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Identity and Christian-Muslim interaction : medieval art of the Syrian Orthodox from the Mosul area

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5. Wall Painting: The Church of Mar Giworgis in Qaraqosh

5.1 Introduction

As we have seen in Section 2.6 of the present study, a substantial number of medieval wall paintings have survived at Christian sites in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt. In Iraq, on the other hand, until now, Christian wall paintings were either only attested in the written sources,¹ or limited to some minor fragments. During excavations conducted at a monastic site near Takrit, for example, Iraqi archaeologists discovered the painted image of a saint, possibly dating from as early as the ninth century.² Considering the limited number and rather fragmentary state of wall paintings uncovered in Iraq so far, the mural which has recently come to light in the ruined Syrian Orthodox Church of Mar Giworgis (St George) in Qaraqosh, a small town that lies on the Mosul plain about 29 km southeast of Mosul, is highly significant. The wall painting discovered is the first relatively well preserved example from the area. During rebuilding activities conducted at the site in 2005, a large painting of the Baptism of Christ was revealed underneath a nineteenth-century layer of plaster (p. x).

Although the iconography of this Baptism painting is generally in accordance with the common composition of the scene, some of the iconographic details are unusual and appear to be unique in Christian art. In the present chapter, an attempt will be made to explain the remarkable iconography and to provide a dating for the painting on the basis of both iconographic and stylistic analysis. To shed further light on the date, it is important to take into account the wider historical and artistic context of Qaraqosh in general and the Church of Mar Giworgis in particular. The analysis of the iconography of the wall painting will be followed by a discussion of its relevance for the Syrian Orthodox community, especially with an eye to any possible identity-related matters. Finally, a preliminary survey will be provided of written sources with references to wall paintings in Syrian Orthodox churches in the Mesopotamian region.

Before turning to these matters, however, some general remarks should be made. Due to the present political circumstances in Iraq, it has not been possible to study the church and the painting *in situ*. Inadequate photographic documentation further hampers a thorough analysis. A series of photographs were taken in October 2005, shortly after the nineteenth-century layer of plaster was taken from the wall, and were afterwards published on the internet.³ More detailed photographs were subsequently made by Harrak, who visited the site in the summer of 2008. Although these photographs are useful for a preliminary iconographic study, a comprehensive stylistic analysis is of course only possible if the wall painting is examined *in situ*. Moreover, at the time of writing, the painting has not yet been cleaned and the dirty

¹ A summary of Arabic sources, both Christian and Muslim, with references to wall paintings in churches in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Palestine can be found in Nasrallah 1969, 70-80. A more systematic compilation and study of such references, including those found in Syriac sources, would be a valuable contribution to scholarship in this field.

² Harrak 2001, 13-14, 16, 19; Immerzeel 2009, 27. In this context, it might be interesting to observe that Christian subjects were not uncommon in murals decorating palaces of Muslim rulers. The thirteenth-century geographer Yaqut reports that the al-Mukhtar palace in Samarra, which was built by the Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil (847-861), was decorated by Greek painters; one of the iconographic themes represented was a monastic church with monks praying in it (Arnold 1928, 31; Farès 1961, 71 n. 10; Ettinghausen/Grabar/Jenkins-Madina 2001, 59). Here we may also refer to the pottery vessels found in the palace of Caliph al-Mut'asim (829-836), again in Samarra, which bore paintings of monastic figures holding crutch staffs (Rice 1958, 32, Pls I, I Ib-c, e).

³ Sony 2005: www.bakhdida.com/FrBehnamSoni/Iconmarkorkis.htm (accessed July 2006).

surface hinders detailed examination. The following discussion should, therefore, be considered provisional.

5.2 General Description

5.2.1 Description of the Church and History of the Building

The Church of Mar Giworgis is located in the southern part of Qaraqosh, on the road which leads to nearby Deir Mar Behnam.⁴ The church is built of bricks and rough stones, and the interior and exterior of the building are covered with layers of plaster, of which large parts have flaked off. The plan of the church is simple, comprising a small edifice with an eastern section, a nave, and two aisles separated from each other by an arcade of solid piers (Fig. 3), with an adjoining courtyard on the north flanked by subsidiary buildings. The nave and the aisles were originally barrel-vaulted. The eastern section, separated from the nave by a transversal wall, consists of an almost square sanctuary with a straight back wall (as opposed to an apsidal sanctuary), surmounted by a dome, and two rectangular side-rooms. A large rectangular altar occupies the centre of the sanctuary, while a smaller secondary altar is placed against the back wall of the northern side-room. The southern side-room contains a baptismal font. From the nave, a large rectangular doorway (Royal Gate) gives access to the sanctuary, while the side-rooms can be reached from the aisles through small pointed archways. All three rooms are connected with one another by means of archways. The only entrance to the church is located in the north wall.

At present, little can be said of the architectural history of the church. It has been assumed that the first construction of the church dates back to the sixth or seventh century,⁵ although this has not been established on the basis of any archaeological or written evidence. Be that as it may, the earliest mention of the Church of Mar Giworgis comes from a thirteenth-century manuscript (see Section 5.5). Other historical evidence relating directly to the church dates from more recent times. Two lengthy Syriac inscriptions, carved in stone and applied on the north wall of the nave, inform us of the digging of a well there in 1739.⁶ Above the entrance to the northern side-room, there was a naïve rendering, in blue paint, of St George as an equestrian saint slaying the dragon (Pl. 28).⁷ A Garshuni (Arabic written in Syriac characters) inscription in the same paint informs us that this commemorates a renovation of the church in 1866, which took place under the direction of a certain priest named Istefo.⁸ In the course of this renovation, the entire structure was probably covered with a new layer of plaster, obscuring the painting of the Baptism from our view.

Apparently, the roof of the nave and the north aisle collapsed at some point during the twentieth century, thereby creating a large open space. It seems, however, that the roof was

⁴ Fiey 1965, II, 458; Harrak 2009, cat. no. AD.04.

⁵ Fiey 1965, II, 458; Harrak 2009, cat. no. AD.04; Sony 2005.

⁶ Harrak 2004, 100; *idem* 2009, inscr. nos AD.04.1-AD.04.2. The well was apparently dug at the order of the abbot of Deir Mar Behnam, Bishop Karas, who was also the instigator behind the rebuilding of many of the village's churches after the destruction of Qaraqosh by the Persian Nadir Shah in 1743 (Fiey 1965, II, 444-445, 458).

⁷ Snelders 2007, Pl. 1. The mounted saint is identified by a Syriac caption: 'Mōr Gīworgīs, the victorious martyr'. Another Syriac caption, placed underneath the horse of St George, describes the defeated enemy as 'the dragon' (translation: Harrak 2009, inscr. no. AD.04.3B-C).

⁸ 'The renovation of (the church of) Mōr Gīworgīs took place at the hand of the late priest, Istēfō, while he was 38 years old and a priest. He died, and I was the third (person) for whom he said the mass free of charge, though (the honorarium of) the mass was 20 Para: The year 1866 of Christ' (translation: Harrak 2009, inscr. no. A.D.04.3A).

still left undamaged when Leroy and Fiey visited the church in the 1950s and 1960s. In his corpus of illuminated Syriac manuscripts, Leroy discusses a late thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century codex which was then still kept at the church.⁹ Fiey refers to the restoration activities of 1866, but does not mention the painting of St George.¹⁰ Finally, when Harrak recorded the Syriac and Garshuni inscriptions preserved at the church in the late 1990s, the roof of the nave and the north aisle had already collapsed some years earlier.¹¹

The wall painting featuring the Baptism of Christ is located at the east end of the north aisle, above the small pointed doorway giving access to the northern side-room (Fig. 3, A). Assuming a clear correlation between the function and symbolism of this church section and the symbolism of its decoration, it may be postulated that this side-room was the place where baptisms were carried out, at least at the time of the painting's execution. The presence of a relatively modern baptismal font in the southern side-room indicates, however, that the site for performing the sacrament of baptism was relocated at some point, perhaps during one of the restoration programmes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

5.2.2 Description of the Wall Painting

The mural revealed underneath the nineteenth-century layer depicts Christ, wearing a dark-red loincloth tied around his waist, standing in the river Jordan (Pls 29-30, Fig. 4). Numerous orange fish are swimming in the river.¹² Christ is flanked on either side by a rocky landscape, in which the two riverbanks are each indicated by a zigzagging line. Part of the upper left section is almost entirely lost, making it impossible to discern Christ's facial features. Christ's head is turned towards the personification of the river standing at the lower left: the river is represented as a youth dressed in a white knee-length tunic. He faces towards Christ, and holds an overturned jar. Between the personification and Christ there is a platform with three steps, surmounted by a cross.

