath his wings with the right one opened, while the left one grabs the wrist of St. Macarius. Above the cherub a number of Coptic or Greek letters are visible: two vertically written words of which the second one ends in ⲁⲃⲧ. The rest of the text is hidden behind the 13th century layer of painted plaster that covers this part of the painting.

Macarius has a grey beard and grey hair and is dressed in a brown tunic and a mantle or cape that is white with a pattern of fine black lines. His head is uncovered, while on his shoulders there is a brown cover that may be a withdrawn hood. He stands under a partially preserved arch. The arch rests on an ornamented red capital or part of a frieze or beam. Below this there are two small haloed figures, dressed in the same costume as Macarius and therefore identifiable as monks. Only the one standing in front is clearly visible, while the second is almost completely overlapped by the first. He is turned towards Macarius with his hands in front of him, the palms kept together. Underneath the monks we see intertwining branches, green leaves, and fruits. The significance of the monks and the fruits is not easy to discern. The colour of the fruits is similar to the fruits that are depicted in the adjacent painting of the Three Patriarchs and their size is rather small compared to the rest of the scene. It would therefore be possible to identify the fruits as grapes. One possible explanation is that a story about St. Macarius the Egyptian may have been attributed here to Macarius the Great. This story, related in the *Historia Monachorum*,

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<sup>9</sup> S. Toda, *Vie de S. Macaire l'Egyptien. Edition et traduction des textes copte et syriaque*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 31 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012), 396.

<sup>10</sup> A thirteenth century icon of St. Macarius and the cherub from St. Catherine's monastery on Mt. Sinai shows the cherub with only a human head. See Bolman, *Monastic Visions*, fig. 6.25.

and also occurring in certain redactions of Palladius's *Historia Lausiaca*, tells how Macarius received a bunch of grapes but, out of humility, passed it on to a brother who seemed to be ill. This one, in turn, gave it to another and this was repeated until the grapes came back to the sender.<sup>11</sup> The story also appears in Rufinus's Latin translation of the *Historia Monachorum*, but this time attributed to Macarius of Alexandria, showing that already in an early period there was confusion about the exact identity of the person called Macarius in the story.<sup>12</sup> It need not be surprising, therefore, that the same story was attributed by others to Macarius the Great. If this is the explanation for this detail, the question remains why it was added to the painting. The rather awkward way in which the two monks have been squeezed between the figure of Macarius and the frame suggests that the painter conceived it as an afterthought, when the figures of Macarius and the cherub had already been painted.

The theme of Macarius and the cherub does not occur frequently in Coptic painting, but a number of parallels are worth mentioning. First of all, there is a painting in the haikal of St. Mark in Deir Abu Maqar. The state of preservation is poor, but it is clear that the composition is a close parallel to that of the painting in Deir al-Surian.<sup>13</sup> Macarius is represented in a similar costume, a brown tunic with a white mantle with thin black lines. He also wears a brown shoulder-mantle but here we see his head covered with a pointed hood. The painting is located in the middle of the eastern wall, a prominent but not surprising place, considering that the monastery is dedicated to this saint. Whether this painting has served as an example for the painting in Deir al-Surian is difficult to say, since its dating is uncertain, but the possibility should be kept open.

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<sup>11</sup> A. J. Festugière, *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*. Subsidia Hagiographica 53 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1971), nos. 13-14, pp. 118, 126-127; Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, cap. XX, PL 73, col. 1112-13.

<sup>12</sup> Rufinus, *Historia Monachorum* XXIX, PL 21, col. 453; Tyrannius Rufinus, *Historia Monachorum sive De Vita Sanctorum Patrum*, edition and commentary by E. Schulz-Flügel (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), 370.

<sup>13</sup> J. Leroy, *Les peintures des couvents du Ouadi Natroun* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1982), pl. 77 and 78.

There is a second painting in Deir Abu Maqar that deserves attention because of a close parallel. The dome of the so-called haikal of Benjamin rests on four wooden constructions in the corners of the square space (sleepers or corner-beams) that provide an octagonal supporting structure. The triangular lower side of these constructions was decorated with painted panels, of which only one, in the north-eastern corner, survives. It shows a cherub that bears a striking resemblance to the cherub in the painting in Deir al-Surian (fig. 3). Certain details, such as the way in which the three animal heads appear from behind the halo, and the edges of the wings, which have a pattern like a plaited string, suggest that one artist was influenced by the other. The dating for the painting in Deir Abu Maqar is uncertain, although the second quarter of the 9th century seems a likely suggestion.<sup>14</sup> The occurrence of representations of cherubim in the sanctuary of a Coptic church is not surprising. The haikal is considered to be the place where God appears, in the divine presence of the Eucharist, but also in the representation of the *Majestas Domini* (Christ surrounded by the four apocalyptic creatures) in the apse decoration. The dome, as a symbol of heaven, can be decorated with an image of the Pantocrator and with heavenly creatures surrounding him.<sup>15</sup> In the haikal of Deir al-Surian similar cherubim as in the haikal of Benjamin were painted. Also here only in the north-eastern corner remains of such a cherub can be seen (fig. 4).<sup>16</sup> Considering this, the appearance of the cherub to Macarius during the liturgy, as related in his *Vita*, takes place at an appropriate moment.

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<sup>14</sup> Under Patriarch Yaquob (819-830) the churches were restored after the destruction inflicted by Bedouins around 817 or earlier. B. Evetts, *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, IV, PO 10 (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1915), 453. Of course the painted decoration of the church may have been added at a later time.

<sup>15</sup> This can be seen in the much later paintings of St. Anthony's monastery near the Red Sea, see P. P. V. van Moorsel, *Les peintures du monastère de Saint-Antoine près de la Mer Rouge* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1995), 20-31.

<sup>16</sup> This painted panel, most likely dating to the early 10th century, when the haikal was rebuilt under abbot Moses of Nisibis, was never covered by paint or plaster, but so far no author who has dealt with the church of the Holy Virgin and its decoration seems to have noticed it.

### The Syriac and Coptic Inscriptions

Left of this painting there is another blocked window and the surface underneath has been divided in two almost equal parts. The top part contains a Syriac inscription, while the lower part has a Coptic text. These texts, containing important information about the dating and the interpretation of the paintings, will be discussed below.

### Two Saints on Horseback

Further to the left, separated from the panel of St. Macarius by another blocked window, there is a painting representing two saints on horseback (fig. 5). Due to the narrow dimension of the available space the painter had to depict them in a frontal position, which leads to an unusual form of foreshortening in the perspective of the painting. The right one of the two is of an advanced age, and has a severe face that is comparable to that of the Three Patriarchs and Macarius, with a grey pointed beard and grey hair falling over his shoulders and back. The similarity of the faces in the three paintings leaves no doubt that we are dealing with the work of the same master. On his head he wears a crown or a diadem, consisting of a yellow band with yellow and red round objects (possibly gems) on top. He wears what seems to be a dark red tunic, over which he wears a yellow girdle that is worn over the chest like a *zone stratotiki* or officer's sash. From the shoulder hangs a shoulder-guard of the ancient Roman type. This and the sash seem to indicate a rather conservative iconography, depicting elements that belong to a long-past era.<sup>17</sup> Over this he wears a wide brown cloak, fastened at his right shoulder with a knot.

His left hand holds the bridles, while his right arm is raised over his head, holding two spears. These spears end in ornamental crosses at the top (the so-called *crux hastata* is an element that occurs in pre-iconoclastic Byzantine art and survives in the peripheries till the 10th century),<sup>18</sup> while the spearheads are pointed towards two small figures between the legs of the horse. The right one of the two wears a crown that looks similar to the crown of the

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<sup>17</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Piotr Grotowski for advice in this matter. See also P. Grotowski, *Arms and Armour of the Warrior Saints* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), chapter 3, especially pp. 170-71.

