# A SYRIAC CHURCH INSCRIPTION
# FROM 504 CE *

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The subject of this article is a mosaic bearing an unusually long Syriac inscription. The mosaic, which reportedly measures approximately 60 by 304 cm.,[1] was brought to New York in three pieces[2] by a Lebanese antiquities dealer (who claimed it had been in a private Lebanese collection for fifty years) and sold to another dealer in 1985. The second dealer put it up for auction at Sotheby's on 29 May 1987, where it was sold for $1500 to a third dealer. In 1988, it was sold to a fourth dealer, who donated it to Saint Mark's Syrian Orthodox Cathedral in Hackensack, NJ. For the moment, it is being kept in Lodi, New Jersey, in the home of Archbishop Mar Athanasius Y. Samuel, who is well known to the scholarly world as the original owner of the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran Cave 1.[3] The text can be read as follows:

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|---|---|
| 1. bšnt | In the year |
| 2. tmnm' | eight hundred |
| 3. wḥmš | and fif- |
| 4. 'sr' | teen |
| 5. byrḥ | in the month |
| 6. 'lwl | of September, |
| 7. 'štlm | this |
| 8. byt' | house |
| 9. hn' | was completed |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 10. | [    ]r' | |
| 11. | 'lh' | God |
| 12. | n'bd | may he grant |
| 13. | šynh | his tranquility |
| 14. | wšlmh | and his peace |
| 15. | b'dïh | in his churches |
| 16. | wb'dyrth | and in his monasteries |
| 17. | wntyl | and may he give |
| 18. | pwr'n' | good payment |
| 19. | ṭb' lkl | to everyone |
| 20. | mn d'ml | who laboured |
| 21. | wld'wšṭ | and to him who stretched forth |
| 22. | 'yd' | a hand |
| 23. | mṭwl | for |
| 24. | mrn wnh' | our Lord. And may |
| 25. | byt' hn' | this house be |
| 26. | lnyḥh | pleasing |
| 27. | d'lh' 'myn | to God. Amen.[4] |

*Palaeography* – For the most part, our mosaic exhibits standard old Estrangela letter-forms (including unconnected *semkath*), but there are some exceptions. The final *'ālaf* of *hn'* in l. 25 and *'lh'* in l. 27 and the *mīm* of *'myn* in l. 27 are written as curved vertical strokes, forms clearly derived from the cursive script of the time.

Sixth-century examples of cursive *'ālaf* have been known since the early days of Syriac palaeography. Already in 1862, Land reproduced a few lines of the colophon (fol. 94a) of British Museum Add. MS. 14542, dated 509 CE,[5] in order to show that, by the sixth century, Syriac had developed a minuscule script with its own characteristic letter-forms, among them '𐎗 expressed at first by an angle, then by a stroke'.[6] Land gives only a vague reference to the fourth line of his specimen (= the first line of the note written in minute characters),[7] but there can be little doubt that he was focusing on the two occurrences of *'ālaf* in the first word (*'n'*) and the two in the third word (*'mry'* for *'mdy'*). Examination of

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[4] I am indebted to Prof. S. Morag for pointing out, at the beginning of my work on this inscription, that 'Amen' would be expected as the concluding word.

[5] J. P. N. Land, *Anecdota Syriaca* (Leiden 1862), 1, plate V.11.

[6] *Ibid.*, 73.

[7] *Ibid.*, 71.

Wright's facsimile of the entire colophon[8] reveals that there are two additional examples (col. b, last line of minute characters, last word: *w'myn*; col. a, third line from bottom, third word: *tlt'*).

Three of the six examples are in non-final position; they are connected at the left. The three examples in word-final position have the appearance of a backwards L balanced on its point. They differ from the ones in our inscription in that (a) their long down-stoke is a straight line (tilted to the right) rather than an arc (with its top and bottom curved to the left), (b) they have a tail at right angles to the bottom of the down-stroke, and (c) they do not descend below the base line.