John the Baptist stands in the landscape on the right, baptizing Christ with his right hand. He has mid-length, brownish (?) hair and a beard, and wears a yellowish tunic with short sleeves. Behind the Baptist, one sees two angels, one wearing a red-orange tunic and white mantle, and the other a white tunic and a red-orange mantle. Their hands are covered with a cloth. On the opposite side of the composition, three other angels are turned towards Christ, though only the one in the background has survived completely. They are identically dressed in a tunic and mantle, with a cloth covering their hands, preserved only in case of the angel on the left. They have red hair and wings.

Some unusual details occur in the lower part of the painting. In the left corner, two small women face towards the centre of the composition, their arms raised (Pl. 31). Each woman holds a small vessel in her right hand. The woman at the front is dressed in a white tunic and a red-brown *maphorion*, the veil of which seems to be decorated with a small cross. The woman at the back is similarly dressed, though the colours are reversed. An antithetically arranged pair of small figures, a man and a woman, are placed on the other side, in the lower right corner (Pl. 32). The man standing at the front has white hair and beard, his right hand raised in admiration. He is dressed in a red tunic and a white mantle. Behind him, the woman is shown as an orant, wearing a white tunic and a red *maphorion*. All four of these small

⁹ Hunt 2000d, 193, Fig. 30; Leroy 1964, 390-396, Pls 142-144. It is not known when this manuscript, which displays some Armenian influence and was probably produced in Northern Mesopotamia, entered the Church of Mar Giworgis. Leroy mentions that, according to a now lost Arabic inscription, it was donated by a Kurdish prince to nearby Deir Mar Behnam.

¹⁰ Fiey 1965, II, 458.

¹¹ Harrak 2009, cat. no. AD.04.

¹² The painted area measures approximately 2.46 x 2.46 m (Sony 2005).

figures are adorned with a nimbus. Finally, the entire scene is bordered both underneath and above by a frieze filled with an intricate ornamental design, consisting of a continuous interlace pattern and grey scrolling stems with hooked leaves.

5.3 Iconography

5.3.1 The Baptism of Christ

The representation of the Baptism of Christ is largely in accordance with the common composition of the scene, with Christ standing in the river Jordan, flanked on either side by a group of figures turning towards him. First represented in the third century, the Baptism had assumed its basic iconographic schema by the sixth century: Christ standing in the water frontally or in profile; John the Baptist on one side, angels on the other; the ray of light and the dove descending from the heavens; the personification of the Jordan below. Except for some minor modifications and additions, some of which will be discussed below, the composition remained virtually unchanged throughout the centuries.

As the general development of the theme has been outlined frequently and its basic constituent elements are well known,¹³ the following discussion will be limited largely to those iconographic details which may be indicative of a date. Further attention will be paid to the features that differ from the usual renderings of the theme: more specifically, the two groups of subsidiary figures which are included in the lower part of the painting. Before discussing these matters, however, a more general observation should be made concerning the distribution of the various protagonists.

One remarkable feature is the position of Christ in relation to John the Baptist: instead of turning towards John, Christ faces the three angels on the opposite bank. Furthermore, in contrast to the more common Byzantine arrangement, the Baptist is placed on the right, at Christ's left hand. This reversal of the usual disposition is found in three thirteenth-century Syrian Orthodox manuscripts, including the lectionary made for Deir Mar Mattai near Mosul (Vat. Syr. 559), which dates from 1220 or 1260 (see Chapter 4).¹⁴ Cruikshank Dodd has suggested that this reverse composition is a typical exponent of an Eastern Christian iconographic tradition.¹⁵

It should be observed, on the other hand, that the reversal as such is by no means confined to Eastern Christian examples of the Baptism. Given that it is already featured in a significant number of eleventh- and twelfth-century Byzantine renderings of the scene, both in monumental and minor art,¹⁶ one should not exclude the possibility that it re-entered Eastern Christian art through Byzantine models functioning as intermediaries. Since it is impossible to trace the lines by which this particular type was transmitted, it appears that the positioning of

¹³ An abundant body of literature exists on the iconography of the Baptism of Christ. Fundamental studies include: Hadermann-Misguich 1975, 120-130; Lafontaine-Dosogne 1989; Millet 1961, 170-185; Mouriki 1985, 122-126; *idem* 1995; Nicolaïdès 1996, 83-87; Ristow 1957; *idem* 1965; Schiller 1966-1980, I, 137-146; Walter 1980, 8-25; Wessel 1988.

¹⁴ Fol. 262r: Leroy 1964, 284-285. Cf. London, BL Add. 7170, c. 1220, fol. 30r (Leroy 1964, 304); Paris, BnF syr. 355, c. 1200, fol. 2v (Leroy 1964, 269, Pl. 67.1). A similar arrangement is found in a wall painting in the (Maronite?) Cave Chapel of Saydet ad-Darr in Bcharreh, Lebanon, which, according to Immerzeel (2009, 117-118), dates from either the late twelfth or early thirteenth century (Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 46, 48, Pls XXXIII, 11.2-4; Hélou 2003a, 124, Fig. 10; *idem* 2006a, 61, Pl. 9; Zibawi 2009, 76, plate on p. 77).

¹⁵ Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 46-48.

¹⁶ Byzantine examples featuring John the Baptist on the right, at Christ's left hand, include the Baptism mosaic at the Monastery of Hosios Loukas in Central Greece (Diez/Demus 1931, 57-60, Fig. 6), and a wall painting in the Church of the Holy Apostles at Perachorio, Cyprus (Megaw/Hawkins 1962, 321, Fig. 35). Cf. the examples listed by Millet 1961, 180-182, Figs 141-143.

John the Baptist in relation to Christ, either to his left or to his right, should not be accorded too much weight, especially in view of the fact that both arrangements were already interchangeable in the Early Christian period.¹⁷

Let us turn now to the various iconographic details featured in the painting. The personification of the river Jordan is presented here as a beardless adolescent, looking up at Christ and holding an overturned jar. In Byzantine art, he is usually shown as an old man with a beard, a reminiscence of the river god of Antiquity, featured either as a reclining figure leaning against an overturned amphora, or turning away in fright. According to Doula Mouriki, the rendering of the river as a youth also has a basis in an ancient tradition, but one which was 'much less common than the one which prescribes the personification as a mature man'.¹⁸ Examples of the personification of the river Jordan without a beard are found in the Cappella Palatina in Palermo (mid-twelfth century),¹⁹ the Church of St George in Kurbinovo (1191) in Macedonia,²⁰ and in several wall paintings in Cappadocia, where he is frequently shown blowing a horn.²¹

The state of preservation of any medieval murals showing the Baptism which have survived in Egypt²² or Greater Syria is so poor that it is impossible to tell whether the personification of the river Jordan was originally depicted. He is not featured in any surviving Coptic manuscripts, and the only Syrian Orthodox example is the lectionary written by Bishop Dioscorus Theodorus (c. 1250), which is now in the library of the Church of the Forty Martyrs in Mardin. In this manuscript the personification is even featured twice, to the left and right of Christ.²³ The personification on the left is a bearded man, who appears to be swimming and holds an overturned jug; the one on the right, who holds an upright jug, is rendered as an old man in an attitude of fear. He has started to run away from Christ, his body abruptly turning, but his gaze still fixed on him.