<sup>18</sup> Grotowski, *Arms and Armour*, 334-35.



saint on horseback, while he also has a halo. On a small square surface that has been left blank in the green background the name Alexandros is written in Greek (or Coptic?) and Syriac (ⲁⲗⲉⲗⲁⲛⲁⲣⲟⲥ – of the Syriac the first three letters are missing: ܐܠܝܬܐ[ܠܚ]). The second figure, who also has a halo, seems to wear some kind of bonnet and is not identified by an inscription.

The second horseman seems to be a young man. His face is heavily damaged, but one can see the contours of a haloed face without a beard and with red dots on the cheeks, possibly meant to depict a blush. His hair is dark and falls over his shoulders, as in the case of the first horseman. His dress is similar as well: a brown tunic with red roundels on the knees and what seem to be red decorative applications on the shoulders. Over his tunic he wears similar shoulder-guards and officer's sash as the other horseman, while his cloak is white and decorated with a pattern of small crosses, composed of red dots. His left hand holds the bridle, while in his right hand he holds a cross.

The horses have been depicted symmetrically, the heads turned towards each other. Both of them have an elaborate harness, yellow, with green and red ornaments, as to suggest gold with precious stones. On the breasts of the horses the strips of the harnesses come together in a decorated *phalera*, or breast-shield.

This painting confronts us with more questions than can be answered at the moment. First of all: who are they? To the left of the older horseman there were traces of a Syriac inscription, only preserved in negative on the plaster that was removed from the painting, but this is difficult to decipher. The identity of the figure(s) he is attacking with his spear might give us a clue, but here the puzzle becomes even more difficult. The fact that they have haloes does not necessarily identify them as saints, but rather as kings or emperors.<sup>19</sup> In that case the question is which ruler called Alexandros, together with another royal person, was killed by a Christian saint according to hagiographic tradition. On the other hand we should not attach too much value to identifying the victims of the warrior saint. In a pair of wings from a triptych,

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<sup>19</sup> The Christian halo was taken over from late antique imperial iconography: W. Weidlé, "Nimbus," in *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, ed. E. Kirschbaum, III (Rome: Herder, 1970), col. 323-24. Nevertheless it is unusual to see it still being used as an attribute for non-saintly figures in a period as late as the ninth century.

possibly more or less contemporary with the painting in Deir al-Surian, from the collection of St. Catherine's monastery,<sup>20</sup> we see St. Theodore and St. George, both depicted in a similar way on a narrow elongated surface, although here the artist has made no attempt to depict the horses in foreshortening. A remarkable detail is the fact that St. George is depicted while killing a man, lying under the fore legs of his horse. In the legend of St. George no man, but a dragon is mentioned as the saint's victim. A similar case of such confusion can be found in another painting in Deir al-Surian. An 8th century painting in the khurus of the church depicts St. Victor, killing a man with a crown and halo.<sup>21</sup> In the legends concerning St. Victor there is no mention of the saint killing an evil king. This might lead us to conclude that there is not always a direct link between hagiography and iconography and that certain painters permitted themselves liberties in such details.

The identification of the younger horseman also raises a problem, though here at least a hypothetical identification can be proposed. Left of his head there are traces of an inscription in Coptic and Syriac, painted in white on the dark background. The Coptic text reads [ⲁⲣⲓ]ⲟⲥ ⲁⲡⲁ ... It is unusual for a warrior saint to be called Apa, a title more often employed for monks and clerics. A saint whose name is frequently preceded by this title, however, is Menas. In icons and other representations he is usually depicted as a young man, often without beard. In his *Vita* there is no reference to any armed struggle with human or animal enemies and though he is sometimes equipped with a spear when he is depicted on horseback, he is hardly ever shown attacking an adversary with it. An example of such a representation, dated slightly later than the mural painting, is the miniature in a Nubian manuscript from the British Museum, Or. MS. 6805.<sup>22</sup> The visible remains of the text

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<sup>20</sup> K. Weitzmann, *The Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai, The Icons, I. From the sixth to the tenth century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 71-73, Pl. XCVII; Weitzmann dates these panels to the ninth or tenth century.

<sup>21</sup> K. C. Innemée, "The Wall-paintings of Deir al-Surian: New Discoveries of 1999" (*Hugoye* 2:2 [1999]), 173-74.

<sup>22</sup> For the facsimile and miniature see E. A. W. Budge, *Texts relating to St. Mena of Egypt and Canons of Nicaea in a Nubian Dialect, with Facsimile* (London: British Museum) 1909, fol 10a; translation in G. M. Browne, *The Old Nubian Miracle of Saint Menas*, Beiträge zur Sudanforschung. Beiheft 7

and the iconographical details thus provide us with arguments to identify the second saint as St. Menas. The identity of the other one remains a question.

### The Painting and the Texts

The Syriac and Coptic texts in the frame between the paintings of Macarius and that of the horsemen give interesting additional information and shed new light on the iconography of the paintings. Both texts refer to the death and commemoration of an abbot named Maqari and it is evident that the three paintings were made in conjunction with the texts, serving as a painted epitaph. The Syriac text mentions a date for the death of Maqari, 10 Iyar of the year 1200, which corresponds to 10 May of the year 889. The Coptic text contains the date 16 Pachon, 605 AM and this leads to 11 May 889 CE. We can assume that the text and the paintings were commissioned soon afterwards. The painting of the Three Patriarchs was, until recently, tentatively dated to the 11th century, but we can now safely assume that it was made before the end of the 9th century. That makes it the earliest dated example of this theme. But the painting does not stand alone, it is part of a group of three paintings made by the same artist, apparently as a painted cenotaph for Maqari, commissioned by his son and successor Yuḥanon. The paintings are located opposite the northern entrance of the church, which must have been already the main entrance at that time and as such it must have caught the eye of those entering the church.<sup>23</sup> The phenomenon of funerary monuments for private individuals in churches is unknown in the Coptic Church, so this seems to be an interesting exception. Commemorative texts for a deceased are not unusual; on the same wall, slightly higher and further to the right, a Syriac text for a deceased monk was discovered in 2000.<sup>24</sup> The combination of such a text with one or more paintings is rare or even unique. Although the paintings are dedicated to the memory of

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(Vienna and Mödling: Verein der Förder der Sudanforschung, 1994). For a new edition, see El-Shafie el-Guuzuli and V. W. J. van Gerven Oei, *The Miracle of Saint Mina* (The Hague: Uitgeverij, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> At that time the church did not yet have a barrel-vault and its heavy supporting walls that now obstruct a direct view on the painting of the Three Patriarchs.

<sup>24</sup> L. Van Rompay, "Deir al-Surian (Egypt): New Discoveries of January 2000, II. Syriac Inscriptions" (*Hugoye* 3:2 [2000]), 267-68.

the deceased abbot, they do not glorify him in a direct way. The paintings must have blended in iconographically with the rest of the painted decoration of the nave and if it were not for the Syriac and Coptic commemorative inscriptions, they would not have struck us as unusual. Macarius, the saint after whom the deceased abbot was named, takes a prominent place, but that is not exceptional for a monastery in the region where Macarius the Great was a founding father. Similarly, the painting of the Three Patriarchs would fit in the iconography of a church interior as a pictorial reference to the daily prayers, as mentioned before. There seems to be a subtle iconographical play that the painter played in adding the detail of the monks and the grapes (if they are grapes) and the fact that the Patriarchs are feeding grapes to the blessed in Paradise. In order to make this link between the two entirely different themes, he was more or less forced to combine the story about Macarius of Alexandria (refusing a gift of grapes) with the figure of Macarius the Great, unless it was the result of a confusion concerning which Macarius was the main person in the story. The blessed in Paradise, among whom Maqari is supposed to be, are fed with grapes, a detail which is absent in other representations of the theme elsewhere. The viewer can draw his conclusion: those who are humble enough to refuse even minor gifts in life will be compensated in the hereafter. The viewer with knowledge of Syriac literature may even be reminded of another passage from Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise*, where the fruits in Paradise are given to the ones who have fasted in life:

Fasters, who have chosen Daniel's  
meager diet of vegetables  
– and before Daniel kings with their crowns  
bowed down and did reverence –  
fasters like these do the trees,  
not kings, extol,  
bowing down in all their beauty  
and inviting them  
to turn aside to the place where they grow,  
and take up their abode amid their boughs,  
bathe in their dew  
and rejoice in their fruits.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise*, VII, 16, transl. Brock, 124-125.