In 1907, Pognon called attention to the formation of *'ālaf* in an inscription from Khirbet Hasan dated 507-508 CE: 'Bien qu'elle soit du commencement du VIe siècle, quelques ܪ finaux ont la forme d'un trait vertical, et je crois qu'elle est écrite dans l'alphabet cursif dont on se servait à cette époque...'[9]

Additional examples of cursive *'ālaf* were pointed out by Littmann in undated graffiti which he published in 1904 and 1934 and in an inscription dated 698 CE.[10]

In 1935, Torrey published a bill of sale from Edessa dated 243 CE which was discovered in the ruins of Dura-Europos.[11] He noted that the script exhibited 'a number of standing peculiarities, mostly incidental to a rapid cursive'.[12] Torrey's discussion of these peculiarities includes the following:

*Ālaf*, when written as a single upright line, is all but invariably inclined or curved (or bent, see the scribe's signature) to the right, and is normally connected on the left, even with a following word when it is a final letter. As final, it appears in a number of quite distinct forms, as may be seen.[13]

[8] W. Wright, *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum*, part III (London 1872), plate IV.

[9] H. Pognon, *Inscriptions sémitiques de la Syrie, de la Mésopotamie, et de la région de Mossoul* (Paris 1907), 144; cf. plate XXXIII.

[10] E. Littmann, *Publications of an American Archaeological Expedition to Syria in 1899-1900*, part IV (*Semitic Inscriptions*) (New York 1904), 13-14, 39-40; id., *Syria: Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria in 1904-5 and 1909*, division IV (*Semitic Inscriptions*), section B (Leiden 1934), 26-27, 34.

[11] C. C. Torrey, 'A Syriac Parchment from Edessa of the Year 243 A.D.', *Zeitschrift für Semitistik* 10 (1935) 33-45.

[12] *Ibid.*, 34.

[13] *Ibid.*, 35. The photographs published by Torrey are not as sharp as

Torrey's 'inclined' *'ālaf* (e.g. l. 2, second word: *bhpty'*; l. 3, fourth and fifth words: *bmnyn' qdmy'*; l. 4, fourth word: *qlwny'*) resembles cursive *'ālaf* in the colophon from 509 and exhibits the same three differences from cursive *'ālaf* in our inscription as the latter. Torrey's 'curved' *'ālaf* (e.g. l. 1, second word: *d'wṭqrṭwr*; fifth word: *'nṭwnyws*; last word: *'wṭwks*; etc.) differs even more strongly from cursive *'ālaf* in our inscription, inasmuch as it curves in the opposite direction.

In view of the above, it is somewhat disconcerting to find Hatch writing in 1946: 'The Serṭâ form of ), which is sometimes straight and sometimes curved, made its appearance in the second quarter of the eighth century with the Serṭâ style of writing'.[14] However, this statement must be interpreted in the light of a statement four pages earlier: '[The Serṭâ script] was derived directly from the minuscule hand mentioned above, which, as we have seen, was employed for ordinary purposes as early as the sixth century'.[15] Hatch was quite familiar with Add. 14542 (a specimen of which is included in his book)[16] and with Land's discussion of the minuscule script used in its colophon.[17] His failure to include any mention of the minuscule script in his 'Observations on the Forms of Certain Letters'[18] is perhaps to be attributed, in part, to a bias in favour of the elegant formal scripts.

The other cursive letter-form exhibited by our inscription – the *mīm* of the concluding 'Amen' – also has parallels in other early texts. Torrey writes that, in the bill of sale from Edessa, '*mīm* has all the Estrangela forms, but most commonly has the appearance of a reversed *epsilon*, the natural result of rapid writing'.[19] Land points to a *mīm* composed of 'one or two very simple strokes' as being characteristic of the minuscule script,[20] citing the colophon from 509, where there are eleven occurren-

those published by C. B. Welles, R. O. Fink, and J. F. Gilliam in *The Excavations at Dura Europos: Final Report V*, part I (*The Parchments and Papyri*) (New Haven 1959), plates LXIX, LXXI and J. Naveh in *Early History of the Alphabet* (Jerusalem 1982), plate 19A.

[14] W. H. P. Hatch, *An Album of Dated Syriac Manuscripts* (Boston 1946), 31.

[15] *Ibid.*, 27.

[16] *Ibid.*, plate VII.

[17] *Ibid.*, 26, fn. 7.

[18] *Ibid.*, 30-40.

[19] 'Parchment', 36.

