Pages of a Chronicle on the Wall: Texts, paintings, and chronology in Deir al-Surian[1]

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1. Introduction (K.C. Innemée)

Since the beginning of the research and conservation work in the church of the Holy Virgin in Deir al-Surian, attempts have

[1] The research and conservation project of Deir al-Surian was carried out with financial support of the Polish National Center of Science (NCN, grant nr. 2015/18/M/HS3/00621) and the Dioraphte Foundation (The Netherlands). At present the project is funded by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung (Germany).

been made to map the development of the building's architecture and decoration (paintings, stucco, woodwork). At first, only a relative chronology could be sketched, based on the stratification of layers of plaster and paintings, but gradually, more and more information came to light that allows scholars to establish a more absolute chronology. Several important modifications and refurbishments of the church were done during the abbacy of Moses of Nisibis, in the first half of the tenth century, and although they cannot all be dated exactly, an increasingly precise image of the activities commissioned by him is slowly taking shape. The modification of the place where the most important church relics were kept and venerated can now be reconstructed based on recently uncovered paintings and a Coptic dipinto.

An essential factor in establishing a more absolute chronology is the discovery of several dated inscriptions (dipinti). In some cases, they refer to events that play a role in the history of the monastery and its community and thus serve as an essential source of information. On the other hand, such dated inscriptions can also be used as *terminus post quem* for the layers of (painted) plaster that cover(ed) these inscriptions.

The present paper presents three recently discovered inscriptions that are important as documents in the history of the monastic community of Deir al-Surian and provide evidence for dating the layers in the stratification of paintings in the church. Based on these inscriptions, an adjusted overview will be given of the chronology of the phases in the stratification of mural paintings in the church, with particular attention to the eastern wall of the northern side-aisle.

2. NEWLY DISCOVERED INSCRIPTIONS

2.1. Funerary inscription of *abba* Kuri (G. Ochała)

In 2019, a Greek text was found on the first layer of plaster, just right of the doorway in the northern side-aisle. The text contains an annual date, a rare case in the epigraphic corpus from the church. Moreover, the date at the very beginning of the eighth century makes the inscription the earliest dated text from the church and, as such, is a critical chronological anchor for its history in general and for the development of its painted decoration in particular.

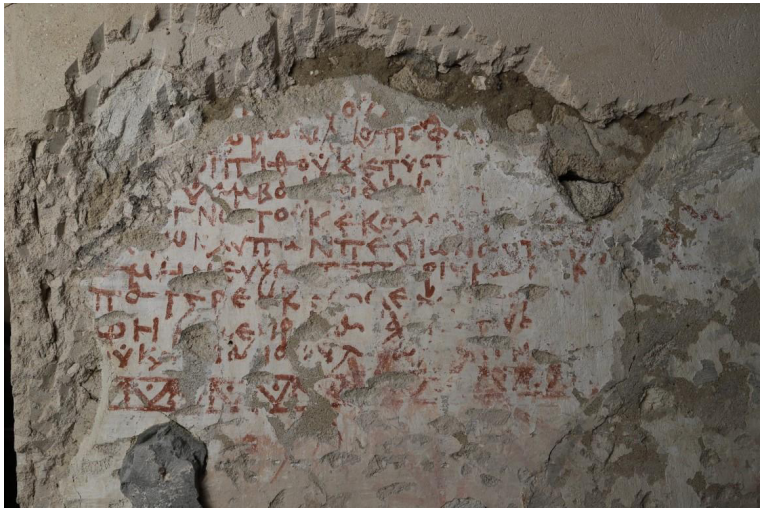

Fig. 1 The funerary inscription of Abba Kuri

The inscription was painted in red and enclosed within a decorative border, also in red (fig. 1). The decoration consists of a zigzag pattern filled in alternately with single dots and wavy vertical lines. Only the lower part of the text has survived, preserving the last ten lines and measuring approximately 22 x 32 cm (together with the border). The border survives almost

completely in the bottom, and a small fragment is visible on the right, at the height of lines 5–7. The left borderline is entirely lost, but the text in lines 7–9 appears to be complete; hence, the total width of the composition can be reconstructed at 38 cm. The preservation of the surviving text is not perfect, and the paint is obliterated in many places, especially in the upper and right parts, making the reading very difficult.

The script is distinct and executed by a skilled scribe, but the size of particular letters can differ per line. Palaeographically, the text represents upright epigraphic majuscule with elements of minuscule script, most notably the shape of the *mu* (ll. 4 and 7) and the *alpha* (ll. 4, 5, and 8). Note also the angular shape of the *epsilon* (ll. 3, 5, 6, and 8), which can get a more lunar look when the script gets smaller (ll. 8 and 9). The scribe consistently used a supralinear dot to mark the *upsilon* in the final position.

In line 2, two thin, slightly slanting strokes are visible between δι and ου. They do not seem to be abbreviation marks or interpunction signs. Instead, they appear to mark off a brake in the text of this line caused by the unusually tall *ksi* from line 1, the tail of which extends to the upper part of the *kappa* in line 3. The strokes would thus be an *ad hoc* typographic device employed by the scribe to amend the mistake in the planning of the text.

Diplomatic transcription

1 [5–6] .[3–4] .ξ̣ο̣ὺ .[. .] . .[5–6]
2 [3–4] .ω̣ρωδι/ *vac.* /ο̣υ̣τροφ . .[3–4]
3 [2–3] .ιπιθο̣υ̣κετὺ̣στ[. . . .]ο̣φ
4 [2]ο̣ὺ̣αμβακυ̣ριδια . . . . .[3–4]
5 [. .]α̣γνω̣στουκεκαλο̣ν̣ο̣μ . . .ν̣
6 [. .]κ̣ρ̣ωνλυπωνπεδιωναυ̣τ̣ο̣υ̣

7 αμηνευξαστεπεριυμων
8 πατερεσκεαδελφ·εγρα
9 φη μμεχιρ κα δ/ ιαετους[?]
10 [.]ουκλητιανουυλ α . . . .ν[. .]

Reading text

1 [5–6] .[3–4] .ξου .[. .] . .[5–6]
2 [3–4] .ωρωδι/ *vac.* /ου τροφ . .[3–4]
3 [2–3] .ιπιθου κὲ τ(ο)ῦ στ[εφαν]οφ-.
4 [όρ]ου ἄμβα Κύρι δια . . . . .[3–4]
5 [ἀν]αγνώστου. κὲ κάλον ὁμ . . .ν
6 [μι]κρὸν λύπων πεδίων αὐτοῦ
7 ἀμήν. εὔξαστε περὶ ὑμῶν
8 πατέρες κὲ ἀδελφ(οί). · ἐγρα
9 φη μ(ηνί) Μέχιρ κα′ (ἰν)δ(ικτιῶνος) ια′ ἔτους [?]
10 [τ]οῦ (Διο)κλητιανοῦ υλ′ α . . . .ν[. .]