We may find support for this interpretation in the first lines of the Syriac inscription, which mention how Maqari departed from this life "... m[eage]r and afflicted and full of sorrows, to the place (which is) full of pleasure and many ble[ss]ings and delights...".

The painting of the two holy horse riders still confronts us with questions, also with the knowledge that it is most likely meant as a part of the "triptych" in commemoration of Abbot Maqari. It is beyond doubt that the painting was made by the same master and at the same time as the other two paintings, but an iconographical connection with the other two panels or with the texts escapes our comprehension for the time being.

### **Identity of the Artist**

The three paintings discussed here show an undeniable similarity in their style and the way in which the faces have been painted seems to be characteristic for this master. The eyes are large and staring, while the bow-shaped eyebrows lend a severe expression to the faces. A question that comes to mind is whether we could place the work of this anonymous painter in a certain tradition. So far no similar paintings are known from other churches or monasteries in Egypt. This in itself does not mean much, since few wall paintings datable to the period around 900 AD have been preserved in Egypt. In the region of Mosul and Takrit, from where many of the Syriac population of the monastery were originating, hardly anything has survived and thus we are left with only the possibility to speculate about the identity of this master. The iconography of the Three Patriarchs may indicate a certain familiarity with the work of Ephrem, but if we presume that the one who was most probably responsible for the commission of the painting and the texts, Yuḥanon, the son of Maqari, was also the one who supplied the iconographical themes, then the painter himself may have been either Syriac or Egyptian. We are therefore left with an open question when it comes to the identity of this master. Future discoveries may shed light on this matter.

## IV. THE SYRIAC INSCRIPTION

(Lucas Van Rompay)<sup>26</sup>

The Syriac text (fig. 6) is written or painted vertically, from top to bottom, in twenty-seven lines (the last line has only two words). The script is an elegant and well-balanced Estrangelo, with a small number of Serto elements. Its distinctive features include the final Estrangelo *olaph* which lets its final stroke go down well below the line (e.g. end of line 1), the *be* of which the elongated middle stroke curves to the right and descends below the line (e.g. fourth word on line 1), and the *shin* which has a Y shape, somewhat flattened at the top (e.g. first word on line 1). The final *olaph* occasionally, probably for reasons of space, has a straight Serto form (e.g. end of line 3). Compared to several other inscriptions in the church, this inscription is relatively well preserved. In the edition below, damaged spots are marked with square brackets; underlining indicates uncertain readings.

## Syriac text

- 1 ✠ ܥܕ ܡܢ ܬܡܪ ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ
- 2 ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ
- 3 ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ
- 4 ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ
- 5 ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ
- 6 ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ
- 7 ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ
- 8 ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ
- 9 ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ
- 10 ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ
- 11 ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ
- 12 ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ
- 13 ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ
- 14 ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܡܠܝܡ ܩܬܠ ܡܪܝܬܐ

<sup>26</sup> Many thanks are due to Andreas Juckel (see note 57) as well as to Dayroyo Roger Akhrass, Sebastian Brock, Amir Harrak, and George Kiraz for their help and for comments on the Syriac inscription. Erin Galgay Walsh read the whole text and made important suggestions for improvement.

ܠܠܡܠܚܬܐ ܕܠܝܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ	15
ܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ	16
ܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ	17
ܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ	18
ܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ	19
ܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ	20
ܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ	21
ܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ	22
ܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ	23
ܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ	24
ܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ	25
ܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ	26
ܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ ܕܡܥܬܐ	27

1. 2: ܠܠܡܠܚܬܐ ] for ܠܠܡܠܚܬܐ – 1. 10: ܡܥܬܐ ] first written as ܡܥܬܐ and ܡ added within the word and above the line – 1. 12: ܡܥܬܐ ] possibly written as ܡܥܬܐ – 1. 14: ܠܠܡܠܚܬܐ ] for ܠܠܡܠܚܬܐ – 1. 15: ܡܥܬܐ ] perhaps ܡܥܬܐ, see note 30 – 1. 15: ܡܥܬܐ ] delete the *seyome* (?), see note 30 – 1. 21: ܡܥܬܐ ] this reading is uncertain as the lacuna seems too small for 3 Syriac characters – 1. 21: ܡܥܬܐ ] *dolath* is added above the line – 1. 25: ܡܥܬܐ ] abbreviation for ܡܥܬܐ – 1. 26: ܡܥܬܐ ] written as ܡܥܬܐ (*sic*, with abbreviation mark)

## Translation

1. (He) has departed from this life, me[age]r and afflicted
2. and full of sorrows, to the place full of joy and many
3. ble[ssi]ngs and delights, the deceased and worthy of a good remembrance,
4. Mar Maqari, [Ta]gritan and cha[s]te abbot
5. of this holy convent. He journeyed to his Lord,
6. God of the spirits and of a[ll] flesh,<sup>27</sup> [on the d]ay of Sun[da]y

<sup>27</sup> Numbers 16:22 and 27:16. The Peshitta, following the Hebrew, reads: “God of the spirits of all flesh”. The reading of our inscription (“God of the spirits *and* of all flesh”), which is found in some later Peshitta manuscripts, may reflect the Septuagint (ὁ θεὸς τῶν πνευμάτων καὶ πάσης σαρκός). The expression “God of the spirits and of all flesh” belongs to a prayer for the deceased that is first attested in one of the

7. of Pentecost, on the tenth of (the month) Iyar in the year one thousand and two [hu]ndred
8. according to the Greeks. May Christ God, for [whose] holy name
9. he left this world and endured abuses and op[re]s[sion], and [car]ried
10. the holy yoke of monasticism [for the sake of the] tr[u]e prom[is]es
11. of our Lord, when he said: "Take [my] yoke upon yourselves and I will give you relief,"<sup>28</sup>
12. may He give him in return hundredfold for his anguish.
13. May the Lord [abs]olve his sins and may He forgive his shortcomings and may He deem
14. him worthy to arrive at the place of rest without fear.<sup>29</sup> May He seat him
15. [in the] Abrahamite [b]osom.<sup>30</sup> May He give him [rest] with scents
16. of [bless]ing. May He give him joy in the tabernacles of light.<sup>31</sup> May He deem him worthy

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Nessana papyri (7th cent.) and became popular in the Byzantine Orthodox and Oriental churches. See E. Velkovska, "Funeral Rites according to the Byzantine Liturgical Sources" (Dumbarton Oaks Papers 55 [2001]), esp. 22, 26, 44, and 46-47, and H. Brakmann, "Defunctus adhuc loquitur. Gottesdienst und Gebetsliteratur der untergegangenen Kirche in Nubien" (Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft 48 [2006]), esp. 300-310. In Syriac the expression is found in a prayer for the deceased that is included in the Anaphora of James, see O. Heimig, "Anaphora Syriaca Sancti Iacobi", *Anaphorae Syriacae* II:2 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1953), 166 (with thanks to Grzegorz Ochoła and Dayroyo Roger Akhrass).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Matthew 11:29.