Several particular iconographic details in the Baptism painting may perhaps be useful in establishing the date of its execution. First, there is the number of attending angels, whose hands are covered with a robe in which to wrap the naked body of Christ. Although the inclusion of more than two angels is already encountered in a few representations of the Baptism from the tenth and eleventh century, it did not become widespread in Byzantine art until the twelfth, with a preference for a total of three angels, probably as a reference to the

¹⁷ In the Neonian Baptistery (c. 451) in Ravenna, for example, John the Baptist is placed on the left of Christ, while in the nearby Arian Baptistery (first quarter of the sixth century) he stands to the right (Kostof 1965, 86, Figs 43, 136). In the corpus of lead *ampullae* from Palestine (sixth to seventh century), the Baptist is featured in both positions: to the left of Christ, for instance, on Monza, Cathedral, no. 2 (Grabar 1958, 19, Pls V-VI), and on Bobbio, Church of St Colombano, no. 19 (Grabar 1958, 42, Pl. L). He stands on the right on the following pieces (among others): Bonn, F.J. Dölger-Institut, nos 131-132 (Engemann 1973, 13-14, 16, Pls 1a, 2a); Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Frühchristliche-byzantinische Sammlung, ampulla no. 2 (Engemann 1973, 16, Pl. 8e).

¹⁸ Mouriki 1985, 123-124. An early example is found on a sixth-century ivory panel from the Throne of Bishop Maximian in Ravenna, Museo Arcivescovile (Ristow 1957, 124-125, Fig. 4; *idem* 1965, Fig. 10).

¹⁹ Kitzinger 1992, 46, Figs 180-183.

²⁰ Hadermann-Misguich 1975, 130, Fig. 55. Further examples are listed in Mouriki 1985, 124.

²¹ Jolivet-Lévy 2001, 173, Fig. 11.

²² Personifications of the river Jordan are, however, found in the Baptism scenes painted in two chapels at the Monastery of St Apollo in Bawit, which are roughly dated between the fifth and seventh century: in Chapel XVII (Bolman 2001, 46, Fig. 16; Clédat 1904, 77, Pl. XLV, 2), and Chapel XXX (Badawy 1978, 252, Fig. 4.29; Clédat 1916, Pl. IV; Zibawi 2003, 77, Pl. 83). In the former painting, the personification of the river is depicted as a naked woman who, together with a small male swimmer holding a disk opposite her, is seen at the feet of Christ. In the Coptic context, the personification of the river Jordan in the Baptism is also found on painted icons, such as on an icon beam from the Church of the Holy Virgin in Harat Zuwayla, Cairo. According to Skalova, this icon was painted by a Byzantine-trained Coptic artist (Skalova/Gabra 2006, cat. no. 17).

²³ Fol. 55: Leroy 1964, 372, Pl. 128.2. Cf. Doumato 1999, 247-248, Fig. 1.

three main hierarchies.²⁴ In addition, numerous examples include four angels, generally grouped together on one side of the river Jordan, opposite John the Baptist.²⁵ Sometimes the number of angels is increased still further, as is the case, for instance, on the reverse of the thirteenth-century bilateral icon preserved in the Monastery of Our Lady in Kaftun, Lebanon, which shows a group of six angels.²⁶ The fact that there are five attending angels in the Church of Mar Giworgis, therefore, makes it most unlikely that the painting dates from before the twelfth century.

Another important detail perhaps indicative of a date is the fish swimming in the river Jordan. As regards the provenance of these genre elements in the Baptism, Cruikshank Dodd proposes a Coptic or Syrian origin.²⁷ Her suggestion finds support in a fifth- to seventh-century wall painting of the scene from Chapel XXX at the Monastery of St Apollo in Bawit, Egypt, which features both the personification of the river and four fish and a crab in the river.²⁸ Apart from this singular early occurrence, fish are extremely rare in early-medieval depictions of the scene. It is not until the late twelfth and early thirteenth century that they become more common in both Syriac²⁹ and Coptic manuscripts,³⁰ and simultaneously make their appearance in Byzantine monumental art.³¹ Susan Boyd has argued that the fish only became a traditional element of the Baptism scene towards the middle of the thirteenth century.³² Perhaps the inclusion of fish in the Baptism painting at the Church of Mar Giworgis was part of the same development.

The inclusion of a cross on top of a stepped platform, finally, is familiar from Byzantine art, where it is often included within the Baptism scene from the eleventh century onwards. This is a reference to the marble column surmounted by a cross that was erected at the site in the river Jordan where the Baptism was traditionally held to have taken place.³³ One of the earliest renderings of this topographical motif can be found in the Menologion of Basil II (Ms. Vat. Cod. Gr. 1630, fol. 299), a Constantinopolitan work dating from around 1000, in which it is still only a minor detail. This new iconographic motif is featured more prominently in the Baptism mosaic at the Monastery of Hosios Loukas (first half of the eleventh century).³⁴ Strikingly, this *locus sanctus* motif is not depicted in Coptic manuscripts, and it is featured only once in Leroy's corpus of illustrated Syriac manuscripts.³⁵

In sum, the motifs described above are largely consistent with Byzantine renderings of the Baptism dating from the twelfth and thirteenth century. It is more problematic, however, to interpret the four small subsidiary figures in the lower section of the composition and pinpoint their iconographic source. The fact that they are each provided with a nimbus excludes the

²⁴ Hadermann-Misguich 1975, 128-129; Lafontaine-Dosogne 1989, 55-56; Millet 1961, 178; Mouriki 1985, 135; Nicolaïdès 1996, 85.

²⁵ Hadermann-Misguich 1975, 129.

²⁶ Hélou 2003a, 101-131, Fig. 2; *idem* 2006a, 58-62, Pl. 7; Immerzeel 2004b, 49-51, Pl. 24; *idem* 2009, 125-126, Pl. 106.

²⁷ Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 47.

²⁸ The painting has only come down to us in a watercolour copy: Clédat 1916, Pl. IV; Zibawi 2003, 77, Pl. 83.

²⁹ London, BL Add. 7169, twelfth/thirteenth century, fol. 9r (Leroy 1964, 351, Pl. 212.1); Paris, BnF syr. 355, c. 1200, fol. 2v (Leroy 1964, 269, Pl. 67.1); Vatican Library, Ms. Syr. 559, 1220 or 1260, fol. 26r (Leroy 1964, 284-285, Pl. 79.1); Mardin, Church of the Forty Martyrs, Dioscorus Theodorus lectionary, c. 1250 (Leroy 1964, 372, Pl. 128.2).

³⁰ Paris, BnF copte 13, A.D. 1179/80, fol. 8v (Leroy 1974a, Pl. 46.1); Paris, Institut Catholique, Ms. copte-arabe 1, A.D. 1249/50, fol. 66r (Leroy 1974a, Pls F, 84).

³¹ See, for example, the Church of Panagia Amasgou in Monagri, Cyprus, c. 1192-1235 (Boyd 1974, 296-298, Fig. 24); Karşı Kilise near Gülşehir, Cappadocia, A.D. 1212 (Restle 1967, III, Fig. 472).

³² Boyd 1974, 298.

³³ Diez/Demus 1931, 58, n. 3; Engemann 1973, 19, n. 103; Ristow 1965, 50-54.

³⁴ Diez/Demus 1931, Fig. 6. Other examples are listed by Engemann 1973, 105, Pls 14b, 15a-b.

³⁵ Paris, BnF syr. 355, c. 1200, fol. 2v (Leroy 1964, 269, Pl. 67.1; Ristow 1965, Fig. 25).

possibility of them being donors. Unfortunately, no traces have been found of inscriptions which could have identified these figures. Interpretation is further hampered by the complete lack of reference material, for it appears that this is the only example of this particular iconography that has come down to us. Moreover, as no other murals seem to have been preserved in the church (or have yet been uncovered, in any case³⁶), it is impossible to determine whether the Baptism painting was part of a larger decoration programme that might provide additional clues.

So how should one interpret these figures and what is the exact meaning of the composition? Three different approaches, which will be explored consecutively in the following sections, may lead to a satisfactory answer: first, considering the various subsidiary motifs which are often included within the imagery of the Baptism of Christ; second, reviewing the scenes from the Christological cycle to which the Baptism is often related, both symbolically and visually; third, studying possible literary sources. This latter approach may prove particularly fruitful in elucidating the inclusion of these motifs, because the inspiration for this compilation may originate in liturgical practice associated with baptism, such as the performance of baptism in the context of the liturgical celebration of Easter.