[20] *Anecdota*, 73

ces (all of them in the note written in minute characters), and a prayer at the end of the colophon of Brit. Mus. Add. MS. 17157, dated 565 CE, which, according to Wright's transcription,[21] contains nine occurrences. The examples of cursive *mīm* in the colophon from 509 resemble a backwards *epsilon* even more strongly than do those in the bill of sale. In the colophon, the clockwise rotation of cursive *mīm* has proceeded a full ninety degrees,[22] and the vestigial stroke which, prior to the rotation, was its left leg has coalesced with the horizontal connecting line; in the bill of sale, this is frequently not the case.

In the bill of sale and in the colophon, cursive *mīm* is quite different from cursive *'ālaf*, as can be seen by examining words containing both (e.g. bill of sale, l. 3, first word: *ḥmšm"*; fourth and fifth words: *bmnyn' qdmy'*; colophon, first line of minute characters, third word: *'mry'* for *'mdy'*; last line of minute characters, last word: *w'myn*). In these documents, cursive *'ālaf* stands on the base line and towers high above it, while cursive *mīm*, a smaller letter, straddles the base line, part above and part below. Moreover, the top of the cursive *'ālaf* leans or curves to the right, while the top (and the bottom) of the cursive *mīm* curves to the left. In our inscription, on the other hand, the two cursive forms would be difficult to distinguish were it not for the horizontal connecting line which intersects the *mīm* above its midpoint.

Wright states that the cursive form of *mīm* 'is not uncommon in manuscripts of various ages',[23] but Hatch omits any mention of it in his discussion of *mīm*,[24] even though he reproduces it in his discussion of Add. 14542.[25] Hatch was simply not interested in this form, presumably because of its non-normative character. Unlike cursive *'ālaf*, cursive *mīm* never became an accepted part of the Serṭā script or any of the other standard scripts which Hatch considered worthy of study.

It should be pointed out that all of the cursive letter-forms in

[21] *Catalogue*, part II, 505.
[22] For the initial stages of this rotation in the first two centuries CE, see A. Maricq, 'La plus ancienne inscription syriaque: celle de Birecik', *Syria* 39 (1962), 93-4.
[23] *Catalogue*, part II; cf. also part III, xxx.
[24] *Album*, 33-4.
[25] *Ibid.*, 58, fn. 3.

our inscription come at the end. The most likely explanation is that the scribe used these narrow allographs as a space-saving device. Thus, the scribe used a cursive *'ālaf* at the end of l. 25, because, with only three lines left to write five words, he needed to squeeze *byt' hn'* into one line; contrast *byt' hn'* spread out over two lines in ll. 8-9. The need for saving space is even more obvious in l. 27, the last line of the inscription. Even with the use of two cursive letter-forms, the signs in that line are very crowded. This explanation seems more plausible than the assumption that the scribe simply became careless at the end, slipping into the free cursive used in everyday writing.

*Orthography and Phonology* – The contraction of *tmnm"* 'eight hundred' to *tmnm'* was previously known from the Zebed trilingual (512 CE).[26] The form *m'* is also found in later Syriac and Christian Palestinian inscriptions, in Mandaic, and (alongside *mh*) in the Jewish Aramaic tombstone inscriptions from Zoar (fifth century CE); the form *mh* is found already in the El-Mal dedicatory inscription (7-6 BCE).[27] All of these spellings agree with the Syriac vocalization *mā*, which must have developed from $*m^{e}$*'ā*,[28] just as the Hebrew realization *mātayim* must have developed from $*m^{e}$*'ātayim*.[29]

*Syntax* – The construction *lkl mn d-... wld-...* is a stylistic variant of *lkl mn d-... wlmn d-...*, in which the second *mn* is deleted but the second *l-* is not. The deletion of the preposition would have yielded *lkl mn d'ml wd'wšt 'yd'* 'to everyone who laboured and who stretched forth a hand', suggesting, perhaps, that the blessing was limited to those who contributed *both* physical labour *and* other (financial?) assistance. By retaining the second *l-*, the author has made it clear that the blessing was

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[26] E. Sachau, 'Zur Trilinguis Zebedaea', *ZDMG* 36 (1882), 345.