<sup>29</sup> Comp. Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise*, XIV. 8: E. Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiso und Contra Julianum*, CSCO 174/Syr. 78, Louvain: Peeters, 1957, 60: ܕܠܥܡܪܐ ܕܠܥܡܪܐ "delight that knows no fear"; Brock, *Saint Ephrem. Hymns on Paradise*, 178.

<sup>30</sup> The Syriac adjective ("Abrahamite") is marked as plural. While this is problematic, it may reflect the Greek ἐν κόλποις (Ἀβραάμ καὶ Ἰσαάκ καὶ Ἰακώβ), see Brakmann, "Defunctus adhuc loquitur," 301. The substantive would then have to be restored in the plural as well: ܕܠܥܡܪܐ ܕܠܥܡܪܐ.



17. [to st]and with the lovely rank of the [el]ected and [ho]ly ones,  
and may he be counted
18. [ ]<sup>32</sup> Abba Maqari the Great and Abba Antoni[o]s;
19. [may He give] him [joy] in the place of delights, with these  
crowds of ascetics.
20. [May] the Lord God [g]ive him a resplendent resurrection at the  
[enc]ounter with [Him]<sup>33</sup>
21. [on the d]ay of Judgment, when the [splendo]r of his Divinity  
will be revealed; and may He be reconciled
22. with him with joy and in great confidence, through the  
intercession
23. [and] the prayers of the Bearer of God, the Virgin Mary, and of  
the Great Abba
24. [Ma]qa[ri] and of all the saints. A[men]. Let everyone who reads  
(this) pray for his soul,
25. [that] the Lord may [gi]ve him the [c]rown of life in His mercy,  
and for Yuḥanon, his son, priest
26. [ ] with him for forty years, and he to[ok up ...] a[fter  
him] the yoke of the superiorship
27. of this monastery. †

### Commentary

The inscription is an epitaph for Abbot Maqari, a native of Takrit (ll. 3-4). He died on Pentecost Sunday of the year 1200 A.Gr., which is in May 889 AD. Some of the language and phraseology has its parallel in other epitaphs of the Syriac-Orthodox tradition.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Comp. Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise*, VIII. 2: Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiso*, 33: ܬܝܡܢܐ ܕܠܝܬܐ “tabernacle of light”; Brock, *Saint Ephrem. Hymns on Paradise*, 131.

<sup>32</sup> Perhaps: “May he be counted among their (i.e. the elected and holy ones’) leaders, Abba Maqari ...”.

<sup>33</sup> This relative clause with prepositional phrase is on l. 21: ܡ[ܐ]ܬܐ. The antecedent is “the encounter” and the pronominal suffix refers to the Lord God. This reading is uncertain, however, as the lacuna at the beginning of line 21 does not seem big enough for three Syriac characters.

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g. A. Palmer, “A Corpus of Inscriptions from Ṭūr ‘Abdīn” (Oriens Christianus 71 [1987]), 53-139, esp. 73: A.10 (AD 910 or 914); 74: A.11 (932); 86: A.17 (1172/3); Sh. Talay, “Neue syrische Grabinschriften aus Qasrōk (Nordostsyrien) aus dem Jahre 327-330 H.” (Oriens Christianus 87 [2003]), 80-99. For other, poorly preserved, obituary

Compared to most other epitaphs, however, this new inscription is more elaborate. Following a biblical quotation in l. 11 (Matthew 11:29), there is a long list of optative clauses (lines 12-22), with either God or the deceased as the subject, many of which evoke images of Paradise and the Last Judgment: the place of rest, being without fear, rest in the bosom of Abraham (Luke 16:22), the scents of Paradise, tabernacles of light, standing with the holy ones, the place of delights, a worthy resurrection given at the encounter with God on the Day of Judgment, and reconciliation with God in joy and great confidence (*parresia*). Some of the images and expressions are reminiscent of Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise*, which may have been a source of inspiration in both the paintings and the obituary text (manuscript copies of the *Hymns* were available in the Monastery's library during several periods of its history). Line 18 contains the names of the Desert Fathers Macarius the Great – the deceased's namesake – and Antony. Following the end of the prayer (after “Amen” in the middle of line 24), an exhortation follows asking the reader to pray for the deceased. Such exhortations (beginning with ... **ⲉⲩⲁⲛ ⲉⲩⲁⲛ** “Everyone who reads ...”) are not uncommon in epitaph inscriptions.<sup>35</sup> In addition to the deceased, prayers are occasionally requested for a second person, who may be the person responsible for the text.<sup>36</sup> In our inscription the reader is asked to pray not only for the deceased abbot, Maqari, but also for his son, Yuḥanon. He is said to have lived<sup>37</sup> with his father for forty years and to have become his successor as abbot. It wouldn't go too far to assume that Yuḥanon

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inscriptions in the Church of the Virgin, see Innemée and Van Rompay, “La présence,” 180 and 202 (Fig. 9), and L. Van Rompay, “Deir al-Surian (Egypt): New Discoveries of January 2000” (Hugoye [2000]), 267-68.

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Palmer, “A Corpus,” 74: A.11; 91-92: A.20; 132: D.4; 134: D.8.

<sup>36</sup> See Palmer, “A Corpus,” 133: D.6 (**ⲉⲩⲁⲛ ⲉⲩⲁⲛ ⲉⲩⲁⲛ** “Let everyone who reads (this) pray for him and for Abraham, the sinner”). In non-obituary inscriptions and in all kinds of notes in manuscripts the same expression is used to request prayers for the actual writer of the text. The use of self-deprecating language often reveals that one is writing about oneself.

<sup>37</sup> The inscription is damaged here and no verb is present, but it seems fair to assume that the “forty years” together refer to their life together or to their time in the Monastery.

is the one responsible for the inscription, with which he wanted to honor his father's and predecessor's life and legacy.

Given this father-son relationship, one wonders whether the references to the hardship of Maqari's life – the abuses and oppression he endured (line 9) – may go beyond the usual rhetoric about the distress of earthly life and may give us an inkling of actual difficulties Maqari encountered, perhaps as a widower and a single parent.

The epitaph does not tell us for how long Maqari was abbot. Nothing about his tenure is known and prior to the discovery of this inscription, Maqari's name was not even included in the list of known abbots of Deir al-Surian.<sup>38</sup> The mention of his son, however, at the end of the inscription, allows us to make connections with what we already knew about the history of Deir al-Surian. For Yuḥanon bar Maqari has been known as an abbot all along and new findings among the Deir al-Surian manuscripts have shed light on his activities in the Monastery. While it seemed a bit unusual that even as an abbot he kept the name of his father (who was completely unknown), that detail receives new light now that we learn that Maqari was not only Yuḥanon's father, but also his predecessor as abbot of the Monastery. We will place this new piece of information in the wider context of the history of the ninth-century abbots of the Monastery in section VI. But before turning to the larger historical picture, the Coptic inscription will be presented.

## V. THE COPTIC INSCRIPTION

(Grzegorz Ochała)<sup>39</sup>

The Coptic inscription to be discussed in this section (fig. 7) constitutes an integral part of the composition on the southern wall of the nave in the church of the Holy Virgin. It has been painted

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<sup>38</sup> W. Wright, *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum Acquired since the Year 1838*, III (London: British Museum, 1872), 1353; H. G. Evelyn White, *The Monasteries of the Wādi 'n Natrun*, II. *The History of the Monasteries of Nitria and of Scetis* (New York, 1932), 462-464.