5.3.2 Frequently Recurring Subsidiary Figures

Aside from the central protagonists of the Baptism, there are several other figures that often complement the theme. These include the two apostles who, especially from the eleventh century onwards, are regularly depicted behind a hill on the upper left side of the scene. They are usually characterized as the disciples John and Andrew, who participated in the Third Witnessing of Christ by John the Baptist (John 1:35-43).³⁷ In thirteenth-century Byzantine art, following the general trend towards the increase of narrative detail,³⁸ the Baptism was often expanded with numerous other subsidiary figures. This narrative elaboration mainly involved the inclusion of bystanders, such as boys undressing and swimming in the river, as well as the multiplication of men and women watching the various episodes of the scene.³⁹ Although the accumulation of narrative detail in the Baptism scene was already an established tendency in the Middle Byzantine period, it would finally reach its peak in the fourteenth century, in large baptismal cycles consisting of a central Baptism, surrounded by several other subjects relating either to baptism in general, or to John the Baptist.⁴⁰

Unfortunately, the subsidiary figures featured in the known versions of the Baptism do not provide us with any distinct parallels for the four small figures in the lower part of the painting. It may nevertheless be postulated that the intricate rendering of the Baptism at the Church of Mar Giworgis accords well with the general tendency towards constructing more sophisticated compositions through the addition of secondary detail and narrative elements, which would eventually reach its apogee in the elaborate versions of the late Byzantine period. This, in turn, would imply the availability of models that reflected current developments in Byzantine painting.

A detailed estimation of Byzantine influence on the artistic tradition of Northern Mesopotamia falls outside the scope of the present study. However, there is evidence that

³⁶ Slight traces of wall painting appear to be visible to the left and right of the small archway leading into the northern side-room, underneath the nineteenth-century layer of plaster (Pl. 29).

³⁷ Mouriki 1985, 126; Nicolaïdès 1996, 87.

³⁸ On this trend, see Eastmond 2004, 131-134; Gouma-Peterson 1984-1985, 54-57.

³⁹ Mouriki 1985, 124-125; *idem* 1995a.

⁴⁰ For instance, in the Catholicon of the Chilandar Monastery, Mount Athos (Underwood 1975, 273-274, Fig. 9); the Church of Bogorodica Ljeviška, Prizren, Serbia (Underwood 1975, 274-275, Figs 10a-b); the Afendiko in the Monastery of the Brontochion in Mistra, Greece, 1311/1312-1322 (Mouriki 1995a, 311-313, Fig. 1); the Old Metropolis in Veria, c. 1310-1320 (Mouriki 1995a, 313-314, Figs 6-11). Cf. Mouriki 1995a, 315, n. 17.

during this period at least one Byzantine artist worked in the Mosul area (see Section 5.6), while Byzantine influence on local manuscript illumination is well-attested.⁴¹ Assuming that this particular rendering of the Baptism originates in Byzantine art, the matter of how to interpret the four subsidiary figures still remains to be determined. A short discussion of the scene with which the Baptism is traditionally most often associated, as well as the Byzantine liturgical tradition surrounding baptism (areas which will prove to be closely related) will be helpful in explaining the intricate iconography.

5.3.3 Baptism and Resurrection of Christ

In Byzantine art, the representation of the Baptism of Christ, the classical image for the feast of the Epiphany, is most often related visually with the Anastasis, also known as Christ's Descent into Hell, the image for Easter. The strong visual link between the Baptism and the Anastasis is not surprising, given the distinct symbolic correspondence between the two themes. From the eighth century onwards, the Anastasis was the most important pictorial symbol of the resurrection of Christ; but the Baptism, too, besides revealing Christ's divinity and being a symbol of rebirth, was also traditionally considered a symbol of his death and resurrection.

In addition, the baptismal rite itself was perceived as a dying and rising in Christ. According to St Paul, the neophyte was granted the remission of his sins and admitted into the community of the earthly Church by participating in Christ's entombment and resurrection through baptism: 'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so we too might walk in the newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is free from sin' (Rom. 6:3-7).

The thematic association between baptism and resurrection was effectively evoked in the Easter liturgy. As maintained by the Constantinopolitan tradition of the Middle Byzantine period, the sacrament of baptism was the focal point of the first part of the Easter Vigil, which was appropriately concluded by the reading of Romans 6:3-11. The second part was entirely devoted to the theme of the resurrection.⁴² This practice can be traced back to at least the fourth century. Several early documents show that the rite of baptism played an important role in the celebration of Easter in Jerusalem.

Egeria's pilgrimage account (383-385), for instance, testifies that in Jerusalem, the baptismal rite was performed at the moment of Christ's resurrection at dawn on Easter Sunday.⁴³ In fact, in the early period, Easter was deemed the most appropriate moment for performing baptisms, because of its resurrectional symbolism.⁴⁴ Although Romans 6:3-11 was initially not featured in the series of readings for the Vigil in the Jerusalem tradition, it would eventually be incorporated due to Constantinopolitan influence, probably around the seventh or eighth century.⁴⁵ Besides its evocation in the Easter liturgy, the relationship between baptism and resurrection was fully explored in the mystagogical interpretations of the baptismal rite itself.

⁴¹ Grabar 2005a, 29-34; Hunt 2000d, 154-183.

⁴² Bertoni re 1972, 132-139; Kartsonis 1986, 156, 175.

⁴³ *Egeria* 38, 45-47: edition and translation by Wilkinson 1999, 157, 161-163, cf. 57-59; Kartsonis 1986, 175; Wharton 1992, 317, 320.

⁴⁴ Kartsonis 1986, 175; Wharton 1992, 319.

⁴⁵ Bertoni re 1972, 61, 67.

By the fourth century, the tendency to associate various parts of the liturgy with different episodes in the life of Christ had become widespread.⁴⁶ As far as the baptismal ceremonies are concerned, for most early commentators the Pauline theology of death and resurrection constituted their principle means for interpreting the successive stages of the baptismal service. An illustrative example is the instruction on the meaning of the mystery of baptism by Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 387), delivered to the neophytes during Easter week, after they had been baptized on the night of Holy Saturday. Cyril's *Mystagogical Catecheses* were read in the Holy Church of the Sepulchre, that is, at the very spot where Christ was buried, and it was this baptismal instruction that was recorded by Egeria when she witnessed the paschal liturgy in Jerusalem.⁴⁷ In relating the Pauline theology of baptism from Romans 6 to the liturgical ceremony at Jerusalem, Cyril interprets the performance of the baptismal rite as a direct imitation of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. He likens the movement to the font to the carrying of Christ from the cross to the sepulchre, the triple immersion in the water to the three days Christ spent in the tomb, and the emergence from the font to the resurrection. Accordingly, the font itself is equated with the tomb of Christ.⁴⁸

The idea of Christian baptism as an imitation of Christ's death and resurrection was also developed in the commentaries of John Chrysostom (d. 407), Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428), Pseudo-Dionysius (sixth century), Basil (d. 379), Gregory of Nyssa (c. 395), and, in the West, by Ambrose of Milan (d. 397).⁴⁹ According to Bryan Spinks, the period of the fourth and fifth century saw the 'increasing use of the Pauline ideas about baptism in Romans, particularly of dying and rising, and the font as a tomb. The womb/new birth imagery is still present, but becomes less prominent'.⁵⁰ In light of the fact that the mural under discussion is painted within a Syrian Orthodox church, it is important to note that the same symbolic imagery is found in the commentaries on the baptismal rite by Syrian Orthodox authors (see Section 5.3.5). They invariably adopted the Pauline view in explaining the baptismal ritual, describing it as a death, burial, and resurrection. As argued by Sebastian Brock, the fusion of these themes can be explained from the fact that the liturgy is set in sacred time rather than historical time. This means that events with the same salvational content can coincide in sacred time even though they are separated within the temporal sequence of historical time. Brock points out that within this framework, many parallels can be found between the purpose of the baptism of Christ and the resurrection.⁵¹

As mentioned above, baptism and resurrection were not only associated with one another liturgically and theologically, but also visually. In her fundamental study on the development of the iconography of the Anastasis, Anna Kartsonis argues that the visual alignment of the Baptism and Anastasis is indeed the result of the liturgical practices surrounding the celebration of Easter: 'The alignment of the two images reflected the parallel performance of Baptism and Anastasis in the Easter Vigil. The rite of the baptism typified the burial of original sin and opened the road to redemption for those that received it'.⁵²

An indication that the link between the two themes already found its pictorial expression in the pre-Iconoclastic period can be found in a lead ampulla from Palestine (sixth to seventh century) formerly preserved in Berlin, which features the Baptism of Christ on one side, and

⁴⁶ Varghese 2004a, 17-19.