[27] Pognon, *Inscriptions*, nos. 19, 34; J.-B. Chabot, 'Inscriptions syriaques de Bennaouï', *Syria* 10 (1929), 256; K. Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte vom Toten Meer* (Göttingen 1984), 619, s.v. *m'h*; J. Naveh, 'An Aramaic Inscription from El-Mal – A Survival of the "Seleucid-Aramaic" Script', *IEJ* 25 (1975), 118; id., 'Another Jewish Aramaic Tombstone from Zoar', *HUCA* 56 (1985), 108-9; id., 'The Fifth Jewish Aramaic Tombstone from Zoar', *Liber Annuus* 37 (1987) 369-70.

[28] Cf. Beyer, *Texte*, 411.

[29] P. Joüon, *Grammaire de l'hébreu biblique* (Rome 1947), 66.

given to two distinct groups, each of which had contributed a single type of assistance.

*Historical background* – Our inscription commemorates the completion of a building in the fall of 504 CE, probably a church judging from l. 15. We know of a number of other building projects from around this time, primarily in Edessa and Amid. In 504-505 CE, Bishop Peter of Edessa received money from the Byzantine emperor Anastasius and his minister Urbicius to repair part of the city wall and to build a new church.[30] At least some of the monasteries and churches around Edessa which were destroyed during the campaign of the Persian King Kawad in the fall of 503 CE must have been rebuilt or replaced shortly afterwards, just as the convent of John Urtaya at Amid, razed by Kawad in the fall of 502 CE, was rebuilt on a smaller scale after the city was recovered by the Byzantines two or three years later.[31]

Was the church of our inscription built as a replacement for one destroyed by Kawad? In view of our current ignorance concerning the provenance of the inscription, no convincing answer to this question can be given. All we can do is point to two hints that the inscription may come from the area of Kawad's campaign.

First of all, the closest parallel to our inscription which we have been able to find comes from Edessa.[32] Like ours, it begins with a cross and a statement of the month and year (805 SE) in which the structure (a burial cave) was completed (*'štlm* rather than *'štkll*, *'tgmr*, *'štmly*, *'tbny*, or *'ttqn*), and it ends with 'Amen'.

Secondly, the inclusion of a prayer for peace may have been motivated, in part, by the memory of Kawad's bloody campaign the year before. The phrase used is *šyn' wšlm'* 'tranquility and peace'. It is interesting to note that almost the same binomial – *šyn' wšly'* 'tranquility and quiet' (cf. also *šlm'* 'peace' at the end of the sentence) – is applied to the period following Kawad's campaign by John of Ephesus.[33]

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[30] J. B. Segal, *Edessa, 'The Blessed City'* (Oxford 1970), 129, 185.
[31] John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* (E. W. Brooks, ed.), 217-21.
[32] E. Sachau, 'Edessenische Inschriften', *ZDMG* 36 (1882), 159-60.
[33] *Lives*, 221, ll. 6 and 8.

This hypothesis presupposes that our church took only one year to build. This does not seem unreasonable, despite the fact that the construction of a church at Baṣufan in the previous decade had dragged on for four years, according to the inscription in its wall.[34]

It is striking that our inscription is dated September, 504 CE. Precisely twelve months before, in September, 503 CE, Kawad had given up his brief siege of Edessa, sparing its inhabitants the horrible slaughter he had wreaked on Amid.[35] This retreat was seen by some as the fulfilment of a promise made by Jesus in one version of the legendary Abgar letter that the city would never be captured by its enemies.[36] It is not impossible that the completion of our church was deliberately timed to coincide with the first anniversary of this event, as part of some local celebration.

## APPENDIX

The following notes have been adapted, with permission, from two letters of Dr Sebastian Brock to the author, dated 4 March 1989 and 31 March 1989:

*tmnm'*: A couple of further instances occur in R. Mouterde and A. Poidebard, *Limes de Chalcis* (Paris 1945), no. 7 (p. 224) of AG 891, near Sefire; and no. 11 (p. 226) of AG 8?9, Rasm el-Ḥağal. Also *tš'm'* in an inscr. of AG 905, SE of Aleppo, publ. by Chabot, *Syria* 10 (1929), 256.

*ntyl*: I know of no other instances of this spelling; one might compare CPA *ytyl* beside *ytl*, and perhaps *'bdyt* (1 sg. pf.) beside *'bdt*. The latter (*'bdyt*) is characteristic of medieval Melkite mss, and is found in a few earlier inscriptions, cf. Pognon no. 20 of 6th cent., NW of Aleppo; and Mouterde-Poidebard, *Limes*, no. 1 (p. 222) Sefire.