<sup>39</sup> I would like to express my utmost gratitude to Nathalie Bosson and Jacques van der Vliet, who helped me understand the most difficult fragments of the text and pointed out my mistakes in the transcription and translation.

below the Syriac text described above and enclosed within the same red-painted frame that surrounds the upper inscription. It has been written horizontally from left to right.

The text is in a rather poor state of preservation. Numerous larger and smaller lacunae cover the surface of the wall in this place. The paint is badly faded, especially in the central left and bottom parts of the inscription. However, the extant letters allow the reconstruction of the majority of the text.

The inscription consists of fifteen lines of text written in a careful and highly decorative book hand. Some letters (e.g. *tau*, *phi*, *psi*, *ti*) are supplied with ornamental dots and/or short strokes. The decorativeness is further enhanced by the alternative use of black and red paint every two lines.<sup>40</sup> The *nomina sacra* are regularly marked with superlinear strokes and the use of *djinkim* seems fairly consistent. Occasionally, one can find sigla and ligatures (see the palaeographic apparatus). Particularly interesting is the use of ampersand, standing for the coordinative conjunction ΟΥΘΕ or και. The scribe appears to have employed two different shapes of this sign, the one used at the beginning of line 5 strongly resembles the Latin &, and the ones occurring in lines 11 and 12 look very much like S, common in Greek papyrological sources. Note that the letters become progressively smaller and more tightly written towards the bottom of the inscription. Moreover, line 14 displays an unusually large number of suprascribed letters. This must have resulted from a bad planning of the inscription's layout. Apparently, the scribe had to squeeze the text in order to contain it within the frame.

The language of the inscription is Bohairic. It appears correct both morphologically and syntactically.

### Coptic text

1. † [b]EN ΦΡΑΝ ἸΦΙΩΤ ΝΕΜ ΠΩΗΡΙ ΝΕΜ ΠΙΠΝΑ ΕΘΟΥΑΒ
2. [ΤΕΤ]ΡΙΑΣ ΕΘΟΥΑΒ Ἰ{N}ΟΜ[Ο<Ο>]Υ[ΣΙΟ]C ΉΕΝ ΟΥΜΕΤΝΟΥ†  
N[Ο]ΥΩΤ ΑΜΗΝ

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<sup>40</sup> An example of such a treatment of a funerary monument is the stela of Bishop Iesou from Faras (Nubia), where incised letters were filled with black and red paint every other line; see A. Łajtar, *Catalogue of the Greek Inscriptions in the Sudan National Museum at Khartoum (I. Khartoum Greek)*, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 122 (Louvain: Peeters, 2003), 21.

2.  $\mu\eta\eta$  in  $\Delta\mu\eta\eta$  ligatured || 5. & || 7.  $\mu\mu$  || 11. S |  $\mu\eta$  in  $\mu\eta\alpha\rho\rho\eta\varsigma$  ligatured || 12. S || 13.  $\Delta\mu\eta$  in  $\Delta\mu\omega\eta\iota$  ligatured,  $\omega$  written above, 1st  $\iota$  written below

1. † In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (πνεῦμα),
2. the Holy Trinity (τριάς), consubstantial (ὁμοούσιος) in a single divinity. Amen.
3. He died in [the Lord, namely] the truly (ἀληθῶς) blessed, according to the trans-
4. lation (ἐρμηνεία) of his name, [---] ... the father of our monastery (μοναστήριον)
5. and *oikonomos* (?) ... [---] the Holy Church (ἁγία ἐκκλησία) in the 3rd hour of the holy

6. Sunday (ἀγία κυριακή) of the holy Pentecost (πεντεκοστή), on the 16th day of Pachon, in
7. the 605th year of the Holy Martyrs (ἅγιοι μαρτύρες). We beseech my fatherly Lords:
8. remember his soul (ψυχή), so that our Lord Jesus Christ gives her (i.e. soul) rest,
9. after having first forgiven him all his negligences (ἀμελής) and
10. having set him free from his sins, hidden and visible,
11. and so that He deems him worthy of a great confidence (παρρησία) on the day
12. of the great judgement, him and us together with him. Amen.
13. And that He makes us and him worthy of His voice full of joy, saying: “Come
14. to me, those who are blessed of my Father, inherit (κληρονομεῖν) the kingdom that was prepared for you” (Matt. 25:34).
15. Amen.

#### Commentary<sup>41</sup>

Judging from their very position within the composition on the southern wall of the church, it is only natural to expect that the Syriac and Coptic inscriptions are interrelated. And indeed, we are dealing here with the same type of text, namely an epitaph, composed most probably for the same person, namely Abbot Makari (Syriac: Maqari). However, against all expectations, one text is not a translation of the other. Moreover, although they bear some similarities, they can hardly be called paraphrases.

The inscription is divided into three parts: (1) the Trinitarian formula in lines 1-2; (2) the presentation of the deceased together with the dating clause in lines 3-7; and (3) the prayer for the deceased in lines 7-14. Such a structure is considerably different from the structure of the Syriac text, which lacks the Trinitarian formula on the one hand, and adds a subscription of the redactor on the other. Moreover, the phrasing of the two remaining parts, the presentation of the deceased and the prayer for his soul, gives the impression that these texts are completely independent

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<sup>41</sup> This is only a preliminary edition of the text, so not all of the issues are addressed in the commentary.

creations. As a matter of fact, the only straightforward structural resemblance between the two epitaphs is the dating clause, which in both cases contains the same elements: the day of the week (Sunday), the liturgical period (Pentecost), the day of the month (according to the Syrian and Coptic calendars, respectively), and the year (according to the eras of the Greeks and the Martyrs, respectively).

The dating clause is one of two direct pieces of evidence that the two epitaphs pertain to the same person. As can be seen in the transcription and translation, the presentation of the deceased is the most extensively damaged part of the Coptic inscription; the name of the deceased has been lost in one of the numerous lacunae.<sup>42</sup> Thanks to the dating formulae in both inscriptions, we know that the person(s) commemorated by them died on either 10 May 889 (reckoned from the Syriac text) or 11 May 889 (reckoned from the Coptic date). It appears, however, that the redactor(s) of both texts had the same date in mind, as they are both dated to a Sunday of the Pentecost. Moreover, the Coptic date seems more reliable, since it was indeed 11 May not 10 May that fell on Sunday in the year 889. The reliability of the Coptic date is further enhanced by the information about the hour of death, which is lacking from the Syriac epitaph.

This, however, does not constitute decisive evidence that both texts commemorate the same person. The ultimate proof is provided by the Coptic phrase “the truly blessed according to the translation of his name” (ll. 3-4). The name Makari, deriving from the Greek adjective *μακάριος*, indeed means ‘blessed’, which is rendered in Coptic as *ⲡⲓⲛⲁⲓⲁⲧⲩ*.

As far as the prayer for the deceased is concerned, similarly to the Syriac inscription, which shares common features with other Syriac epitaphs of the period (see above), the Coptic epitaph of Abbot Makari also contains some parallels among Coptic funerary monuments. No direct analogies have been identified so far, however. Comparing the texts of both epitaphs, we find only distant similarities, namely references to the Judgement Day and “a great confidence.” The latter should perhaps be considered the

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<sup>42</sup> The name of the deceased is expected in the middle of line 4, before the word *ⲫⲓⲱⲧ*. Traces of letters extant on the wall may fit the name *[ⲙⲁ]ⲕⲁⲓⲁⲧⲩ* but they are too scarce to allow any degree of certainty.

only unambiguous textual link, as in both inscriptions the same Greek loanword (*παρησία*) has been used. The Coptic text is in fact very simple in comparison to the highly elaborate Syriac prayer. There are no detailed descriptions of the afterlife and no reference to the scenes depicted in the nearby paintings belonging to the same composition.