3. l. καί || 4. l. ἄββα || 5. l. καί || 6. l. [μι]κρὸν λιπὼν παιδίον || 7. l. εὔξασθε | l. ἡμῶν || 8. l. καί

1 …
2 …
3 *… and crown-*
4 *bearing abba Kuri, …*
5 *lector. And beautifully …*
6 *leaving his small child,*
7 *amen. Pray for us,*
8 *O fathers and brothers. (It was) writ-*
9 *ten in the month of Mechir, (day) 21, in the 11th indiction, in the year*
10 *430 from Diocletian. …*

The text is badly damaged in its upper part, but the phrase "having left his small child"[2] in line 6 indicates that the inscription most probably had a funerary/commemorative character. At the beginning of the dipinto, we find a fragment of the presentation of the commemorated person (ll. 3–6); the name of the person is in the genitive, which suggests the use of a formula such as "Remember, O God, the falling asleep of NN", "Lord, give rest to the soul of NN", or "For the commemoration of NN".[3] The presentation closes with the phrase "And beautifully … leaving his small child, amen", which has personal and emotional character;[4] the last word in line 5 could be, in our opinion, a verbal form designating the departure of the commemorated person from this world (i.e. "And he beautifully died/fell asleep/went to rest etc."), but we could not find an appropriate form matching the preserved letters.[5] What fol-

[2] The anonymous peer-reviewer of our article suggested to interpret the phrase as [μι/μα]κρῶν λυπῶν πεδίων (l. παιδίων) αὐτοῦ, "of small [great] griefs concerning his [?] children". While this interpretation has the merit of not having to accept as many as four phonological alterations in three words as we propose (twice ω for ο, once υ for ι, and once ε for αι), it, nevertheless, does not offer a convincing sense for the whole text. Moreover, all these phonological alterations are very well attested in late Greek: Gignac 1976, 192–193 (αι/ε interchange), 267–273 (υ/ι interchange), 275–277 (ο/ω interchange).

[3] E.g. Lefebvre 1907, no. 15 (Alexandria), ll. 1–2: μνησθίη ὁ θεὸς τῆσ κοιμήσεος; no. 62 (Hermopolis Parva), ll. 1–3: κύριε ἀνάπαυσον τὴν ψυχὴν τοῦ δούλου σου; no. 282 (Akhmim), ll. 1–2: ὑπὲρ μνήμης. For an overview, see Tudor 2011, 146–157.

[4] Starting a new sentence with καί is nothing unusual in ancient Greek and is an element of spoken language (personal communication of Adam Łajtar).

[5] In fact, such interpretation allows us to take the form λυπων as the nominative singular of the aorist active participle of λείπω, "to leave", that is

lows is an exhortation to prayer (ll. 7–8), and the dating clause (ll. 8–10).

Luckily, what survives from the presentation is the deceased's name, honorific title, and function. We learn from it that *abba* Kuri, described with the epithet "crown-bearing",[6] was a lector (*anagnostes*); what was written at the end of line 4 was apparently his other function (probably starting with *dia-*, but rather not διάκονος). While this is not mentioned (or not preserved) in the inscription, from the fact that the text was placed on the wall of the monastic church, we may surmise that Kuri was a monk of Deir al-Surian or a member of the Church of the Virgin. An exciting feature of the inscription is a rare reference to the pre-monastic life of the deceased. Line 6 informs us that Kuri "left a small child".[7] This can mean that he either became a monk not long after his child had been born or was not a monk but only a cleric.

λυπών for λιπών, rather than the plural genitive of λυπή, "grief", that is λυπῶν; see n. 2 above.

[6] The dictionary form of the adjective is στεφανηφόρος, from στεφανηφορέω, but forms with the *omicron* are found on occasion in Hellenistic and Roman inscriptions (e.g. a list of magistrates from Smyrna, *CIG* 3150, l. 1: ἐπὶ στεφανοφόρου Κόρρης). More importantly, the adjective is used in this form with reference to a deceased (but, admittedly, a holy deceased) in a Coptic papyrus document from Thebes of a date in the 8th century, just as our inscription, published in Crum 1912, no. 15, ll. 32–35: ⲡⲁⲑⲗⲟⲫⲟⲣⲟⲥ ⲁⲩⲱ ⲡⲓⲛⲓⲕⲟⲫⲟⲣⲟⲥ ⲁⲩⲱ ⲥⲧⲉⲫⲁⲛⲟⲫⲟⲣⲟⲥ ⲡⲕⲁⲗⲛⲓⲕⲟⲥ ⲁⲩⲱ ⲡⲙⲁⲣⲧⲩⲣⲟⲥ ⲉⲧⲣ ⲟⲩⲟⲉⲓⲛ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲡϩⲁⲅⲓⲟⲥ ⲁⲃⲃⲁ ⲃⲓⲕⲧⲱⲣ, "the prize-bearer, victor, crown-bearer, triumphant, martyr who shines, the holy *abba* Victor".

[7] For a similar phrase, but in a woman's epitaph from Banganarti in Nubia (prob. 853/4), see Łajtar 2007, 135–137, with a correction to the interesting place in Diethart 2015: κα̣[ταλιποῦ]|σα ἀμήτορα στ̣[ένοντα τέ]|κνα, "having left motherless weeping children".

The next lines of the text (ll. 7–8) address the "fathers and brothers", meaning here undoubtedly the most natural readers of the inscription, the monks of Deir al-Surian.[8] They all are implored to "pray for us ",[9] which can refer either more generally to the whole monastic community, struck by the departure of one of its members, or, more specifically, to Kuri's widow and his orphaned child, who ask for prayers in their time of need.

The two last lines of the inscription contain the most crucial piece of information from the viewpoint of the present article, namely the exact date of *abba* Kuri's death. The event is dated to Mecheir 21 in the year 430 of the Era of Diocletian,[10] which is 15 February 714 in the Julian calendar. One notes that the indiction date in the eleventh indictional year disagrees with the date according to the Diocletian Era by one year: year 430 from Diocletian was in fact the twelfth indiction. Such a

[8] For an analogous phrase, but with reference to the "holy fathers", that is the deceased members of the community who are to intercede in front of the Lord for the commemorated person, see a dipinto from Kellia: N. Bosson in Bridel 1999, 445, no. 182, ll. 4–6: ἅγιοι πατέρες | εὔξασθε περ⟨ὶ⟩ τοῦ | ἀδελφοῦ Ρούφου, "Holy fathers, pray for brother Rufus".

[9] ὑμῶν for ἡμῶν is a common orthography of late Greek texts due to iotacism: Gignac 1976, 264. E.g. P. Cherix in Bridel 1994, 2:436, no. 254, l. 6, or R. Kasser, J. Partyka, and N. Bosson in Bridel 1999, 312, no. 149, l. 5, both ὑμᾶς for ἡμᾶς.

[10] To the best of our knowledge, the form κλητιανοῦ has so far been unattested in Greek epigraphic and papyrological sources in the dating formulae according to the Era of Diocletian, but a Coptic funerary inscription from Antinoe (Hasitzka 1993, no. 768) has ⲕⲗⲏⲇⲓⲁⲛⲟⲩ (l. 11), which renders our reading entirely plausible.

discrepancy is not a common phenomenon but is sufficiently attested in both papyri and inscriptions.[11]

2.2. Commemorative inscription of *papa* Mouses (G. Ochała)

In 2018, a composition of paintings and an accompanying text were uncovered on the eastern wall of the northern side-aisle. The text was painted in black on two panels enclosed in a red-painted frame, measuring, respectively, 13 by 32 cm and 17 by 30 cm approximately. These two panels are located in the middle of the wall, with two military saints, St Eustathios and St Theodoros Orientalis above and two others, St Jacob the Persian and St Leontios, below (figs. 2-4). Although the panels do not include an exact annual date, they provide an important chronological anchor for dating the painted decoration in the Church of the Virgin. The paleography of the text, with tall letters of book style decorated with serifs and a cross-like central part of the *omega*, resembles that of the long inscription running around the central dome of the *khurus*. This is all the more so since both texts have the same function, commemorating the persons who supposedly were responsible for decorating both spaces, and they date from the same period (see below). Unfortunately, the left panel is almost completely obliterated in its right part, which makes interpreting the text significantly more difficult. However, considering the inscription's context, it is possible to propose a reconstruction.[12] The text bears traits of Nitrian Bohairic (ⲭⲁ for ⲫⲁ in A, l.