*nb'*: Common in poetry, for obvious metrical reasons. In inscriptions: Pognon, no. 44, pagan, Edessa region.

*mtwl*: Very common in mss of the 5th/6th cent., but later systematically dropped in favour of *mtl*.

*wntyl pwr'n' tb'*: cp. Add. 14559 (Wright, *Cat.*, p. 468) of 597/600, Palmyra region; and Add. 14458 (*Cat.*, p. 48) of 6th-7th cent. *ntl pwr'n'* alone: Add. 14425 (*Cat.*, p. 5) and Vat. Syr. 142 (*Cat.* III, p. 245/6).

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[34] Pognon, *Inscriptions*, 60.
[35] *The Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite* (W. Wright, ed.), LX-LXIII.
[36] *Ibid.*, V, LX-LXI; cf. Segal, *Edessa*, 62-3, 73-6.
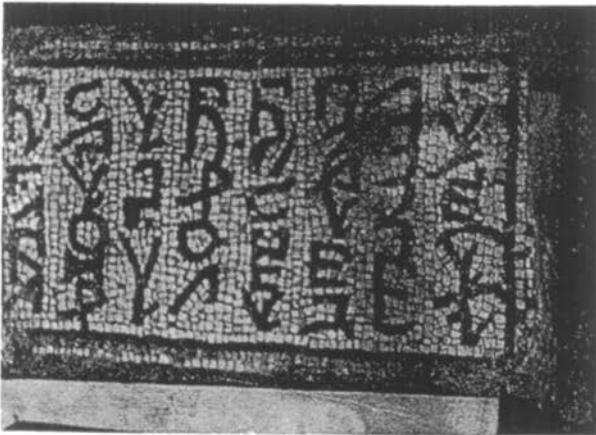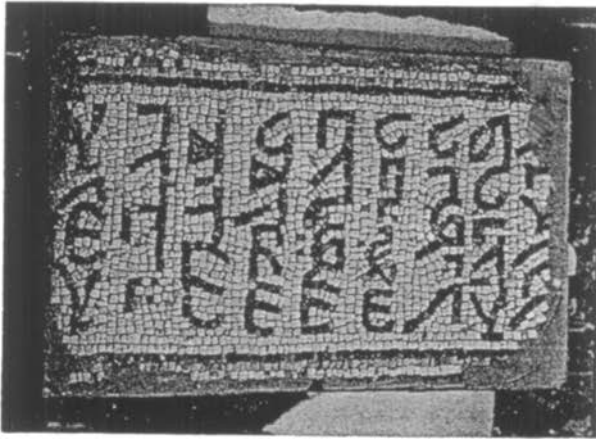
Syriac inscription of 504 C.E.

*n'bd šynh wšlmh*: cp. Rabbula Gospels (Flor. Laur. Plut. 1. 56) of 586: *nšr' bh šynh wšlmh.*

*n'bd šynh wšlmh b'dth*: cp. Add. 14591 *(Cat.,* p. 673) of 6th cent.: *nsg' šynh wnmlk šlmh b'dt'.*

*d'ml*: cp. Add. 14530 *(Cat.,* p. 1029-30) of 535, Kafra d-BRT'; Add. 14558 *(Cat.,* p. 466) of 557.

The word order Year Month Verb is rare in colophons but does occur in a later recopying of the original colophon of Add 12150 *(Cat.,* p. 633) of 411, Edessa (no indication where or when the later note was provided), and, much more interesting in view of its use of cursive *'ālaf* and *mīm* to which attention is rightly drawn above, Add. 14542. It also occurs in a dated mosaic of AG 868, near Raqqa (Abou Asaf, *AAAS* 22 (1972), 141, no. 1).

I am inclined to favour Syria rather than the area of Edessa or Amida as the provenance of the inscription, because of its having surfaced in the Lebanese antiquities market, whose main source, as far as I know, is illicit diggings in Syria. The black market antiquities from the Urfa area of Turkey seem to go direct to Switzerland and then elsewhere in Europe. As for the links between the inscription and Add. 14542, I would lay more weight on the place where the latter was written (Pha'nor = Dussaud, *Topographie,* p. 205, near Me'arrat Meṣren) than on the Amidan origin of the scribe.