

## SYRIAC INSCRIPTIONS IN SYRIA

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Compared to the different fields of ancient Semitic Alphabetic epigraphy, Syriac inscriptions have never been paid the same attention. They were never evoked when the *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum* was elaborated<sup>1</sup> and if Syriac inscriptions have been published when discovered, no systematic gathering had never been planned.

In 1992, a project was exposed on the occasion of the *Symposium Syriacum* in Cambridge (UK) to publish a systematic collection of all Syriac inscriptions<sup>2</sup>. It was decided that it would be organised in volumes according to the divisions of modern countries. Since then, two volumes were undertaken which should be published quite soon. Amir Harrak collected, just in time, all the inscriptions of Iraq, for which the scientific community must be very grateful, and the authors of these lines, together with Rev. Dr. Jacob Thekeparampil, have written the volume about the inscriptions of Kerala (India)<sup>3</sup>.

On the occasion of a symposium organized in Paris in 2003 and dedicated to Syriac Inscriptions, whose acts inaugurated the

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<sup>1</sup> Briquel Chatonnet and Fauveaud-Brasseau 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Desreumaux and Palmer 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Briquel Chatonnet, Desreumaux and Thekeparampil 2008. Harrak 2010.

series “Études syriaques”<sup>4</sup>, our attention was drawn on the fact that the two main parts of this corpus, that is to say Turkey and Syria, had been laid aside. We drew a sort of preliminary appreciation in the volume<sup>5</sup> and undertook the project in Syria. A French-Syrian mission was organized which received the authorization from the General Direction of Antiquities and Museums in Damascus and some money was obtained from the French-Syrian Program in CNRS. A detailed presentation of the project was published<sup>6</sup>. Two survey campaigns have already been done, the first in June 2006 and the second in June 2007<sup>7</sup>. On the French part, Françoise Briquel Chatonnet is administratively in charge of the mission, but she and Alain Desreumaux are working together. On the Syrian part, the director of the mission is Dr Nicolas Kabbad, director of antiquities for Idlib and the region, and the scientific director was in 2006 Dr Widad Khoury and in 2007 Rana Sabbag from the General Direction of Antiquities in Syria. Some Syrian students joined the expedition as well as a specialist of Syriac manuscripts, Youssef Dergham who is taking care of the collections of manuscripts in Charfet (Lebanon).

As is only too natural, the first part of the collection job was undertaken in the region that was once the background of Antioch, where the majority of Syriac inscriptions had been situated. But we also began, on our way to and back, to study other inscriptions. In 2006, our exploration was concentrated on the Jabal Barisha, but we also studied the inscriptions preserved in the museums of Maarat an No'man (where we studied once more the Syriac mosaic of Ma'arzayta<sup>8</sup> as well as some other pieces) and Idlib. In 2007, we went on with Jabal Barisha, explored also Jabal el Ala as well as some in Jabal Sim'an and went also to Qaryatayn to study the inscriptions on the sarcophagus of mar Elyan.

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<sup>4</sup> Briquel-Chatonnet, Debié et Desreumaux 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Briquel Chatonnet et Desreumaux 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Briquel Chatonnet, Desreumaux et Khoury sous prese.

<sup>7</sup> Three more have been done since this article was given to edition in 2008, 2009 and 2010 in which a preliminary survey of the whole Limestone Massif was achieved and the 2011 expedition will concentrate on the Aleppo region.

<sup>8</sup> Harrak 1995; Briquel Chatonnet, Desreumaux and Khoury 2004–2005 [2008].