[11] Bagnall and Worp 2004, 64–67

[12] We owe thanks to Anne Boud'hors and Jacques van der Vliet who agreed to read the first draft of this edition and suggested a number of improvements.

3) and non-literary Bohairic (the conjunctive ⲧⲉ in B, l. 3, and the absence of nasal-labial assimilation in ⲛⲡⲁⲡⲁ in B, l. 1)

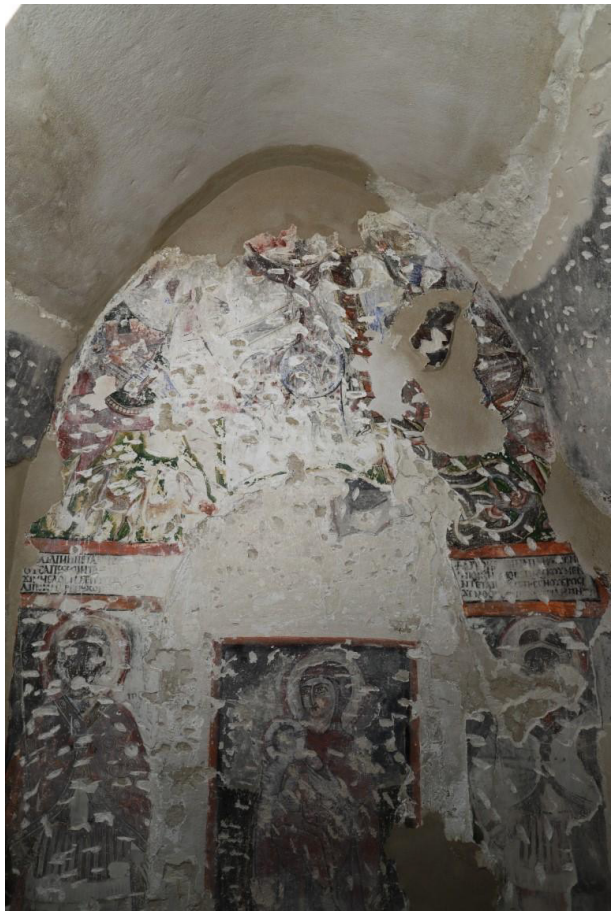

Fig. 2 The eastern wall of the northern side-aisle

Fig. 3 First part of the inscription

A

1 [†] ⲛ̣ⲁⲓⲗⲓⲙⲏⲛ ⲉⲧⲁⲛⲉⲣⲍⲱ[ⲅⲣ]ⲁ̣ⲫ̣ⲓ[ⲛ ⲙⲙⲱ-]

2 ⲟⲩ ⲥⲁⲡⲱⲱⲓ ⲛ̇ⲧⲁⲓⲥ̣ⲁ̣ⲏ̣ⲉ ⲛ̣ⲍⲓⲕ̣[ⲱⲛ ⲁⲩ-]

3 ⲭⲓ ⲙ̣ⲙⲉⲗⲟⲥ ⲛⲧⲉ ⲡⲟⲩⲥ̣ⲱ̣[ⲙⲁ ⲉⲑⲟⲩⲁⲃ.]

4 ⲗⲓⲡⲟⲛ ⲙⲁ̣ⲣⲉⲛⲱⲱⲡ̣ⲓ ⲃ̣ⲉ̣ⲛ̣ [ⲟⲩⲧⲱⲙⲧ.]

1. ζωγραφεῖν || 2. l. ϲⲁⲓⲉ; εἰκών || 3. μέλος; σῶμα || 4. l. ⲗⲟⲓⲡⲟⲛ, λοιπόν

1 *† These portraits, which we have painted*
2 *above this beautiful image, have*
3 *received the members of their* [*holy*] *body.*

4 *Hence, let us be* [*amazed*[13] (*?*)].

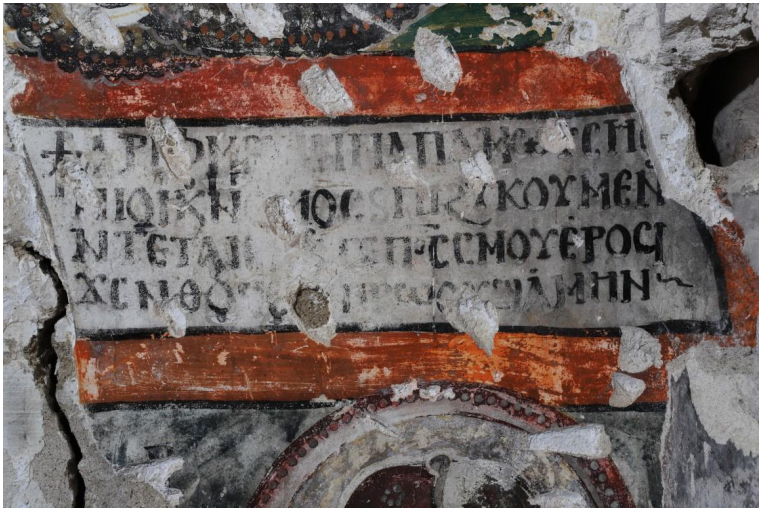

Fig. 4 Second part of the inscription

B

1 † ⲁⲣⲓ ⲫⲙⲉⲩⲓ ⲛⲡⲁⲡⲁ ⲙⲱⲩⲥⲛⲍ

2 ⲡⲓⲟⲓⲕⲟⲛⲟⲙⲟⲥ (ⲟⲩⲟⲩ) ⲡⲓⲣⲩ̀ⲕⲟⲩⲙⲉⲛⲟ(ⲥ)

3 ⲛⲧⲉ ⲧⲁⲓⲉ̣ⲕⲕⲗ(ⲏⲥⲓⲁ). ⲧⲉ ⲡ̅ⲟ̅ⲥ ⲥⲙⲟⲩ ⲉ̀ⲣⲟⲩ

4 ⲭⲉ ⲛⲑⲟⲩ ⲉ[ⲑ]ⲩⲓⲣⲱⲟⲩⲱ. ⲁ̀ⲙⲏⲛ. ~

2. inscr. ⲡⲓⲟⲓⲕ\ⲟ/ⲛⲟⲙⲟⲥ, οἰκόνομος; ⲥ; inscr. ⲡⲓⲣⲩ̀ⲕⲟⲩⲙⲉⲛ\ⲟ/; ἡγούμενος || 3. inscr. ⲧⲁⲓⲉ̣ⲕⲕ\ⲗ/, ἐκκλησία

[13] This reconstruction was proposed to us by Jacques van der Vliet, who also noted that other words could be supplemented here as well, e.g. ϩⲟϯ, "fear", or ⲥⲑⲱⲧ, "trembling".