⁴⁷ Wilkinson 1999, 57.

⁴⁸ Riley 1974, 228-242.

⁴⁹ Riley 1974, 242-298; Spinks 2006, 42-47, 48-49, 59-62, 94-95.

⁵⁰ Spinks 2006, 47.

⁵¹ Brock 1991, 191. Cf. Buchan 2004, 232-257; McDonnell 1995; *idem* 1996, 156-170; Rousseau 1951-1952, all with further references.

⁵² Kartsonis 1986, 175-176.

the Crucifixion and the Women at the empty Tomb on the other.⁵³ Here one should bear in mind that in the Early Christian and Byzantine world, the representation of the Women at the Tomb was the most important prototype of the Resurrection. Significantly, the Easter Vigil had the corresponding text (Matt. 28:1-20) as its main New Testament reading, after the sacrament of baptism had taken place.⁵⁴

By the eighth century, the role of the scene of the Women at the Tomb as *the* reference to the Resurrection of Christ was taken over by the Anastasis, with which the Baptism was from then on conveniently allied.⁵⁵ Examples of the pairing of these themes are featured in a considerable number of Middle Byzantine works of art dating from the ninth to the thirteenth century, both in minor and monumental art. These include a number of Constantinopolitan ivories and phylacteries (ninth to eleventh century),⁵⁶ a tenth-century icon at the Monastery of St Catherine at Mount Sinai,⁵⁷ the mosaics in the Katholikon of the Monastery of Nea Moni on Chios (1042-1056),⁵⁸ several wall paintings in Cappadocia, such as those in the Pigeon House Church in Çavuşin (c. 963-964)⁵⁹ and Çarıklı Kilise (second half of the twelfth century),⁶⁰ and the murals in the Church of Panagia tou Arakou in Lagoudera on the island of Cyprus (1192).⁶¹

At this stage of the discussion, it should be observed that there are regional variations to this pattern; in Greater Syria and Coptic Egypt, the Baptism is never directly paired with the Anastasis or the Women at the Tomb, either in monumental or minor art.⁶² The only exception currently known is the decoration programme at the Church of Mar Fauqa (St Phocas) in Amiun, Lebanon, where the Baptism is painted on the second layer of the west side of the northern pier, in front of the apse, which features the Anastasis (layer 1).⁶³ At first sight, one might be inclined to explain this exceptional pairing in the light of the distinct

⁵³ Berlin, Staatliche Museen, inv. no. 6697 (destroyed during World War II): Engemann 1973, 16, Pls 8e-8f; Kartsonis 1986, 175.

⁵⁴ Bertonière 1972, 60, 112; Hunt 2000c, 150.

⁵⁵ Kartsonis 1986, 78, 134.

⁵⁶ Examples are listed by Kartsonis 1986, 175-177, Figs 25a-b, 26a-b, 69-70; Nicolaïdès 1996, 88, n. 779.

⁵⁷ Kartsonis 1986, 174, 176, Fig. 63; Weitzmann 1967, cat. no. B.55.

⁵⁸ Kartsonis 1986, 215, Fig. 81; Mouriki 1985, Pls 130-131.

⁵⁹ Jolivet-Lévy 1991, 15; Kartsonis 1986, 173-177, Fig. 65; Restle 1967, III, no. XXVI, Fig. 302.

⁶⁰ Restle 1967, II, no. XXI, Figs 210-211.

⁶¹ Nicolaïdès 1996, 88, Pl. 2, Fig. 67.

⁶² The Anastasis does not seem to have been a very popular iconographic subject in Coptic art; the image has not been preserved in either wall paintings, or manuscript illuminations. In the Coptic context, the Anastasis is only encountered on a carved wooden panel from a screen in the Church of al-Mu'allaqa in Old Cairo, c. 1300 (Hunt 1998d, 309-310, Fig. 9) and on several icons which, according to Skalova, were painted by Byzantine-trained Coptic artists: e.g., a thirteenth-century icon in Deir al-Surian in the Wadi al-Natrun, Egypt (Skalova/Gabra 2006, 119, Ill. 35); and an icon beam decorated with the Seven Major Feasts from the Church of the Holy Virgin in Harat Zuwayla, Cairo, c. 1200 (Skalova/Gabra 2006, 118, cat. no. 17). In Egypt, the theme is found more often within a Byzantine Orthodox context. In addition to the tenth-century specimen referred to above (see n. 61), which shows the Anastasis and the Baptism in conjunction, several Middle and Late Byzantine icons and templon beams in the Monastery of St Catherine at Mount Sinai display the Anastasis and the Baptism as part of the *Dodekaorton* (Mouriki, 1990, 105-108, 121, Figs 28, 72; Skalova/Gabra 2006, 88-89, Ill. 27, Appendix no. 5). The Anastasis is also featured in a late thirteenth-century miniature from an Arabic Gospel book (incorporated into a later manuscript dated to A.D. 1331: Leiden, University Library, Or. 1571, fol. 195v), which, according to Hunt, was painted by a Syrian artist at Mount Sinai (Hunt 2000d, 184-189, Fig. 17).

⁶³ Cruikshank Dodd (2004, 82-83, Pls 1.27-1.28, Figs 1.2-1.3) has suggested that the image displays a naked male figure being tempted by a small demon on the right. Recent analysis has shown, however, that the supposed demon is furnished with a nimbus, and is part of a rendering of the Virgin and Child painted underneath the Baptism (Immerzeel 2009, 91). Westphalen hypothesizes that the Anastasis may originally have been included in the partly preserved cycle of paintings of the life of Christ in the Chapel of Mar Ya'qub (first half of the eleventh century), a Melkite stronghold in Syria (Schmidt/Westphalen 2005, 89). A direct connection between the two themes can be excluded however; if the Anastasis was indeed depicted, it would have been situated on the north wall, while the Baptism is located on the west wall.

religious context in which it has been preserved. The Church of Mar Fauqa appears always to have been of the Greek Orthodox (Melkite) denomination, as it is today.⁶⁴ Accordingly, one might posit that the pairing of the Baptism and Anastasis in this particular context was the result of direct Byzantine influence on the iconography. Closer inspection makes this highly unlikely, however.

First of all, the scenes are painted on two different layers: whereas the Anastasis was painted by a Byzantine artist, perhaps from Cyprus, in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, the Baptism was probably executed by a local artist somewhat later in the thirteenth century. Moreover, though the Baptism and the Anastasis are now the only two Christological scenes in the decoration programme, which consists otherwise of representations of saints and Christ in isolation, much of the original decoration programme has been lost. Furthermore, the location of the Anastasis in the central apse appears to have more affinities with decoration programmes found in the region.

This disposition is unknown in Byzantine church decoration, where the scene is usually featured in the nave as part of the twelve scenes of the festival cycle (*Dodekaorton*). The rare occurrence of this image in the apse, which is also encountered in the Church of Abu Gosh (c. 1170) near Jerusalem,⁶⁵ may be due to influence of the (now lost) eleventh-century mosaic of the Anastasis in the main apse of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.⁶⁶ On the other hand, one should not exclude the possibility that the decision to include the Anastasis and the Baptism was governed by the main functions of the Church of Mar Fauqa itself. There are strong indications, both in the architecture of the church and the lay-out of its decoration programme, that it was particularly used for funerary and baptismal purposes.⁶⁷

As far as the Byzantine tradition is concerned, the strong thematic affiliation between the Baptism and the Anastasis did not result only in the mere juxtaposition of the themes, but also initiated the exchange of compositional elements and iconographic motifs. In this respect, the most striking example is perhaps the distinct parallelism, which is often encountered between the jagged rocky outline of the banks of the river Jordan and the opening of Hades.⁶⁸ This topographical similarity constitutes a visual reminder that Christ's immersion in the river of death is analogous to his descent into Hell. Especially in versions portraying the Jordan as the waters of Death, for instance through the inclusion of dragons and snakes (evoking Psalm 73:13-14), Christ's descent into the river Jordan becomes a figure of his sojourn in Hell.⁶⁹ This idea is given even further development in late-Byzantine renderings of the Baptism in which the motif of the broken gates of Hades, which have fallen in the shape of a cross, features prominently in the Jordan where the broken gates are placed under Christ's feet.