A file has been drawn of all inscriptions collected by the Butler expedition in the plain of Antioch in 1899, published by Littmann in 1904 and 1934<sup>9</sup>, and of the inscriptions discovered by Henri Pognon<sup>10</sup>. Inscriptions published by Mousterde<sup>11</sup>, Jalabert<sup>12</sup>, Jarry<sup>13</sup> as well as, incidentally, by other authors, were added. Special attention was drawn on the explorations made by the three Franciscan fathers Ignacio Pena, Pasquale Castellana and Romuald Fernandez whose results were published in their *Inventaries*<sup>14</sup>. These noticed quite a lot of new inscriptions even if they did not properly publish them as it was not their aim. But their indications were most precious. We work with the files drawn from all these publications, but also with indications given by people on the spot, which allowed new discoveries. On the contrary, quite a number of inscriptions mentioned in the literature could not be found. It is mainly the case with inscriptions which were noticed on blocs that were no more inserted in a building already a century ago. The region of the Dead cities in North West Syria which had been abandoned at the beginning of Islam is being reoccupied by new inhabitants: these get installed in old villages where they build their houses with the existing stones, without particular preoccupation about inscriptions, sculptures or more generally preservation of the patrimony. Syrian antiquities authorities are doing their best but the task is really huge.

More than fifty inscriptions have been studied through these two campaigns, which go from big, well engraved, official inscriptions to a number of mere graffiti. They are written in every place and situation and epigraphy can be as well a sport than a science, as it can need several hours of walk to get to some spots and as some inscriptions can be situated on difficult positions. Anyway, we make a point of taking not only pictures, which can be misleading, but also to trace every inscription off on plastic and, if

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<sup>9</sup> Littmann 1905; Littmann 1934.

<sup>10</sup> Pognon 1907.

<sup>11</sup> For exemple Mousterde 1945.

<sup>12</sup> Inscriptions mentionned in different volumes of IGLS.

<sup>13</sup> Jarry 1968.

<sup>14</sup> Pena, Castellana et Fernandez 1987; Pena, Castellana et Fernandez 1990; Pena, Castellana et Fernandez 1999; Pena, Castellana et Fernandez 2003.

necessary, to make a squeeze. It is with this documentation that we finally make the drawing to be published.

The other point is the importance of taking into account the context of these inscriptions. Some of them are out of context, either fallen or reused in modern buildings. Even if they are on the original spot, it is not always easy to identify the buildings. But it is an important point for the interpretation and it would be a fundamental task to complete the remarkable studies and plans by Tchalenko<sup>15</sup> and to make precise architectural drawings of all these buildings. But for the moment we are not able to do so. And it is a pity that so few people are getting interested in these so many and fascinating testimonies of early Byzantine architecture.

It is not possible for the moment to draw a general picture of this epigraphy, a task that must wait for the end of the surveys, but we would like to point at some features which emerged from these first two missions.

## 1. THE ANTIQUITY OF THIS CORPUS:

If ancient pagan inscriptions in what Drijvers called Old Syriac or Edessean were naturally all found in Osrhoene<sup>16</sup>, it is surprisingly not the fact for the first Christian inscriptions. The first dated inscriptions that were published previously<sup>17</sup> seem all to come from the region of Antioch and, very often, they are dated according to the antiochene comput<sup>18</sup>. The most ancient one, published by Littmann, was found by him in Dar Qita and was dated 482 Antiochian era, ie 433/4 AD<sup>19</sup>. Unfortunately, we did not find it last year, when we visited and studied the spot. The archaeological site is really very wide and has to be surveyed once more. We shall come back later to other inscriptions from Dar Qita.

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<sup>15</sup> Tchalenko 1953–1958

<sup>16</sup> Drijvers et Healey 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Two dated inscriptions have recently been found, both of them even more ancient than the Dar Qita one. They were published by Ayash, Balty, Briquel Chatonnet, Desreumaux and Sabbag 2008 (see also the next article in this volume); Briquel Chatonnet, Desreumaux and Moukarzel 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Meimaris 1992; Briquel Chatonnet 1998; Feissel 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Littmann 1934, n° 4.

The second one is to be found in Qasr Iblisu, dated 490 AE, ie 440/41 AD. It was engraved on the occidental portal of the baptistery but quite difficult to read.

The third one is an inscription from Khirbet Khattib<sup>20</sup> (pl. 1). The inscription is, as often, engraved on a lintel. Its date is 522 AE, that is 473/474 AD.