1 *† Remember papa Mouses,*
2 *the oikonomos and hegoumenos*
3 *of this church. May the Lord bless him,*
4 *for he is the one who provides. Amen.*

As mentioned above, the dipinto is comparable with another text from the same church, the long inscription running around the central dome. The latter is regrettably quite lacunary but appears to commemorate the act of founding the painted decoration of the dome. What is wholly preserved are the names of several persons seemingly involved in the whole enterprise, including *papa*[14] Aaron, deacon Ioannes, and – most notably in the present context – *papa* Moses, *oikonomos* and *hegoumenos*,[15] without any doubt the same person as in the present text. In his 2009 article on Coptic epigraphy of Wadi al-Natrun monasteries, Jacques van der Vliet discusses this inscription and observes that the three men were representatives of "the monastic authorities in whose period of office and under whose supervision the dome above the *khurus* was refurbished". He further notes that they may have been "sponsors of the operation", but concludes that – given the state of preservation of the text – their mention rather functions as a means of dating of the event during their service in

[14] For the title *papa*, occurring also in the present text, interpreted as a monastic rather than ecclesiastical title, see now the analysis in Laver 2022.

[15] The inscription is unpublished; G.O.'s reading of the fragment with the names from the photo: ⲡⲁⲡⲁ ⲙⲱⲩⲥⲏⲥ ⲡⲓϩⲓⲕⲟⲩⲙⲉⲛⲟⲥ ⲡⲓ<ⲓ>ⲟⲓⲕⲟⲛⲟⲙⲟⲥ ⲛⲉⲙ ⲡⲁⲡⲁ ⲁϩⲁⲣⲱⲛ ⲛⲉⲙ ⲡⲓⲇⲓⲁⲕⲟⲛ ⲓⲱⲁⲛⲛⲏⲥ ⲁⲙⲏⲛ, "*papa* Moses, *hegoumenos* (and) *oikonomos* and *papa* Aharon and deacon Ioannes. Amen".

the monastery.[16] In the present inscription, by contrast, the reason for commemorating Moses is mentioned explicitly in the last line of part B as "he is the one who provides". Admittedly, as the phrase is apparently in the present tense,[17] this can be a general statement of Moses's involvement in refurbishing the church,[18] not only this particular work. However, one notes that analogous verbs are used in Syriac inscriptions in connection with Moses's activity: *isep*, "he took care", and *eṯḥappaṭ*, "he strove", with the meaning "he took the initiative".[19] If so, then it is not inconceivable that his role here was not as a mere "chronological pointer", but as the true initiator, founder, and supervisor of the work. The nature of this work is explicitly presented in part A of the text as "these portraits" (ⲛ̣ⲁⲓⲗⲓⲙⲏⲛ), most logically the painted composition adorning the wall, which the inscription accompanies.[20] The unidentified "we", repeated in line 4 in the phrase "let us be" (ⲛⲁⲣⲉⲛϣⲱⲡ̣ⲓ̣) and thus perhaps meaning the whole monastic community, executed these paintings "above this beautiful image". These portraits "received" – which must mean some-

[16] Van der Vliet 2009, 336–37.

[17] It could also be reconstructed ⲛⲑⲟⲩ ⲉ[ⲩ]ⲭⲓⲣⲱⲟⲩϣ, where ⲉⲩ- would be present II in its Nitrian form; the meaning would be basically the same.

[18] This includes the present painting, the decoration of the dome over the *khurus*, the rebuilding of the sanctuary, and the two pairs of wooden doors leading to the *haikal* and the *khurus* (the door inscriptions were edited and discussed in Leroy 1974, 153–59; Brock 2012, 18–19).

[19] E.g. in the inscription in wood dated 914: *isep wa-bna*, "he took care and built" (Luk Van Rompay's translation; Leroy 1974, 154 translated "s'est occupé de faire batir"; in Brock 2012, 18 one finds "was concerned to build").

[20] The word is often used for wall-paintings, see Godron 1983, 1-52, and idem 1990, 43-48; see also the note by Drescher 1976, 3-4. We thank Jacques van der Vliet for providing these references.

thing like "represented" or "reproduced"[21] – "the members of their [holy] body". The unnamed "they" undoubtedly refers to the four military saints identified in the painting. The expression "members of their body", although it should naturally be considered a euphemism for human figures painted on the wall, seems a little bizarre in the given context. However, there seems to be a plausible explanation for its use here. As we believe, the wooden reliquary discussed above, adorned with the figures of the same saints as those represented on the wall, was most probably originally displayed and venerated in this very space. Thus, should this be the case, the phrase could be treated literally as a reference to the actual body parts of the saints enclosed in the box.[22]

2.3. A new Syriac inscription (L. Van Rompay)[23]

This inscription was uncovered in September 2022. It is located on the right side in the intrados between the nave and the khurus.

The badly damaged text originally must have filled 11 lines, justified on both sides. If the traces of ink to the left of the beginning of the first line belong to the same inscription,

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[21] We again thank Jacques van der Vliet for suggesting this interpretation.

[22] This would not be the first time for an author of an inscription in Deir al-Surian to make use of such a play on words: see the Coptic funerary inscription of abbot Makari (Innemée, Ochała, and Van Rompay 2016, 165–71), where the protagonist is called ⲡⲙⲁⲓⲁⲧⲩ ⲁⲗⲏⲑ[ⲱ]ⲥ ⲕⲁⲧⲁ ⲧ̀ⲉ́ⲣⲙ̀ⲏⲛ̀ⲓ́ⲁ ⲙ̀ⲡⲉⲭⲣⲁⲛ, "the truly blessed, according to the translation of his name", a clear reference to the etymology of the name Makari (from the Greek μακάριος, "blessed").

[23] I want to acknowledge the helpful discussions on this inscription with Aaron Butts (University of Hamburg).

they would create an additional line. It is unlikely, however, that this additional line had the same amount of writing as the other lines. The only identifiable letter of this additional line is *mim* (ܡ), perhaps as part of the phrase *b-šem* (ܒܫܡ) "in the name of", which may be the beginning of an introductory formula.[24]

The script is early Serto,[25] with typical Serto forms for *waw*, *alaph*, *dalath*, *resh*, *taw*, and *ṭeth*. The letters *taw* and *ṭeth* are joined to the preceding letter on the top of the letter rather than on the base line. This way of joining, unknown in Estrangela, is typical of Serto. Only the angularity of some letters and the form of the letter *shin* (ܫ) remind one of earlier Estrangela. The Serto ligature *alaph+lamadh* occurs in line 3 (ܐܠ) and probably in line 10 (ܐܠ). The Serto ligature *lamadh+alaph* does not seem to be attested (line 5: ܠܐ rather than ܠ). The final *lamadh* probably does not have a second shaft (line 8 – the reading is not certain). The script would fit in the ninth or the tenth century. Even though it is not very regular and a bit uneven, it betrays the hand of an experienced writer, who may have found it more challenging to write on the plaster of a wall than on parchment. The ink is black and thick.

Very little of this inscription can be read. Lines 3 and 8 are the only ones to offer small portions of coherent text. Only iso-

[24] This introductory piece is not counted as a separate line in the edition below.