A good example is the wall painting at the Monastery of Gračanica in Serbia (late fourteenth century).⁷⁰ In borrowing the gates from the Anastasis, the compiler of this composition has ingeniously fused the descent into the Jordan with the descent into Hell. In turn, the link between the two themes is established even more naturally within the Anastasis through the addition of John the Baptist, who forms an integral part of the theme from the tenth century onwards. Kartsonis argues that his inclusion may be due, at least in part, to the

⁶⁴ Immerzeel 2004a, 24; *idem* 2009, 92.

⁶⁵ Kühnel 1988, 153-155, Pls XL-XLI.

⁶⁶ Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 40; Kühnel 1988, 155.

⁶⁷ Immerzeel 2009, 92.

⁶⁸ Schiller 1966-1980, I, 145.

⁶⁹ *ODB*, II, 1220; Schiller 1966-1980, I, 146-147; Wessel 1988, esp. 379-381. Early examples include several Psalters with marginal decorations in which Psalm 73:13 is accompanied by an illustration of the Baptism with a snake-like dragon and a demon: see, for instance, the Khludov Psalter, Moscow, Historical Museum, cod. 129, fol. 72v, ninth century (Schiller 1966-1980, I, Fig. 359; Corrigan 1992, 11, Fig. 88).

⁷⁰ Lafontaine-Dosogne 1989, 56, Fig. 11; Millet 1961, 198, Fig. 171; Milošević 1989, 52, Fig. 29; Wessel 1988, 380-381.

liturgical association between baptism and resurrection, emphasizing that John's appearance in any given composition inherently brings to mind the Baptism of Christ.⁷¹ Now, bearing in mind this strong symbolical, liturgical, and visual relationship between baptism and resurrection, let us turn again to the iconography of the Baptism painting in the Church of Mar Giworgis.

5.3.4 An Accumulation of Resurrectional Symbolism

An important clue to the interpretation of the two women in the lower left-hand corner of the mural is provided by the vessels that they carry in their right hands (Pl. 31). These attributes clearly associate them with the women who brought spices and ointment to Christ's tomb on Easter Sunday morning, who are known better as the Myrophores or the Women at the Tomb.⁷² Although the Holy Women are also included in other themes, such as the Chairete and the Crucifixion, in those scenes they are commonly depicted *without* vessels. It has often been argued that in Byzantine and Eastern Christian art the representation of the Women at the Tomb is usually confined to two women, because of the more important position of Matthew 28:1-10 in many eastern liturgies, while the West favours three women, in accordance with Mark 16:1-10.⁷³ Thomas Mathews has shown that this geographical division cannot be maintained, pointing out that Armenian iconography commonly represents three women at the tomb in accordance with the Armenian liturgy, which uses Mark for Easter.⁷⁴ The Armenian material thus appears to confirm a liturgical connection, but the occurrence of three women in the scene at Deir Mar Musa in Syria (Layer 2; A.D. 1095),⁷⁵ and at Deir Anba Antonius (late thirteenth century) near the Red Sea in Egypt,⁷⁶ shows that one cannot make clear-cut distinctions.

Although the various accounts of the events of Easter Sunday in the Gospels do not mention the Virgin Mary, from the sixth century onwards one of the women tends to be characterized as Christ's mother, drawing on the allusion to the 'other Mary' in Matthew 28:1. She is then distinguished in a variety of ways, either through the addition of a clarifying inscription (as in a seventh-century icon from Sinai showing the Chairete, for example) or in her general appearance, for instance through the purple colour of her dress and the addition of four points or stars above her forehead and on her shoulders (as on the Sancta Sanctorum reliquary box, for example). Sometimes the Virgin is given a nimbus and the other women are not thus endowed (Rabbula Codex),⁷⁷ or there may be a difference in colour if they are all provided with a nimbus. It would seem that in our wall painting the Mary at the front is distinguished as the Mother of God by the small cross that appears to be placed on her *maphorion*, but it will not be possible to confirm this until the painting has been cleaned and studied in detail.

⁷¹ Kartsonis 1986, 172-173.

⁷² On the iconography of the Women at the Tomb, see Kartsonis 1986, 19-24; Millet 1961, 517-540; Vilette 1957, 59-87; *LCI*, II, 54-62 (J. Myslivec, G. Jázai).

⁷³ Leroy 1964, 382; Millet 1961, 517.

⁷⁴ Mathews/Sanjian 1991, 115-117.

⁷⁵ Westphalen 2007, 110, Pl. 17; Immerzeel 2009, 63, Pl. 31; Zibawi 2009, 108, plate on p. 109.

⁷⁶ Bolman 2002, 135, Fig. 8.4. Three women were perhaps also featured at the tomb in a now-lost wall painting (A.D. 953) at Tebtunis in Fayyum: Walters 1989, 197-199, Pl. XXII, who suggests that the scene may have been the result of a conflation between the Women at the Tomb and the Chairete. On the dating of this painting, see Bolman 2002, 93 n. 18.

⁷⁷ For the icon representing the Chairete from Sinai, see Weitzmann 1974, 43, Fig. 25; for the wooden reliquary box from the Sancta Sanctorum, Rome (sixth century), see Weitzmann 1974, 42, Fig. 23; for the Rabbula Codex, see Leroy 1964, 180, Pl. 32.

It may be argued that the inclusion of the two holy women, who apparently function as a sort of *pars pro toto* for the scene of the Women at the Tomb, is a direct reference to the Resurrection. As mentioned above, the image of the Women at the Tomb was the most important pictorial symbol of the Resurrection in the Early Christian and Byzantine world. While this role was soon taken over by the Anastasis, the scene retained this connotation throughout the centuries. In this context, one should mention a thirteenth-century icon from Deir al-Surian in Egypt, which displays an elaborate version of the Crucifixion. Several of its iconographic details have led Hunt to relate this icon to the Easter liturgy in Jerusalem and to propose a Palestinian provenance.⁷⁸ She suggests a comparable referential function for the female personification in the top left corner, holding a flask and standing in a shell which is held by an angel.⁷⁹ Similarly to the Baptism painting, the inclusion of this attribute clearly associates this figure with the Women at the Tomb carrying their phials of ointment on Easter morning.

While the two women evidently relate to the Women at the Tomb, the old prototype of the Resurrection, the two figures on the opposite side of the composition appear to allude to the new prototype of the Resurrection, the Anastasis. As far as the iconography of the latter theme is concerned, the type most frequently used from the eleventh century onwards shows Christ raising Adam from his tomb by pulling him by the hand. Eve usually follows immediately behind Adam, raising her hands in supplication to Christ. Adam is invariably represented as an old man with white hair and a beard; Eve wears a tunic and *maphorion*, which is traditionally red in colour.⁸⁰ It is not difficult, then, to recognize the similarities between the two subsidiary figures in the lower right-hand corner of the Baptism painting and the Adam and Eve of the Anastasis. The male figure in front is similarly portrayed as an old man with white hair and a beard, while the woman standing behind him is appropriately dressed in a red *maphorion*. The fact that both figures are nimbed does not impede their identification as Adam and Eve, for the protoplasts can be represented either with or without a nimbus. In illustrated Syrian Orthodox manuscripts, for instance, Adam and Eve have haloes in the lectionary from Deir Mar Mattai (Vat. Syr. 559; 1220 or 1260), whereas in the closely related manuscript BL Add. 7170 (c. 1220) they do not.⁸¹

Strikingly, Adam and Eve are also regularly featured in other epiphanies, such as the Last Judgement, in which they are placed beside the Hetoimasia,⁸² and in apocalyptic visions, for example in the apse of the Church of St Barbara (1006 or 1021) at Soğanlı, Cappadocia.⁸³ Kartsonis suggests that they were directly borrowed from the Anastasis, pointing out that the semantic interrelationship between these themes resulted in the exchange of iconographical motifs.⁸⁴ A similar process may thus be postulated for the inclusion of Adam and Eve in the Baptism painting.