The fourth one, published by Sachau, is in Turkey, and outside the region of Antioch, but the fifth and sixth ones, from Basufan and Suhanian, take us back into this district. We still have to go to these spots. The seventh one we found back this year in Khirbet Hassan (pl. 2). It was just laid upside down on the side of the road but some people said there was script on the other side so we had this lintel turned over and the inscription appeared, as well as a fine decoration. It is dated 556 according to the era of Antioch, that is 507 CE, that is a few years before the well reknown trilingual inscription found in Zabad, south-east of Aleppo.

All this is altogether puzzling. Why are all these testimonies of ancient Christian Syriac epigraphy concentrated in the region of Antioch, the Edessa region being almost empty, when it is the contrary as far as manuscripts are concerned<sup>21</sup>? This discrepancy is still to be explained, more especially as both type of documents emerge at the same time in the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2. THE LINKS BETWEEN GREEK AND SYRIAC

Most of the sites that we visited preserve inscriptions in Syriac as well as in Greek. It means that in the same locations there were Greek and Aramaic speakers, or that some people could understand and use both. That is for example the case in Dar Qita where an important Syriac inscription was written on the north portal of the south church and Syriac graffiti outside the main apse but where the north church was engraved with a Greek one and a tomb also bears a Greek inscription. In Bshandalty (Jabal el A'la), a graffito in Syriac is preserved on the wall of a house, and, a little further, the west portal of the church preserved a Greek inscription with the *Trisagion*. In these cases there is most probably a gap of

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<sup>20</sup> Littmann 1934, n° 7.

<sup>21</sup> The oldest dated manuscripts are of Edesseean origin. See Hatch 1946.

time between Greek and Syriac inscriptions; but we must take into account the Baqirha inscription (pl. 3), where the same lintel bears an inscription in Syriac and one in Greek, as well as the inscription of Qasr Iblisu already mentioned. There was no separation in the repartition of Greek and Syriac speakers.

### 3. SPECIAL ATTENTION MUST BE PAID TO THE TECHNICAL AND PALAEOGRAPHICAL ASPECTS

— Different ways of engraving : some inscriptions are just made of a simple line of incision, which can be quite thick (*Kfar Deryan* on the spot where lived a Stylite) or whose cut section is triangular (*Barqiha 1*). Other are traced as a doubled line with relief between (*Dar Qita*), or in champlévé (*Qalb Loze*). A point to be noted is that even graffitis, which are the most numerous in this corpus, are generally very regular and well engraved (*Dar Qita*). But some of them are less regular (*Kousik; Firikya*).

— The scripts used are different : some inscriptions are in the old formal script (*Kh Hassan*), others in estrangelo (*Nourieh*); one can also see forms already more like serto (*Qalb Loze*) or mixture of both (*Bashaqouh andrôn*). We definitely have to get out of the too strict categories drawn from manuscripts<sup>22</sup>.

— The disposition of the letters is also of different kinds. Except when a lintel allows only a line, inscriptions and graffitis are almost always vertically written. But the third inscription of Qalb Loze in our corpus is written in three horizontal lines, each letter being vertical, in a style which was also used, for example, in the famous inscription of Zabad and that of Dahes (pl. 4).

### 4. THE PRESENCE IN THESE INSCRIPTIONS OF THEOLOGICAL CONTROVERSIES OF THE TIME

The huge majority of these inscriptions are religious. The monumental ones are dedications of churches, baptisteries etc, written on stiles and lintels. Graffiti mention personal names, mainly with the specification “X shamasha” or “X hatoyo”. Theological affirmations are numerous. One can for example insist

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<sup>22</sup> Cf Healey 2000 and Briquel Chatonnet 2001, as well as to the studies of Ayda Kaplan in her diploma of the university of Louvain la Neuve and her PhD.

on the frequent mentions of the Trinity. An example would be the huge inscription on the south church of Dar Qita, on the stile of a door in the north wall which celebrates the Trinity<sup>23</sup> (*Dar Qita église sud*) but also in a mere graffito in Bschandalty. Sometimes there are precise definitions of faith. In Greek also in Beshandalty, with a monophysite trisagion, but also in Kafr Kila, where the inscription mentioned by the Franciscan Fathers<sup>24</sup> was a clear affirmation that Virgin Mary begot God himself : engraved on a bloc under a window on the east wall of a now isolated tower, it is disposed around a rosette (Kafr Qila). The left part is dedicated to this affirmation about Virgin Mary and the inferior one is also concerned by the Trinity. This could be interpreted as a way of defining the territories of a community, of asserting for example that a village had chosen the monophysite party.