[25] For the periodization and the terminology of the Syriac script, see Brock and Van Rompay 2014, xxi-xxii.

lated letters and parts of words can be seen on the remaining lines.[26]

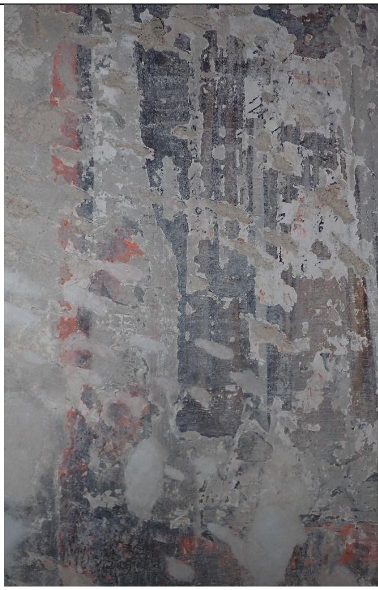

Fig. 5 (September 2022)

Fig. 5 (Enhanced)

Syriac text

[ܒܫ]ܢ] ... ؟ ... [

] . . . . [ܐܐ 1

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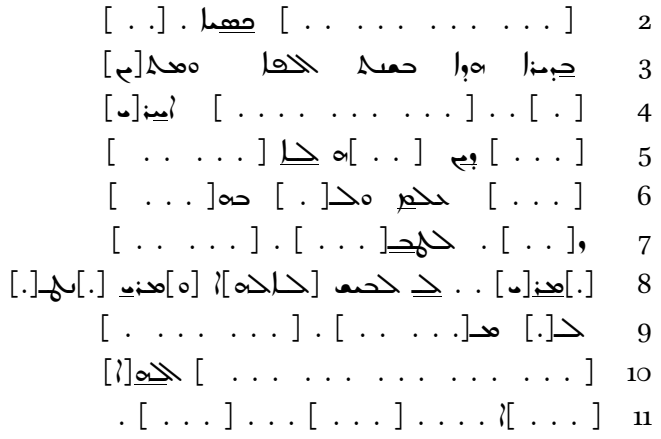
[26] Our reading of the text is based on two photographs: one was made in September 2022; the other, enhanced photograph dates from November 2022. Both photographs are included in this paper. In the edition and translation, square brackets are used for text that is missing; dots outside the brackets for traces of letters that cannot be identified; and underlining for uncertain readings. Text between square brackets is reconstructed on the basis of context and/or parallel inscriptions.



Translation

[In the na]me of [... ? ...]

1 [... ...]

2 [... ... ...] hidden [...]

3 in this monastery in the year one thousand and two hundred

4 [... ... ...] second

5 [...] however [...] not [... ... ...]

6 [... ...] eternity and [.] in [...]

7 [...] for the good [... ... ...]

8 [.] Mar [...]l the [God-]clad [and] Mar [.]nat[.]

9 [... ...]

10 [... ... ...] God

11 [... ...]

Three pieces of information help us understand the general outline of the message that is being conveyed: 1) it is about

"this monastery" (line 3), i.e., Deir al-Surian; 2) there is a date (line 3 and possibly 4); 3) the title "God-clad" occurs, which usually is used for patriarchs; the names of two patriarchs may have been present. Each of these topics require further explanation.

"This monastery"

The same expression occurs in other inscriptions in Deir al-Surian. One example is the inscription reporting on the building of the monastery in 818/9,[27] where "this monastery" (line 9 – the phrase is followed by the official name of the monastery) is the object of the building activities. Another example is the inscription reporting on the arrival of the patriarchal envoys in 1166/7, who "entered into this monastery" (line 2) carrying the synodical letter from the Syriac-Orthodox patriarch to Egypt.[28] These are official inscriptions created on behalf of the monastic authorities or the monastic community as a whole. The same official status may perhaps be attributed to our new inscription, even though it remains unknown whether reference is made here to some construction activity or to an event of a different nature.

The date

In the second half of line 3, we propose the reading "in the year one thousand and two hundred". Following "one thousand," the letters *waw* and *mim* can be read with confidence. This clarity reduces the options for the hundreds to "one hundred"

[27] Van Rompay and Innemée, 2020-2022, Inscription A.
[28] *Ibid.*, Inscription C.

(ܘܡܐܐ) and "two hundred" (ܘܡܬܝܢ),[29] as the higher numbers (three hundred and higher) require the numeral to precede the hundred (as in English). The letter following *mim* most likely is *taw*, as the connection between *mim* and the top of *taw* is very similar to the way *nun* and *taw* are joined together in ܒܫܢܬ "in the year" on the same line. Additionally, the ink below (what probably is) *taw*, may be part of the final *nun*, thus lending support to the reading ܘܡܬܝܢ "two hundred". The year 1200 of the Seleucid era (A.Gr.) is 888/9 CE.

Whether this is the full date or only part of it remains uncertain. As a matter of fact, the date may continue on line 4, with the decade and the single digit. Even though there is residue of ink just above the damaged spot that covers most of line 4, it is impossible to decide whether this is the continuation of the date or a subsequent part of the inscription.[30]

Towards the end of line 4, a few letters are visible, which at first sight may be read as ܐܝܪ, i.e., the month of Iyar, the equivalent of our month of May. Because the *yudh* is not clear, however, and there is additional room for a letter or two at the end of the line, it is preferable to read ܐܚܪ[ܝ]ܐ or ܐܚܪ[ܝ]ܬܐ "last,

[29] The standard spelling is ܡܐܬܝܢ, but the form ܡܬܝܢ is not uncommon, see Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, col. 1984. With the construct of "year," the expression ܫܢܬ ܐܠܦܐ ܘܡܬܝܢ "the year one thousand and two hundred" frequently occurs in the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* (see Beth Mardutho, *Simtho*). The Maqari inscription, dated A.Gr. 1200, uses ܒܫܢܬ ܐܠܦ ܘܡܬܝܢ (line 7), see Innemée, Ochała, Van Rompay 2015, 160 and 188.

[30] One might speculate that if indeed this is part of the date, the first trace of writing may be the upper part of *alaph* – a tall letter, extending above the main line – and the second the upper part of ʿ*ayn*. This would allow us to propose the reading ܐ[ܪܒ]ܥ[ܝܢ] "forty"(the year 1240 of the Seleucid era is 928/9 CE – the final digit may or may not have been present). There is, however, no firm ground for this proposal.

or second" which is used as part of the names of the months of ܬܫܪܝ ܩܕܡܝܐ (November) and ܟܢܘܢ ܩܕܡܝܐ (January). Neither of these two readings can be ruled out.

The patriarchs

Almost nothing can be read in lines 5, 6, and 7. In the middle of line 8, the participle ܠܒܫ "clothed" catches the eye. In the construct state, followed by ܐܠܗܐ, this is often used as an honorific title for patriarchs, ܠܒܫ ܐܠܗܐ "God-clad".[31] Even though in our inscription the participle is followed by a damaged spot and, as a result, the second component of the expression cannot be read, the presence of a final *alaph* lends support to the possibility that the full reading ܠܒܫ [ܐܠܗܐ] "God-clad" originally was written. This expression is followed by ܡܪܢ, i.e., Mar, "Sir" or "Monsignor," which is evidence that a patriarch's name was once written here. Only an initial or medial *nun* of the name can be seen, followed by an upward stroke, which may be the beginning of *lamadh*, or the connecting stroke of a *ṭeth* or a *taw*.

The possibility cannot be ruled out that another name was written at the beginning of line 8, where, with some difficulty, the title ܡ[ܪܢ], Mar, may be read, probably followed by a proper name ending with *lamadh*. The presence of the names of two patriarchs would be in agreement with the common practice, found in inscriptions and manuscript colophons related to Deir al-Surian, of mentioning two patriarchs, the Egyptian ("of Egypt" or "of Alexandria") and the Syrian ("of Syria" or "of Antioch"), whereby throughout the ninth and tenth

[31] See, e.g., Van Rompay and Innemée, 2020-2022, Inscription A, line 11.

centuries the former usually is mentioned before the latter.[32] If there ever was any geographical indication in our inscription, it has disappeared.