It is interesting to observe that parallels for two specific fragments of the prayer contained in the Coptic epitaph are found in the colophon of the Syriac manuscript BL Add. 14,635 (fig. 8), known to have come from Deir al-Surian and dated only five years later, in 893/4.<sup>43</sup> In line 1 of the Coptic subscription of the colophon<sup>44</sup> we find the expression 𐩧𐩢𐩣𐩪 𐩪𐩬𐩣𐩪 𐩬𐩪𐩥𐩰 𐩬𐩪𐩥𐩰 𐩬𐩪𐩥𐩰 ..., “I beseech my fatherly Lords: remember ...,”<sup>45</sup> which is identical with the phrase contained in lines 7–8 of our inscription. In both cases, the sentence appears to be addressed to the members of the monastic community, who are asked to pray for the salvation of the deceased and the compiler of the codex, respectively. The only problem is the disagreement of persons in the sentence of the epitaph, resulting in an awkward phrase “We beseech my fatherly Lords”. The language of the remainder of the inscription appears to be faultless, hence this error should probably be explained by the inattentiveness of the redactor, who used an expression very well known to him but forgot to make a proper grammatical adjustment.

The second parallel comes from the Syriac part of the same colophon.<sup>46</sup> It ends, just like our inscription, with a quotation from the Gospel of Matthew 25:34, which is a promise of the Heavenly Kingdom to all of the blessed ones, preceded by an almost identical introductory sentence. While this whole expression, accompanying a prayer for the deceased,<sup>47</sup> is well attested in the corpus of Coptic

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<sup>43</sup> See below for the contents of the codex and its significance for the reconstruction of the history of the Monastery.

<sup>44</sup> Wright, *Catalogue* II, 150.

<sup>45</sup> Wright’s translation, “the God of my Fathers,” is grammatically incorrect.

<sup>46</sup> For its transcription and translation, see below.

<sup>47</sup> In the colophon the sentence is preceded by a prayer for the deceased too.



funerary stelae from both Egypt and Nubia,<sup>48</sup> in the epitaph of Makari it seems to take on a more literal meaning thanks to the “blessed” name of the commemorated person (here rendered as ⲉⲧⲙⲁⲣⲱⲟⲩⲧ).

These similarities make one think that both texts were composed by the same author, ideally, Yuḥanon (Coptic: Ioannes), son of Makari (see above and below). However, while the palaeography of the Syriac texts allow such a supposition, the case of the Coptic sources is not so evident. Unless differences between the shapes of particular letters result from the use of different media (wall vs. parchment), they are too great to assume that the same scribe executed both the inscription and the Coptic subscription in the manuscript. Yet, both texts share some common elements, most notably the shape of suprascript *taus*, which indicates that this could have been a general style of writing in Coptic in Deir el-Surian in the ninth-tenth century.

However, this does not completely exclude the possibility that Yuḥanon/Ioannes (or any other person) was the redactor of both texts. After all, two different scribes skilled in writing in Coptic may have been employed on two different occasions.

## VI. THE LARGER HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE ABBOTS OF THE NINTH CENTURY

(Lucas Van Rompay)

The Syriac presence in the “Monastery of the Syrians” in Egypt can be traced back to the second decade of the ninth century. A Syriac inscription dated 818/19 records the completion of building activities in which monks from Takrit were instrumental. Amicable relations between the patriarchs of Alexandria and Antioch and a supportive Takritan merchant community in Egypt fostered a favorable environment for these activities. The history of this early period, based on the evidence from the new inscriptions in the

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<sup>48</sup> See J. van der Vliet, *Catalogue of the Coptic Inscriptions in the Sudan National Museum at Khartoum* (I. Khartoum Copt.), *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 121 (Louvain: Peeters, 2003), 62–63, with fn. 283, and B. Tudor, *Christian Funerary Stelae of the Byzantine and Arab periods from Egypt* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2011), 185–87, for a commentary and list of examples.

Church of the Virgin and on manuscript colophons, has been sketched elsewhere.<sup>49</sup>

We know of five Takritan brothers who were involved in this early rebuilding of the Monastery. Their names are found in varying combinations: Mattay, Abraham, Jacob, Theodore, and Joseph. Some may have served as monastic leaders while others are credited with construction work or are known as manuscript collectors. The brothers' activities cover the period from the second decade to around the middle of the ninth century. In the 850s, a new phase in the history of the Monastery was inaugurated, when three monks from the Monastery of Mar Yonan, in Upper-Egypt, joined the Takritan Monastery, which from now on began to be known as "Monastery of the Syrians". The monks from Mar Yonan brought with them ten manuscripts, two of which along with a colophon from the third survive (mss. BL Add. 14,623; 14,587; 17,216, f. 48), and they were welcomed in the Monastery by Bar 'Iday, the abbot.<sup>50</sup> If, as seems likely, this Bar 'Iday was the same person who as a monk donated to the monastery the liturgical ms. BL Add. 14,487 (which was written in 824) and who was in close contact with Mattay and Abraham,<sup>51</sup> we must conclude that he also was from Takrit.

Following Bar 'Iday's tenure as abbot, which may have lasted until ca. 860, or a little later, our evidence, until very recently, was very scanty, consisting of only two pieces of information. The first was the mention of "Mar Yaws[eph], abbot of the Monastery of

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<sup>49</sup> Innemée and Van Rompay, "La présence des Syriens" (see note 8), 167-202; L. Van Rompay and A. B. Schmidt, "Takritans in the Egyptian Desert: The Monastery of the Syrians in the Ninth Century" (Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies 1 [2001]), 41-60; J. den Heijer, "Relations between Copts and Syrians in the Light of Recent Discoveries at Dayr as-Suryān," in *Coptic Studies on the Threshold of a New Millennium. Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Coptic Studies, Leiden, 27 August – 2 September 2000*, ed. M. Immerzeel and J. van der Vliet, II. Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 133 (Louvain: Peeters, 2004), 934-935.

<sup>50</sup> Wright, *Catalogue*, II, 766a (ms. BL Add. 14,623, f. 88v): "They entered this monastery in the days of the saintly and blessed patriarchs, Mar Qosmas of Alexandria and Mar Yuḥanon of Antioch, and 'between the hands' (ܡܝܬܝܢ ܕܐܝܕܝܢ) of the honorable old man, the monk Bar 'Iday, the abbot (ܐܒܬܐܝܬܐ)."

<sup>51</sup> Wright, *Catalogue*, I, 153b: ܡܬܬܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܬܬܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܬܬܝܬܝܢ

the Syrians,” who took the initiative for the writing of ms. BL Add. 14,522, ff. 4-26, a liturgical manuscript which was completed in the Monastery of Macarius, in the desert of Scetis, in the year 11[.]9 (the decade is missing), at the beginning of First Teshrin (i.e. October).<sup>52</sup> Wright was inclined to opt for the latest possible date, i.e. 1199, which is October 887 AD. Evelyn White, however, thought that this Abbot Joseph might have been one of the Takritan brothers, and suggested 867 or 877.<sup>53</sup> Even then, he still must have been considerably younger than the other brothers. Moreover, the note in ms. BL Add. 14,522 does not mention the other brothers nor the city of Takrit. It seems quite unlikely, therefore, that Abbot Joseph was the same as Joseph from Takrit who, according to one colophon and the 818/9 inscription was involved in the building of the Monastery. Abbot Joseph’s tenure did not leave any further traces beyond his one-time involvement in the copying of a liturgical manuscript, ordered for the Monastery of the Syrians, but actually written in the nearby Monastery of Macarius.