Finally, it should be observed that the Women at the Tomb and the Anastasis are often paired in middle-Byzantine church decoration, especially, it appears, in Cappadocia. In the Old Tokalı Kilise, for instance, these subjects form the last two scenes of a sub-cycle of

⁷⁸ Hunt 2000c, 127-152; *idem* 2005, 198-200, Fig. 110; *idem* 2009, 337; Skalova/Gabra 2006, Pl. 6c; Immerzeel 2009, 32-33.

⁷⁹ Hunt 2000c, Fig. 6.

⁸⁰ Nicolaïdès 1996, 90.

⁸¹ Vatican Library, Ms. Syr. 559, fol. 146v (Leroy 1964, 294, Pl. 92.2); London, BL Add. 7170, fol. 156v (Leroy 1964, 308, Pl. 92.1). Cf. Nicolaïdès 1996, 90.

⁸² Torcello, Sta. Maria Assunta, eleventh century (Kartsonis 1986, Pl. 58); Canavar Kilise, Soğanlı, Cappadocia, thirteenth century (Restle 1967, III, no. XLIX, Pl. 465); Deir Mar Musa, Syria (Cruikshank Dodd 2001, Pls XVII, 64; Immerzeel 2009, 65-66, Pl. 37).

⁸³ Jolivet-Lévy 1991, 260, Pls 143.2, 144.2, 145.1; Restle 1967, III, no. XLVI, Fig. 433.

⁸⁴ Kartsonis 1986, 153-156.

paintings (tenth century) dealing with the death and resurrection of Christ.⁸⁵ Kartsonis has pointed out that the scenes are not simply juxtaposed, but are inventively connected with each other by means of Christ's tomb, which functions simultaneously as the sarcophagus from which David and Solomon emerge.⁸⁶ The same combination is found in Karşı Kilise (1212).⁸⁷ The two scenes are also paired in the Chapel of the Theotokos, John the Baptist, and St George or Chapel 9 in Göreme (late tenth century),⁸⁸ in Çarıklı Kilise or Chapel 22 in Göreme (second half of the twelfth century),⁸⁹ in Karabaş Kilise (eleventh century), and in Karanlık Kilise or Chapel 23 in Göreme (c. 1200-1210).⁹⁰ In this context there is a unique late Byzantine icon in the Walters Gallery of Art in Ohio, dating from the early fourteenth century, which also merits a mention.⁹¹ The upper part of the icon is devoted to the Anastasis. In the lower part, the theme of the Women at the Tomb is elaborated into two successive episodes, illustrating Matthew 27:61 and 28:2 respectively.

Syrian Orthodox manuscript illustration also provides parallels for the combination of the Anastasis and the Women at the Tomb. In the lectionary from Deir Mar Mattai (1220 or 1260), the two scenes are featured side by side, albeit in separate miniatures: the Women at the Tomb (together with the Chairete) on the left, and the Anastasis on the right.⁹² The Lectionary of Dioscorus Theodorus (c. 1250) also links the two themes.⁹³ This manuscript contains nineteen illustrations, eleven of which depict scenes relating to the Holy Week and Easter. The miniature of the Anastasis is included on page 307,⁹⁴ directly preceded by the Women at the Tomb on page 306.⁹⁵ In contrast to the usual composition, the latter scene is not confined to the angel and the Myrophores at the empty tomb, but it also prominently features the figure of Christ, who himself points out the grave to the women. Even more interesting is the large patriarchal cross which Christ displays. This type of cross is not only a general reminder of the Passion of Christ, but also a specific visual and symbolic reference to the Anastasis, of which, from the eleventh century onwards, it is one of the most important attributes.⁹⁶ Thus, the inclusion of Christ carrying a patriarchal cross in the scene of the Women at the Tomb is a direct allusion to the Anastasis featured on the following page.

To conclude: the iconographic analysis of the wall painting at the Church of Mar Giworgis shows that it is an ingeniously created composition consisting of a regular Baptism of Christ combined with the two women from the scene of the Women at the Tomb, and Adam and Eve from the Anastasis. The inclusion of these additional figures clearly stresses the resurrectional symbolism of the Baptism. The ultimate literary source for the combination of these three subjects is found in the Pauline teaching of Romans 6, according to which the sacramental act of baptism is a participation in the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ. To paraphrase Kartsonis, the Baptism painting at the Church of Mar Giworgis can therefore be considered a synoptic review of this teaching.⁹⁷ Although direct compositional models do not appear to have been preserved, the pictorial synthesis between the Baptism and the Anastasis, familiar from Middle Byzantine art, should be given serious consideration as a visual

⁸⁵ Restle 1967, II, no. X, Figs 77, 94-95.

⁸⁶ Kartsonis 1986, 166, Fig. 61.

⁸⁷ Jolivet-Lévy 2001, 176-177, Figs 5, 9; Restle 1967, III, no. LI, Figs 471-472.

⁸⁸ Restle 1967, II, no. XII, Fig. 124.

⁸⁹ Restle 1967, II, no. XXI, Figs 210-211.

⁹⁰ Restle 1967, III, no. XLVIII, Figs 456, 461-462; *idem*, II, no. XXII, Figs 238-239.

⁹¹ The Walters Art Gallery, Washington, D.C., inv. no. 37.751 (Gouma-Peterson 1984-1985, 48-60).

⁹² Vatican Library, Ms. Syr. 559, fol. 146v (Leroy 1964, 294, Pls 79.2, 92.2; Smine 1993, Fig. 13).

⁹³ Leroy 1964, 371-383. Cf. Doumato 1999.

⁹⁴ Leroy 1964, 376, Pl. 133.1.

⁹⁵ Leroy 1964, 376, Pl. 132.2. Leroy does not provide folio numbers.

⁹⁶ Kartsonis 1986, 205-207.

⁹⁷ Kartsonis 1986, 215: '... the antithetical pair Baptism-Anastasis ... may be considered an equally synoptic review of the doctrine of re-creation and redemption, and hence, of Christ's divine nature'.

precedent. It may at least be argued that our complex composition and the Baptism-Anastasis pair stem from the same tradition, in which the Baptism is directly associated with the Resurrection.

5.3.5 Baptismal Themes in the Syrian Orthodox Tradition

Although the iconographic source for this particularly elaborate version of the Baptism must probably be sought in the Byzantine tradition, or at least as yet finds its closest parallels in Middle Byzantine art, the scene was still painted within a distinctively Syrian Orthodox context. In order to shed some light on how this community may have understood the imagery, we therefore have to turn to the baptismal rites performed in the Syrian Orthodox Church at the time and, more importantly, to the commentaries of Syrian Orthodox authors on these rites.⁹⁸ The standard baptismal service in the Syrian Orthodox Church is attributed to Patriarch Severus of Antioch (512-518).⁹⁹ Two additional services are known in the Syrian Orthodox tradition, but they were no longer used at this time, one attributed to a Timothy of Alexandria, and the other anonymous.¹⁰⁰ Besides the baptismal rites themselves, a number of commentaries on these rites have survived in the Syrian Orthodox tradition, including those written by George, Bishop of the Arab tribes (d. 724),¹⁰¹ Moses bar Kepha (d. 903),¹⁰² Dionysius bar Salibi (d. 1171),¹⁰³ and Barhebraeus (d. 1286).¹⁰⁴

Numerous studies have been devoted to the baptismal service in the Syriac tradition, the most elucidating being those by Brock, who has conveniently traced the main ways in which the sacrament of baptism was understood by the Syriac commentators, including those of the Syrian Orthodox denomination.¹⁰⁵ Brock has pointed out that even though the baptismal rite was interpreted in a variety of ways, there are essentially two basic conceptual models that lay at the foundation of these interpretations: the first model, following John 3:5, describes baptism as a rebirth; the second model describes it as a death, burial, and resurrection, thereby following the Pauline theology of baptism as formulated in Romans 6. In view of the above discussion of the iconography of the wall painting at the Church of Mar Giworgis, it is obviously the second model which deserves our detailed attention here.