In the Coptic-Orthodox Church, Michael III (Khael or Khayil) was patriarch between 880 and 907 CE.[33] He was succeeded by Patriarch Gabriel (909-920 CE).[34] Neither of them has left traces in the Syriac historiographical tradition. In the Christian-Arabic and Ethiopic traditions, however, a synodical letter by the Syriac-Orthodox Patriarch Theodosios (887-896) to his Coptic counterpart Michael III is preserved[35] (since Theodosios took office seven years after Michael's ordination, this cannot have been sent at the beginning of Michael's tenure, as would have been the usual practice). Since both Michael III and Gabriel have names that end in *lamadh* in Syriac, either of them could fill the place in line 8 of our inscription, where indeed the name of the Coptic patriarch is expected.

In the year 1200 A.Gr. (888/9 CE), Theodosios was the patriarch of the Syriac-Orthodox Church (887-896).[36] According to the *Chronicle* of Michael Rabo, he was ordained in Amid in the month Shebaṭ of the year 1198, which is February 887 CE. With his ordination there came an end to a four-year vacancy, during which the bishops had been unable to agree on a can-

[32] Van Rompay 2004, 62.

[33] See Atiya, ʿAbd al-Masīḥ, KHS.-Burmester 1948, 103-115.

[34] *Ibid.*, 116-118.

[35] It is preserved in the Arabic collection known as *Kitāb iʿtirāf al-ʾabāʾ* "Book of the Confession of the Fathers"; see Graf 1937, 395; Id. 1944, 443-444. The Arabic collection was translated into Geʿez (*Hāymānota Abaw* "Faith of the Fathers); see Zotenberg 1877, 120b, no. 37. Both the Arabic and the Ethiopic text remain unedited.

[36] On Patriarch Theodosios, see Van Rompay 2011, 406-407.

didate. The vacancy began after the death of Patriarch Ignatios, whose short tenure covered the period from Ḥeziran of the year 1189 (June 878 CE) to his death in Adar of the year 1194 (March 883 CE).[37] We cannot rule out the possibility that the name of the Syriac patriarch in our inscription is Ignatios (Syriac: [ܐܗ]ܢܛ[ܝ]).[38] This name would, however, create a chronological gap of a bit more than five years between the death of Ignatios (March 883) and the earliest possible date of our inscription (October 888). Even though the four-year vacancy would somewhat justify the continued use of the deceased patriarch's name beyond his death, that still would leave us with more than one year since the ordination of Theodosios (February 887).

Whether our predicament can be reduced to a chronological problem or whether it is due to the scarcity of sources available for this period remains unknown. Even if we take the most cautious approach, the date of 1200 A.Gr. (or rather: 12[...]) still stands, allowing a date for our inscription between 888/889 and 987/988 CE.[39] The script of the inscription would not militate against a date in the earlier half of this period.

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[37] Ed. Ibrahim 2009, 550c-552c; French translation: Chabot 1905/2008, 119-120.

[38] For the different spellings of the Syriac name, see Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, 28-29.

[39] The Coptic patriarchs during this period are: Michael III (880-907), Gabriel (909-920), Cosmas III (921-933), Macarios I (933-953), Theophanes (953-956), Menas II (956-974), Afraham (975-978), and Philotheos (979-1003). The Syriac patriarchs are (following Ignatios): Theodosios (887-896), Dionysios II (896-909), Yuḥanon IV (910-922), Basilios (923-935), Yuḥanon V (936-953), Iwannis/Yuḥanon VI (954-957), Dionysios III (958-961), Abrohom (962-963), Yuḥanon VI (965-986), and Athanasios V (987-1002/3).

3. CHRONOLOGY OF THE BUILDING PHASES AND PAINTED DECORATION (K.C. INNEMÉE)

3.1. The first phase: the seventh century

The church must have been built around the middle of the seventh century, under the patriarchate of Benjamin I.[40] After the building was completed, the interior was plastered and whitewashed. Soon afterward, almost all over the church decorative patterns were applied, consisting of geometrical decorations and crosses in red, yellow, and orange, most of them of the so-called Maltese model.[41] A plinth zone of approximately 40 cm in height painted in red was applied throughout the church on the lower parts of the walls. It is a kind of basic decoration that monks probably made and can also be found in hermitages in various parts of Egypt.

3.2. The second phase: the eighth and ninth centuries

The next phase of decoration consisted of a painted dado-zone, 2 meters high, which was applied on almost all walls of the church. Only in the *khurus*, on the narrow strips of the western wall flanking the doorway to the nave, this dado was apparently absent. The decoration consists of painted columns supporting an architrave with a triangular pattern that seems to imitate white marble and red porphyry inlay. Between the columns, there are painted imitations of white marble panelling. Such imitations of *opus sectile* are quite common in late antiquity and can be found in house decorations, tombs, and

[40] Grossmann 2002, 501-02

[41] Although no chemical analyses have been done so far, it is most likely that the pigments used are red and yellow ochre.

churches.[42] An example of such marble imitation in a church not remote in time and space from Deir al-Surian was found in Karm al-Ahbariya, a sixth-century church just north of Abu Mena.[43] The interior figurative paintings were gradually added to this basic decoration in the upper zones. This process must have covered a period of more than a century. The first paintings of saints were added in the *khurus*, and only afterward, the upper walls of the nave were decorated. One of the last series of paintings added on this layer may have been the ones dedicated to the memory of Abbot Maqari, made in or shortly after 889.[44] They occupy the eastern part of the southern side-aisle, which was turned into what looks like a commemorative chapel.

Until recently it was only an estimation that the dado-painting and the layer of whitewash on which it was applied could date back to around 700. The Greek commemorative inscription dated to 714 now gives a clear indication. The layer of whitewash on which the text is written is relatively clean. Given the fact that the inscription is next to the entrance of the church, a place where one can expect wear, tear, and grime from the hands of people moving in and out, the conclusion can be drawn that it was exposed for a relatively short period, after which the dado covered it. In other words, it seems safe to date the dado to shortly after 714. In the course of the eighth century the upper parts of the walls would be gradually decorated with representations of saints painted in the encaustic technique and finally the Christological/Mariological cycle of

[42] Rostovtzeff 1919, pl. VIII; Deichmann 1983, 325-26.
[43] Witte-Orr 2010, 89-94.
[44] Innemée, Ochała, Van Rompay 2015.

paintings would be painted in the apse and the three semi-domes.[45]

3.3. The third phase: renovations in the ninth and tenth centuries

It is difficult to pinpoint the moment of arrival of the first Syriac monks in the monastery; the first pieces of evidence date back to the second decade of the ninth century, when a group of "Brothers of Tikrit", who are named as Mattay, Abraham, Yawsep, Theodoros, and Yaʿqub, arrived in Egypt and are mentioned as being involved in the (re)building of the monastery. Two inscriptions on the church's walls refer to this restoration: one by Mattay and Yaʿqub on the northern wall of the northern side-aisle, and the other by Abraham and Theodoros on the southern wall of the central nave.[46] The necessity of restoring and enlarging the monastery is most likely a result of the raid of Bedouins on Sketis that must have taken place around 816.[47] There is, however, no evidence of significant damage to the church: the paintings from the seventh and eighth centuries that have been uncovered bear no traces of intentional damage or fire. Their state of preservation suggests that there was no need to launch a renovation of the interior of the church, while in the course of the ninth century additional paintings were made on the eighth-century plaster. The

[45] That the paintings in the semi-domes were made later than certain paintings on the upper walls of the church can be deduced from the drops of encaustic paint that were found on the paintings below the Epiphany scene in the northern semi-dome in the *khurus*.