## 5. THE PRESENCE, EVEN IF RARE, OF INSCRIPTIONS OF A CIVIL MATTER

One has the impression that Syriac was only used for religious matters. It is not the case, as can be shown from a short epigraph engraved on a stile of a building in Bashaqouh. This building is definitely not a church, and probably not a private house. It has outside stairs, and, inside the lower level, a press (oil press?). An inscription was engraved on the left stile of the door (pl. 5). It was read *Andria* by Jarry who supposed one had to complete “Alexandria” and wondered which Alexandria it could be<sup>25</sup>. The Franciscan Fathers supposed it was to be read *Nidro* “vow”<sup>26</sup>. Both readings should be abandoned. The word is clearly *Andrôna*, a Syriac transcription of Greek *Andrôn*<sup>27</sup>, which was a sort of civil communal building often with a press on the ground and a common room upstairs. This inscription would be a sign at the door of the building. Incidentally, it raises up anew the question of the *andrôn* in Byzantine Syria<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Briquel Chatonnet, Desreumaux and Khoury 2004–2005 [2008].

<sup>24</sup> Pena, Castellana et Fernandez 1990, p. 133 et 252.

<sup>25</sup> Jarry 1968, p. 152.

<sup>26</sup> Pena, Castellana et Fernandez 1983, p. 263.

<sup>27</sup> Briquel Chatonnet, Desreumaux and Khoury 2004–2005 [2008].

<sup>28</sup> This has to be confronted to the conclusions of Gatier 2001 [2003].

## **6. THE CRITICAL SITUATION IN WHICH ARE SOME OF THESE INSCRIPTIONS**

There are traces of recent destructions in Dar Qita on a Greek inscription situated on the southern door of the North church (pl. 6) but the most depressing situation we found in Baffitin, where all the inscribed capitals published recently by Christine Strube<sup>29</sup> were destroyed into pieces as well as the other Christian symbols.

These are extreme cases, and due to precise ill-will, but perhaps the greatest danger is the reoccupation of the region and the villages by new inhabitants. In some cases, it can help to preserve monuments as is the case in Kafr Kila where the church is reused as a farm but elsewhere people cover the decorations or inscriptions with cement. In Khirbet Hassan, we suppose that we have identified, through the description of the spot, the stone where Pogon read an inscription, but the house is now covered with a plain white cement.

## **7. THE POSSIBILITY OF EMERGENCE OF IMPORTANT NEW MATERIAL**

A very important Syriac inscription, which goes back as far as the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, was found at the beginning of 2007 in the region of Jerablous. It marks the entrance to a martyrium in a monastery. It is linked to a big mosaic, some 4 x 10 m, with animals and figurative pictures. The inscription is quite long and commemorates the laying of the mosaic. It is in two parts on each side of a step. The interpretation of the building is still to be found as only the interior of the room has been excavated. We have been asked by Dr Michel Al-Maqdissi, director of the service of excavations and archaeological research in Damascus, to publish it<sup>30</sup>, along with Janine Balty, the specialist of mosaic, and Rana Sabbag who studied the archaeological material found on the mosaic.

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<sup>29</sup> Strube 2002.

<sup>30</sup> Ayash, Balty, Briquel Chatonnet, Desreumaux and Sabbag 2008.

These were just a few short blicks in this Syriac epigraphic patrimony of Syria, in the region of North West Syria around Antioch. The point was to give an idea of the interest of these inscriptions and we hope that the pursuit of the project will lead to new discoveries in this region which once was the centre of Syriac world.



Pl. 1: Khirbet Khattib, lintel, south door.



Pl. 2: Khirbet Hassan, inscribed and ornamented lintel.



Pl. 3: Baqirha, lintel.



Pl. 4: Dahis, left part of the lintel.



Pl. 5: Bashaqouh, door stile.



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