

Art and Material Culture of the Christian Syriac Tradition:  
Some Current Projects

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- [1] Within the same communities which produced and transmitted Syriac literary works, artists and craftsmen were active in creating material culture and art. The remains of their efforts deserve to be studied both in their own right and as sources—complementary to the literary texts—for our knowledge of the life and ideas of Syrian Christians. Two recent projects, initiated at the University of Leiden (The Netherlands) and carried out in close cooperation with scholars and specialists from Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, and various European countries, include documentation and conservation of art connected with the Syriac tradition.

**Syrian-Netherlands Cooperation for the Study of Art in Syria  
(SYNCAS)**

- [2] As of May 1996, a team of art historians and restorers, under the aegis of the Universities of Damascus and Leiden, has been involved in the documentation and conservation of Syrian art of Late Antiquity as well as of the Christian and Islamic traditions. At workshops held at the University of Damascus on 16–19 September 1996 and at the University of Leiden on 3–5 July 1997, ideas were exchanged and concrete plans discussed.
- [3] Among the fields selected is that of Christian wall-paintings. In the area between Damascus and Homs are preserved some very interesting collections of paintings stemming either from the Syrian-Orthodox or the Greek-Orthodox tradition. Among them are the well-known wall-paintings of the Monastery of Musa al-Habashi near Nabk, which was a Syrian-Orthodox monastery until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many paintings have Greek and Syriac inscriptions.
- [4] For our September 1997 campaign, we have chosen to work in the Chapel of Saint Elijah at Ma'arrat-Saydnaya (15 km to the north of Damascus), at just a few kilometres from the newly built Syrian-Orthodox Monastery of Mor Efrem. A team of Syrian, Dutch, and Egyptian restorers has cleaned the existing wall-paintings which represent: Saint Nicholas, the Virgin Mary and Child, Three Saints (one of them being Saint Athanasius, the second probably Andreas of Crete, the third, dressed as a deacon, still unidentified). In the

course of the work, new parts of paintings came to light. Among them are the remnants of the Ascension of Elijah as well as fragmentary depictions of some other saints, which still need some further study.

- [5] These paintings in Byzantine style, which probably belong to the Greek-Orthodox tradition (and bear only Greek, no Syriac inscriptions), are the work of different hands. They may be dated to the 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries. The work in this chapel will hopefully continue in May 1998. A publication with photographs is in preparation. A photograph of the Virgin and Child, after treatment by our team, is included as Fig. 1.

- [6] While much work still remains to be done in the documentation and conservation of Syrian wall-paintings, other extremely rich fields are those of manuscript illuminations and of mosaics. These fields lead us to a period antedating that of the wall-paintings preserved. Like the wall-paintings, the manuscript illuminations and mosaics show us many aspects of the cultural and artistic life of Christianity in this region, with the interaction of Greek and local Syriac traditions. Much work has already been done in these fields in recent years, but new findings and materials that have barely been noticed so far still await full documentation and study. Not only mosaics, but other pieces of church architecture and furniture, which have come to light in recent or older excavations, as well deserve further study.

### **Egyptian-Netherlands Cooperation for Coptic Art Preservation (ENCCAP)**

- [7] This project deals with Egyptian art and is carried out in various Coptic monasteries, in close cooperation with the monks. For our present purpose, the work going on in the "Monastery of the Syrians" (Dayr al-Suryan) in the Wadi al-Natrun, one of the centres of Medieval Syriac culture, deserves to be singled out. Whereas this monastery is already widely known for its unparalleled manuscript treasures, inscriptions and wall-paintings, new discoveries connected with the period when it was inhabited by Syrian-Orthodox monks are presently being made.

- [8] In three recent campaigns (September-October 1995, September-October 1996, and October-November 1997) Karel Innemée (Leiden University) and Ewa Parandowska (National Museum Warsaw, Poland) have uncovered previously unknown

wall-paintings and Syriac texts on the walls of the Church of the Holy Virgin. Among the new wall-paintings there is one representing the Three Patriarchs and another very beautiful one with the Virgin breast-feeding the Jesus Child (Fig. 2). The latter may be datable to the seventh century and may even antedate, therefore, the Syrian presence in the Monastery. Among the Syriac texts found on the walls (most of them written from top to bottom) some are quite long and resemble colophons of manuscripts, giving names and dates. As such, these texts become historical witnesses, providing information on the history of the Monastery and its architecture as well as on its links with the Syrian motherland. The text reproduced in Fig. 3 is dated to the year “three hundred and twenty and [...] of the Arabs,” which is between AD 932 and 940. Another text, of a strikingly ornamental character, is written from top to bottom on a vertical line and is reflected, as in a mirror, on the right side of the same line (Fig. 4). This remarkable piece still needs to be examined in more detail. Whereas publications on the discoveries of 1995 and 1996 are already forthcoming, the newly discovered paintings and texts still await further study. The next campaign is planned for January 1998.

[9]

### **Some Bibliographical References**

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[10]

### **Practical Information on the Projects**

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