[46] Innemée, Van Rompay 1998, 182-83; Van Rompay, Schmidt 2001; Van Rompay, Innemée 2020-2022, 110-19.

[47] White 1932, 298, 311.

best example of this is the paintings commemorating Abbot Maqari that were made in the southern side-aisle, where the upper walls were still blank, apart from a few inscriptions by visitors.

Maqari was succeeded as an abbot by his son Yuḥanon, the predecessor of Moses of Nisibis, who may have become abbot in or a few years after 906/7 and who is last mentioned in 943/4 (ms. London, Brit. Libr. Add. 14,525, f. 1v).[48] It was under his abbotship that considerable additions were made to the iconographical programme of the mural paintings in the church, and in 914 the sanctuary of the church was completely remodelled from an apse into a square domed building. The dated inscription on the precious wooden doors that separate the *khurus* from the sanctuary provides us with this date.[49] Parts of the walls that carried only decorative paintings, such as crosses and floral patterns, were plastered over and paintings were added that formed an extension of the eighth/ninth century iconographical programme. Such paintings were added on the upper walls of the *khurus*, on the upper walls of the central nave, and on the eastern wall of the northern side-aisle. The assumption that Moses commissioned the paintings is based on the presence of a Coptic inscription around the dome over the *khurus* that mentions "*papa* Moses the *hegoumenos* and *oikonomos*" and the inscription on the eastern wall of the northern side-aisle.[50] Neither of the two is dated precisely, so nothing more can be said than that the paintings

[48] Brock 2012.
[49] White 1933, 197, Leroy 1974, 154.
[50] Innemée 2001, 265.

associated with them date back to the decades between 914 and 944.

Fig. 6 Left intrados

On the eastern wall of the central nave, several additions were made, probably in the tenth century, by locally overplastering the seventh/eighth-century layer and adding several figures. In the upper part of the wall the fragments of the additions that have survived are too disconnected to identify the figures, but in the lower part, many paintings could be identified by their captions. Only part of these paintings have been uncovered so far, so it is too early for final conclusions, but it seems clear that several Syriac and Coptic patriarchs have been depicted. To the left of the doorway to the *khurus* there is a painting with the inscription ἄββα Ἰωσήφ.[51] To the right of this is the calligraphic text in Syriac that reads "Saintly Cyriacus, Patriarch of Antioch".[52] In the left intrados of the arch between the nave and the *khurus*, directly next to this calligraphy, there is a painting representing ἄββα Ἰάκκωβος (sic) (fig. 6).

The inscription, in which the apparently forgotten ω and β were added in white paint in a somewhat improvised way, is still clearly visible, while the figure of the father is covered by the wooden doorjamb of the door that separates the *khurus* from the nave. On the opposite side, in the right intrados, there is a figure that could not yet be identified and is equally covered by the right doorjamb. To the right, there is another figure, still covered by a later layer of plaster, but with an accompanying inscription that reads [ἄ]ββ[α] Δ[ι]ον[ύ]σιος. These three figures do not have the epithet ἅγιος and do not show a typically monastic outfit, as far as their costumes are

[51] There was a Syriac-Orthodox patriarch, Joseph who had a very short tenure: 790-792. But also a Coptic-Orthodox patriarch by that name: 831-849 (?).

[52] Innemée, Van Rompay 1998, 184, fig. 7.

visible, so they likely represent patriarchs, contemporary or from a recent past. Dionysius of Antioch (818-845) and Yaʿqub of Alexandria (819-830) are mentioned in the inscriptions of the Takritan brothers Mattay and Yaʿqub and of Abraham and Theodoros as those patriarchs who were in office during the restoration work that is commemorated by the texts.[53] Cyriacus (793-817) was the predecessor of Dionysius. In all likelihood, we are dealing not with contemporary representations of these patriarchs but with a list of portraits created approximately a century later. The difference in style and technique in these ʹportraitsʹ could mean that they were not made simultaneously. For instance, the calligraphy of Cyriacusʹ name may have been done at a relatively late moment as a substitute for a figurative representation for which there was not enough space available. On the second layer of plaster/whitewash (eighth century), on the right side of the intrados between nave and khurus, a fragmentary Syriac inscription can be distinguished, partly covered by the (yet unidentified) figure on the third layer.

The succession of phases as visible in this part of the church would mean that at least two changes in the appearance of the archway between nave and *khurus* took place within a relatively short period. After 888/9, a commemorative inscription in Syriac (see 2.3.) was written on the still blank plaster. At an unknown moment, the lower part of the eastern wall of the nave, including the intrados, was covered with a layer of whitewash to add paintings. This whitewash may have happened in the early tenth century, when under Moses of Nisibis, paintings were added in several parts of the church. In this

[53] Van Rompay, Innemée 2022, 113, 117-18

way, the inscription disappeared under the painting of a yet unknown figure. This painting, in turn, disappeared out of sight in 926, when the wooden doors commissioned by Moses were placed. The *terminus post quem* of 888/9 and the *terminus ante quem* of 926 between which apparently the paintings on the eastern wall were made, not only give us a valuable and reliable means of dating, but also an impression of how, during the first part of his abbacy, he ordered several embellishments to the interior of the church within a timespan of a few decades. The monumental doors to the sanctuary bear the date of 914,[54] but the additions of paintings in several parts of the church may have been done earlier. How much earlier remains challenging to say.

Among the other murals in the church commissioned by Moses, the paintings and the Coptic inscription (nr. 2 above) on the eastern wall of the northern side-aisle take a special place. They occupy the back wall of a niche that was until recently covered by an eighteenth-century *maqsura* (relic shrine) that contained the main relics of the church (fig. 7).[55]

[54] Leroy 1974, 154.

[55] The most important relics are now kept in a modern shrine in the northern part of the *khurus*.

Fig. 7 Eastern wall of northern side-aisle with *maqsura*

Until the eighteenth century it must have been the location of the much older relic shrine that was found by Walter Hauser

in the keep and is now in the museum of the monastery (fig. 8).[56]

Fig. 8 The relic shrine, now in the museum of the monastery

This wooden shrine with ivory inlay is most likely to be from the same workshop in which the doors between *khurus* and sanctuary and between the nave and *khurus* were made and can, therefore, be considered a contemporary work of art commissioned by Moses of Nisibis as well. It seems pretty likely that this shrine had its place where, in the eighteenth century, the *maqsura* was constructed, and evidence for this has recently come to light. The ivory inlay on the front of the shrine shows seven standing figures standing in an arcade of seven arches. Although most of the inlay has disappeared, the contours of the figures are still well recognisable, and six of the seven are identified by inlaid texts in Greek. In the middle, there is the Christ Emmanouel (Ἐμμανουήλ), with the Virgin Mary (ἡ ἁγια Μαρία) on his right side, figures that correspond to those in the central panels on the doors to the *khurus*. To

[56] White 1933, 194-95. Before this shrine was placed here, there may have been an even older shrine containing relics, judging from the number of dipinti of various kinds (including the inscription of Mattay and Yaʿqub from 816) on the adjacent wall.