Our second piece of evidence introduces a different abbot, by the name of Yuhanon bar Maqari. A note added to ms. BL Add. 14,635 (a sixth-century manuscript containing works by Evagrius of Pontus), f. 5r, reports that this abbot participated in the rebinding of the manuscript in A.Gr. 1205, i.e. 893/4 AD. The note, nine lines long, deserves to be quoted in full (fig. 8).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Wright, *Catalogue*, I, 247b.

<sup>53</sup> Evelyn White, *The Monasteries of the Wādi 'n Natrun*, II, 439-40.

<sup>54</sup> Part of the Syriac text is quoted in Wright, *Catalogue*, II, 450a.

“Yuḥanon, the sinful and lowly one, and priest, son of Maqari, the head of the Monastery of the Syrians in the desert of Sqetis, participated in this binding. May everyone who reads in it pray for him that our Lord Jesus, our true and blessed God, may absolve him and that He may give him the end which pleases Him. And may He provide a good remembrance to his deceased at the resurrection of the righteous, and may He deem him worthy of that blessed voice of His, when He says: “Come, blessed ones of the Father, inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.”<sup>55</sup> Yea and Amen. I have written this in the year one thousand and two hundred and five.”

This Syriac note is followed by another note in Coptic, which also uses the first person. Both the Syriac and the Coptic note may, therefore, have been written – as Wright suggests – by Yuḥanon himself.<sup>56</sup> The Coptic text is written as a request to remember him and forgive his sins because of his work on “this holy book of Abba Evagrius” (ⲡⲁⲓ Ⲭⲱⲙ ⲉⲑⲟⲩⲁⲃ ⲛⲧⲉ ⲁⲃⲃⲁ ⲉⲩⲁⲅⲣⲓⲟⲥ). The writer identifies himself as: ⲁⲛⲟⲕ ⲓⲱⲁⲛⲛⲏⲥ ⲉⲗⲁⲭ(ⲓⲥⲧⲟⲥ) ⲡⲣⲉⲥⲃⲩ(ⲧⲉⲣⲟⲥ) ⲩ(ⲓⲟⲥ) ⲡⲁⲓ[...] ⲙⲁⲕⲁⲣⲓ “I, Ioannes, the lowly one, priest, the son of [...] Makari.” From these two notes in ms. BL Add. 14,635, it would appear then that Abbot Yuḥanon, working here as a bookbinder, was able to write and to compose in two languages, Syriac and Coptic. In addition to the two languages used in the notes, another remarkable aspect is the quite large, formal and elegant Syriac and Coptic script of the notes, which would be unusual for a bookbinder’s note were it not for the involvement of the abbot himself. As for the Estrangelo of this note, it shares with the Estrangelo of the inscription several of its distinctive features: the final *olaph* descending below the line, the elongated middle stroke of the *he*, the Y shape of the *shin*, and a Serto *olaph* found at the end of line 4. Whether it is Yuḥanon’s hand which accounts for the similarities in the inscription and in the note or whether we are

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. Matthew 25:34.

<sup>56</sup> The possibility cannot be ruled out, however, that the note was written by someone else on behalf, or at the dictation, of the abbot. Following the Coptic text there is an additional two-line Syriac request for a prayer. It must have been added later and seems to be unrelated to Yuḥanon; it is not included in our description.

dealing in both cases with the “house style” of the Monastery remains uncertain.

A note very similar to the one of ms. BL Add. 14,635 is found on f. 2r of ms. N.S. Syr. 3 of the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg, a fifth- or sixth-century manuscript containing the Letters of Paul.<sup>57</sup> It tells us about the rebinding of this precious manuscript, which must have taken place around the same time.

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“Yuḥanon, the priest, son of Mar Maqari, the head of the Monastery of the Syrians of the House of the Bearer of God in the desert of Abba Maqari of Sqete participated in the binding of this holy Apostle. May everyone who reads in it pray for him that our Lord Jesus Christ may forgive all his sins and may provide a good remembrance for his deceased and may He let his soul live in the heavenly kingdom. Yea and Amen.”

Unfortunately, this note has no date and there is also no Coptic counterpart. By calling the area in which the Monastery of the Syrians is located “the desert of Abba Maqari,” the writer – perhaps Yuḥanon himself – appears eager to make a connection between St. Macarius and his father, who was named after the saint.

Very recently, one additional piece of evidence has come to light. It allows us to appreciate Yuḥanon’s work in the Monastery

<sup>57</sup> No. 15 of the continuous numbering in Н. В. Пигулевская, *Каталог сирийских рукописей Ленинграда* (Палестинский Сборник, 6.68; Moscow and Leningrad, 1960), 50-54. We are grateful to Dr. Andreas Juckel (University of Munster) who, during a visit to St. Petersburg in June 2014, made an accurate copy of the colophon. Dr. Juckel, having seen a photograph of the note in ms. British Library Add. 14,635, confirmed that the two notes, in the BL and in the St. Petersburg manuscripts, were written in the same hand.

beyond his modest participation in two bookbinding projects. Ms. Deir al-Surian Syr. 30 is a composite manuscript consisting of parts from several different manuscripts.<sup>58</sup> One major part (30C) contains *Mimre* and hagiographical texts (ff. 5-138). This part was written by no one other than Moses of Nisibis and he wrote it in 903/4 AD, before he became abbot. Two texts in particular deserve our attention. The first contains the Life of the Roman brothers Maximos and Dometios, “who became disciples in the desert of Skete in the days of Abba Macarius (Maqari) the Great,” attributed to “Abba Bishoi, archdeacon of Constantinople” (ff. 24v-74r), while the second contains “the History of the Great Macarius (Maqari), the saint and the father of all the monks who came to live in the desert of Skete, Shehit,” attributed to Abba Serapion (ff. 74v-128r).

The two notes, at the end of each text, deserve to be quoted in full.<sup>59</sup>

F. 74r (at the end of the Life of Maximos and Dometios):

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“It was translated from the Egyptian tongue into Syriac by Yuḥanon son of Maqari, head priest and abbot of the Monastery of the Bearer of God, of the Syrians in the desert of Skete in the year 1215. The feeble sinner Moses from Nisibis put it in order and wrote it out in the above-mentioned desert. May everyone who reads (this) pray for

<sup>58</sup> S. P. Brock and L. Van Rompay, *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts and Fragments in the Library of Deir al-Surian, Wadi al-Natrun (Egypt)*. Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 227 (Louvain: Peeters, 2014), 220-30.

<sup>59</sup> See Brock and Van Rompay, *Catalogue*, 223-24.



the Wadi al-Natrun around 900.<sup>61</sup> The note in ms. Deir al-Surian 30 not only confirms Toda's hypothesis, but also reveals the identity of the translator: Yuḥanon bar Maqari. According to the first note, the translation work itself must be dated to the year 1215 A.Gr., which is 903/4, and this is the same year in which, according to the second note, Moses wrote the manuscript. We may assume that at that time Yuḥanon was still abbot. Whether Moses had a written model (Yuḥanon's original translation?), we do not know. But it is conceivable that Abbot Yuḥanon and Moses worked together and that the verb used by Moses twice "to put in order" (ܡܠܟܐ) refers to Moses' participation in (at least the final stage of) the translation work. The earliest evidence that Moses was abbot is from May 914, when the new abbot's name was written in an inscription running around the entrance between the *keburus* and the altar space. Yuḥanon must have died, therefore, between 903/4 and 914, after having been abbot for between 15 and 24 years.