the left of Christ, there is the figure of St John (ὁ ἅγιος Ἰωάννης; it is not clear whether it refers to the Baptist or the Evangelist). At the far left of the front, St Eustathios (Εὐστάθιος) has been depicted, and to his right, St Theodore (Θεώδορος). The hagiographical traditions concerning the several military saints with this latter name are complicated and intertwined, and it is unclear which one is meant here. The figure on the far right remains anonymous since only the words ὁ ἅγιος have been inlaid, and the name was omitted for an unknown reason. The contours of the lost ivory, however, show that it must have been a military saint with an oval shield in his left hand. Left of him there is a figure called ὁ ἅγιος Ἰάκοβος, also depicted as a military saint. Four saints are depicted on the wall in the niche where the shrine is supposed to have stood. In the upper part on the left, St Eustathios is shown hunting a stag over which a figure of Christ appears in a tondo or a fragment of a heavenly sphere.[57] As his counterpart to the right, a horseman attacks a snake with a human head curled on the ground below a ladder that leads to the same figure of Christ in the circle. Although there is no inscription visible that identifies this horseman, these particular details of the human-headed snake and the ladder can only point at the *Vita* of Theodoros Orientalis, where a vision of a heavenly ladder and a fight with Satan in the form of a snake with a human head are described.[58] In the

[57] There is no inscription that identifies the horseman, but the hunting scene with the appearance of Christ identifies the figure as Eustathios. According to his *Vita* he saw an appearance of Christ while hunting a stag, a legend similar to the western legend of St Hubert. *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca* 641, for reference to mss see
https://pinakes.irht.cnrs.fr/notices/oeuvre/15538/

[58] Nafroth 2017, 319-329. My thanks go to Stephen Emmel for this reference.

middle of the lower part of the wall, there must have been a panel or an icon that is no longer there, judging from the contours visible in the tenth-century plaster. On the seventh-century plaster where this panel must have been, what is visible now is a painting of the Virgin Galaktotrophousa, which could mean that the now missing panel or icon was also a representation of the Virgin. The inscription of Moses seems to refer to this now missing panel in the phrase "these portraits, which we have painted above this beautiful image", implying that the icon already existed at the time of Moses and that it was incorporated into the composition.

On either side of where the panel used to be, there is a standing figure of a military saint, depicted standing frontally, in a military outfit and holding an oval shield. A Coptic inscription identifies the left one as Jacob the Persian, and the right one (by a Greek or Coptic inscription) as St Leontios. This Leontios should be Leontios of Tripoli, a first-century Roman soldier who was martyred for his faith and popular in the region of Antioch. The contours of the figures and the detail that they are holding oval shields makes them look similar to the contours of the two military saints on the far right on the relic chest: ὁ ἅγιος Ἰάκοβος and the anonymous ὁ ἅγιος. Thus, considering the apparent parallelism of the wall paintings and the reliquary, it is nearly certain that the former should be identified with St James the Persian and reasonably probable that the latter is St Leontios.

Fig. 9 Eastern wall of the northern side-aisle, reconstruction of the original situation.

The inscription in the two text panels between the paintings provides a link between the paintings and the reliquary and shows undisputedly that Moses of Nisibis had a role in com-

missioning both. The saints whose relics were kept in the shrine were depicted in both the paintings and the ivory inlay, and these parallel representations support their iconographic identification. The sentence "these portraits, which we have painted above this beautiful image, have received the members of their [holy] body" alludes to both the relics and the wall paintings. It is, therefore, possible to make a virtual reconstruction of the situation as it must have existed in the tenth century (fig. 9). In all likelihood, the refurbishing of this corner of the church took place in the period before 926/7, after which Moses was absent from the monastery for a considerable time.[59]

3.4. Late paintings

Approximately three centuries later, the interior of the church underwent a thorough renovation: the wooden roofs over the side-aisles and return aisle were replaced by brick vaults, blocked windows that had taken the shape of niches were now completely walled up, and the total interior was covered by a fresh layer of plaster that was a few millimetres thick in some places, but several centimetres in some other. New paintings were made throughout the church. The exact date of this operation is unknown, and based on the style of the paintings, an estimation of the first half of the thirteenth century has been made.[60] So far, no textual evidence has been found that would support a more precise dating.

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[59] Brock 2012, 15.

[60] The paintings are in style comparable to thirteenth-century paintings, such as in St Anthony's monastery and Deir al-Baramus, but also to illustrations in manuscripts from the first half of the thirteenth century; Hunt 1985.

The final refurbishment of the church can be dated in a relatively precise way. According to a marginal note in a manuscript from the monastery's library, the church was reconsecrated in 1782,[61] and it seems likely that this was done after a critical renovation had been finished. It appears now that this renovation was done in two main phases, of which the last phase was finished in 1782. Before the renovation, all the woodwork in the church was in bad condition, affected by termites. In addition, in the western part of the church, a fire must have caused serious damage to the wooden lintels over the entrance, the columns and piers, and the roof. The charred and burned remains of these wooden elements have been found under the eighteenth-century plaster. It seems that the church's restoration project was interrupted for some time and resumed. These phases are shown by the two superimposed layers of eighteenth-century plaster, the first one of which must have been exposed for only a short period[62] and may date back to the middle of the eighteenth century or slightly later. In the meantime, the church was apparently not in use. The French naturalist Charles Sonnini de Manoncourt visited the monastery in 1775, and concerning the church he writes:

> "The ancient Syrian chapel still remains. It is tolerably handsome, and adorned with sculptures, and paintings in fresco. On one of the pillars the names of

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The first half of the thirteenth century must have been a period of prosperity for the monastery; White 1932, 390-91; Van Rompay 2008, 748-49.

[61] Oral information from Father (meanwhile bishop) Martyros.

[62] A few dipinti by visitors in Syriac have been found on this temporarily exposed layer of plaster, indicating that the church was accessible during the interruption of the restoration work.

> several Europeans are cut, but those of the French travellers, Baron and Granger, are the only ones I knew. The Cophts do not make use of this chapel; but have built another, after their own fashion, that is, in the form of a cross."[63]

This Coptic church he mentions is apparently the so-called Church of the Cave, the second church in the monastery. In his description, Sonnini mentions the wall paintings in the Syrian church, from which we can conclude that they were apparently not yet covered with the final layer of plaster. The graffiti of European travellers that he mentions are not visible nowadays, but they may be waiting to be uncovered under the plaster on the masonry piers that are still covered by the final layer of plaster. All this shows that in 1775, the final layer of plaster had not yet been applied.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The graffiti and dipinti on the walls of the church of the Holy Virgin in Deir al-Surian (as in so many other monuments), despite their difference in language and character, have in common that they mark moments in time that connect persons and events with the building. The reasons and the occasions for leaving an inscription behind can vary and range from the humble and personal text of a visitor who commemorates his visit in the form of a prayer to the announcement or commemoration of events that are deemed of interest for all who use or visit the church. These texts can be read as a diary of events connected with the church and its congregation. As in

[63] Sonnini 1799, 181.

an archaeological stratigraphy, the layers of plaster and whitewash on the walls of the church could be compared to the folios of a codex, and 'reading' the pages reveals the history of the building and its community. As in a damaged manuscript, these pages are not intact anymore, and many of the events recorded are without a date. The joint efforts of conservators, epigraphists, and art historians can help put a chronological order in shreds of information that tell the history of a church building. The recent finds of (dated) inscriptions in Deir al-Surian have underscored once more the importance of Moses of Nisibis as a church patron. Furthermore, they have narrowed down the number of intervals within which artistic additions to the church have been made.

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