Returning now to the newly discovered inscription, we should date it at the very beginning of Yuḥanon's tenure as abbot. Shortly after Maqari's death, in 889, Yuḥanon took the initiative to honor his father with a collection of wall paintings and two inscriptions, in Syriac and Coptic. Since his father was named after the Egyptian desert father Macarius the Great and must have had a special devotion to this saint, it does not come as a surprise that Macarius was chosen as the overall theme of what Yuḥanon must have conceived as a memorial for his father. Whether Abbot Maqari's interest in Macarius already brought him to the study of the Coptic language and the reading of Macarius' Coptic *Vita*, we do not know. But his son Yuḥanon certainly took these steps and – possibly in honor of his father – embarked on the Syriac translation of the Coptic *Vita* and of other Coptic texts as well. Inspired by his father, Yuḥanon must have intended to bring the ascetic world of Coptic and Syriac Christianity together. Macarius, the Egyptian saint after whom his father was named, was seen as a perfect embodiment of this symbiosis.

The newly discovered Syriac and Coptic inscriptions provide unique evidence for our knowledge of the history of the Monastery in the late ninth and the early tenth century, under the two abbots,

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<sup>61</sup> S. Toda, "Syriac Translation in Egypt. The Case of the *Life of Saint Macarius the Egyptian*" (Orientalia 75:1 [2006]), 96-106; Id., *Vie de S. Macaire l'Égyptien* (see note 9), 70-73 and 110-12.



Maqari (d. 889) and his son Yuḥanon (d. between 903/4 and 914). Even more importantly, together with the information contained in ms. Deir al-Surian 30, the two inscriptions highlight the bilingual character, Syriac and Coptic, of life in the Monastery in this period. Maqari's and Yuḥanon's interest in the Coptic language may have been triggered by their eagerness to learn about the Egyptian Desert Fathers, but the bilingual note in ms. BL Add. 14,635 and even more so the use of the two languages in Maqari's "Memorial" strongly suggest that the two abbots had both Syriac and Coptic readers in mind, Syriac and Coptic visitors to the church, and monks belonging to the two linguistic and cultural communities.

Moses of Nisibis, when he assumed the responsibility as abbot sometime before 913/4, continued this bilingual tradition. Whereas the inscriptions on the two wooden doors (the one closing the haikal and the other standing between the khurus and the nave), dated respectively 914 and 926/7, are in Syriac, and the saints' names inscribed in inlaid ivory on the panels of the former door are in Greek, the saints' names on the latter door use Coptic.<sup>62</sup> More importantly, a large Coptic inscription running along the baseline of the dome that covers the khurus contains the name of *παπα μωυσης ηγικουμενος οικονομος* "Papa Moyses hegoumenos (and) oikonomos."<sup>63</sup> Despite our initial doubts about the identity of this "Moses," it seems very likely now that we are indeed dealing with the Syriac abbot Moses of Nisibis. Like his predecessor, Yuḥanon bar Maqari, Moses made use of both Syriac and Coptic, addressing audiences in these two languages and

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<sup>62</sup> L. Van Rompay, "Syriac Inscriptions in Deir al-Surian. Some Reflections on Their Writers and Readers" (Hugoye 2:2 [1999]), 190-91 (par. 30-33).

<sup>63</sup> K. C. Innemée, "The Wall-paintings of Deir al-Surian: New Discoveries of 1999" (Hugoye 2:2 [1999]), 171 (par. 8); J. van der Vliet, "History through Inscriptions: Coptic Epigraphy in the Wadi al-Natrun," in *Christianity and Monasticism in Wadi al-Natrun*, ed. M. S. A. Mikhail and M. Moussa (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2009), 336-37; L. Van Rompay, "Dayr al-Suryan: l'esperienza siro-ortodossa in Egitto," in *L'eredità religiosa e culturale dei Siri-occidentali tra VI et IX secolo. Atti del 6° Incontro sull'Oriente Cristiano di tradizione siriana*, ed. E. Vergani and S. Chialà (Milan: Centro Ambrosiano, 2012), 82-83. For the possible use of "oikonomos" as a title for Abbot Maqari, see line 5 of the Coptic inscription.

committed to bringing together the two linguistic and cultural traditions within the walls of his Monastery. The new paintings and inscriptions uncovered in 2014 in a very poignant way make us aware of the deliberately bilingual and bicultural program adopted by the monastic authorities in the ninth and tenth century.

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Figure 1



Fig. 1: Deir al-Surian, Church of the Holy Virgin, south wall, the Three Old Testament Patriarchs in Paradise. Photo: Karel Innemée.

Figure 2



Fig. 2: Deir al-Surian, Church of the Holy Virgin, south wall, Saint Macarius and the cherub. Photo: Cristobal Calaforra.



Figure 3



Fig. 3 Deir Abu Maqar, Haikal of Benjamin, panel with painting of a cherub. Photo: Karel Innemée.

Figure 4



Fig. 4: Deir al-Surian, Church of the Holy Virgin, panel with painting of a cherub. Photo: Karel Innemée.



Figure 5



Fig. 5: Deir al-Surian, Church of the Holy Virgin, south wall, two saints on horseback. Photo: Cristobal Calaforra.

Figure 6



Fig. 6: Deir al-Surian, Church of the Holy Virgin, south wall, Syriac inscription. Photo: Karel Innemée.



Figure 7



Fig. 7: Deir al-Surian, Church of the Holy Virgin, south wall, Coptic inscription. Photo: Karel Innemée.

Figure 8

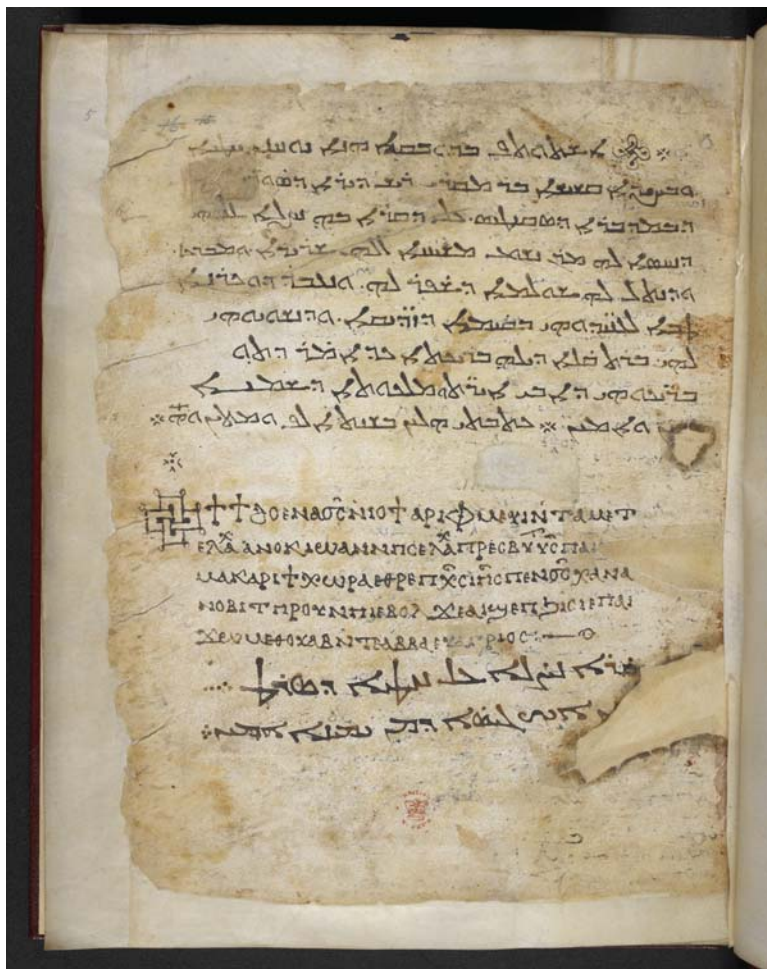


Fig. 8: Ms. London, British Library Add. 14,635, f. 5r. © The British Library Board, Add. 14635 f5.