It should first be pointed out that the image of the baptism as a representation of the death and resurrection of Christ does not appear to have played a dominant role in the Syriac baptismal rites themselves. Although some Syriac rites occasionally use language from Romans 6 (e.g., 'the old man' and 'being planted in likeness of the death of Christ'), the water is never described as the 'grave' or the baptized as 'being buried'.¹⁰⁶ According to Spinks, the Syrian Orthodox rite 'tends to stress themes of forgiveness and recapitulation of the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. Resurrection is emphasized, but as part of regeneration and new life following the drama of rejecting evil. Both tomb and womb are implicit, womb only slightly more so than tomb'.¹⁰⁷ This virtual absence of the Pauline theology in the baptismal rites is perhaps all the more remarkable given the fact that the conceptual model of baptism as death followed by resurrection gained considerable importance in the baptismal commentaries from

⁹⁸ For a short survey of the most important texts concerning the Syriac baptismal tradition, see the Appendix in Brock 1991, 210-214, which includes the main bibliographical references.

⁹⁹ Brock 1972.

¹⁰⁰ Brock 1970a; *idem* 1977-1978.

¹⁰¹ George, Bishop of the Arab tribes, *Exposition of the Mysteries*: Connolly/Codrington 1913, 11-15.

¹⁰² Moses bar Kepha, *The Mysteries of Baptism*: Aytoun 1973, 1-15.

¹⁰³ Dionysius bar Salibi, *Commentary on Baptism*: Varghese 2006.

¹⁰⁴ Barhebraeus, *Lamp of the Sanctuary*, Ch. 3, § 3: Kohlhaas 1959, 33, 36.

¹⁰⁵ Brock 1991.

¹⁰⁶ Brock 1979, 79.

¹⁰⁷ Spinks 2006, 88.

at least the fifth century onwards, where it featured alongside the early Syrian symbolism of baptism as rebirth.

In the Syrian Orthodox tradition, Severus of Antioch, who wrote in Greek, was one of the first to associate the triple immersion at baptism with the three days Christ spent in the sepulchre, and to describe the baptismal font as the tomb of Christ. In his Homily 23, Severus directly links the triple immersion with the Pauline theology of baptism, as he urges the catechumens to go to 'the source of the Jordan, full of the Holy Spirit, and of purification and of divine fire, in which you will be buried with Christ at the same time as you are burying the old man [Adam] in the waters. For because of that, by the triple immersion we also understand the three day burial and resurrection from this world'.¹⁰⁸

In explaining the baptismal rite, womb and tomb imagery do not necessarily mutually exclude one another. On the contrary, they are often used in conjunction. An early example of this combination is found in three closely-related West Syrian commentaries, all from the fifth to the seventh century. Constituting the main source for George, Bishop of the Arab tribes, they were also known to other later Syrian Orthodox commentators, such as Moses bar Kephra and Dionysius bar Salibi.¹⁰⁹ According to the three early commentaries, 'The font fulfils the place of the grave. The water in it is the womb which gave birth to life. Baptism is also rebirth'. Another passage has it that 'The threefold baptism in water is a symbol of the three days Jesus was in the Sheol among the dead' and 'Our going up from the font is a sign of the resurrection of Jesus from the grave'.¹¹⁰ In the words of George, Bishop of the Arab tribes, 'The font represents the tomb of Christ; and the water that is in it, the womb that brings forth children, spiritual and immortal and incorruptible, as by a resurrection of the dead. The baptism of him who is baptized is a re-birth. That he is dipped three times, is a mystery of the three days our Lord was in the tomb'.¹¹¹

Similarly, Dionysius bar Salibi writes that 'The font or the pool of baptism takes the place of the tomb of Jesus, and therefore, when the baptized descends, he descends as if to the tomb. The water in the font (symbolizes) the womb that gives birth to the spiritual sons, as though after the resurrection of the dead. Baptism that he receives is regeneration'.¹¹² The ascent from the baptismal font is not only seen as a symbol of the resurrection of Christ, but also of all Christians. In this respect, Bar Salibi writes the following: 'The ascent from the font signifies three things: first, the ascent and resurrection of Jesus from the grave; second, that we shall have an ascent and resurrection from the grave at the last day; and third, that we shall have an ascent above the heavens if we preserve baptism undefiled'.¹¹³

This brief overview shows that, besides the concept of baptism as rebirth, Syrian Orthodox commentators invariably adopted the Pauline theology for explaining the baptismal rite. The triple immersion in the baptismal water and leaving the font symbolize death and resurrection with Christ. Along the same lines, the baptism of Christ is a symbol of his death and resurrection. Given the prevalence of this symbolism in the Syrian Orthodox baptismal tradition, it may be argued that the Syrian Orthodox viewer would have explained the symbolic content of the Baptism painting in the Church of Mar Giworgis in similar terms. The fact that the Syrian Orthodox commentaries on the significance of baptism contribute to our understanding of the painting does not necessarily imply, however, that its unique iconographic details are due to local influence, nor that the texts mentioned above served as a direct source of inspiration. In this respect, it should be stressed that the paschal theme of

¹⁰⁸ Severus of Antioch, *Homily* 42: Spinks 2006, 85.

¹⁰⁹ Brock 1980, 20.

¹¹⁰ Brock 1980, 41, 43.

¹¹¹ Connolly/Codrington 1913, 14; Spinks 2006, 86.

¹¹² Varghese 2006, 142 (translation), 143 (text).

¹¹³ Aytoun 1973, 13; Brock 1979, 81.

death and resurrection in the understanding of the baptism is found, alongside the main themes of cleansing and rebirth or regeneration, in other Christian contexts as well, including the Byzantine Orthodox, the Coptic, the Armenian Orthodox, and the East Syrian tradition.¹¹⁴

In short, a study of the relevant Syrian Orthodox texts does not lead to a different interpretation than has been offered above. Moreover, it has already been stated that there are some arguments more in favour of a Byzantine source for this particular version of the Baptism. The link between baptism and resurrection is often expressed visually in Byzantine works of art: they are not only paired but allusions to the Anastasis are also frequently found within Baptism representations themselves. Moreover, the accumulation of narrative detail accords well with general developments in the Byzantine tradition. Be that as it may, what is relevant to the present study is that although this rendering of the Baptism appears to be unique, it would equally have been appropriate in a non-Syrian Orthodox context.

5.4 Style

As mentioned in the introduction to the present chapter, the analysis of the style of the Baptism painting is hampered by the fact that it has not been possible to study it *in situ*, by its present condition, and by the insufficient photographic material. Nevertheless, some preliminary observations can still be made.

Although large parts of the painting are covered with white dust, which has remained on the surface after the removal of the nineteenth-century layer of plaster, it seems that the artist's palette was limited, with reddish colours predominating. Dark red is used for the contours separating the different parts; white, ochre-yellow, orange, red, and red-brown for the clothes; and orange for the fish. The depiction of the figures is characterized by the flat rendering of their faces, hands, and dress, of which the outlines and folds are indicated by heavy contour lines. No attempt has been made to give the persons any sense of corporeality. On the contrary, the general lack of highlights or indications of shadowing gives them an insubstantial presence. The hair and beards are schematized; the eyes, ears, noses, and mouths indicated merely by simple lines.

The artist was certainly not a very highly skilled painter. His line drawing is unstable and the proportions of some of the figures are clumsy. Consider, for instance, John the Baptist, whose left arm is nearly twice as long as his right. The limited skills of the artist are especially visible in the rendering of the four small subsidiary figures in the lower half of the painting, with their narrow shoulders and oversized hands in comparison to the heads. Similar flaws can be found in the awkward representation of Adam's right arm, the apparent inability to typify the attributes carried by the two women, and the execution of the mantle of the front angel on the left: instead of revealing the lower leg underneath, the mantle makes an unnaturally long sweeping curve to the left.

All in all, whereas the iconography of the Baptism painting can be characterized as sophisticated, its style can best be described as simplistic. The poor quality of the work as a whole was perhaps determined by geographical, social, and economic factors. It should be borne in mind that we are dealing with a small parish church, arguably decorated by an artist who was hired with the limited financial resources of its rural community. Of course, great wealth would have been required to obtain the skills of the most highly trained artists. On the other hand, the patrons would also have been dependent on the availability of workshops; perhaps there were simply no artists active in the area at the time who could have produced murals of a more elevated quality.

¹¹⁴ Spinks 2006, 76, 95, 104, 107-108.

Unlike the iconography of the painting, there is nothing in its style which points to Byzantine influence. This immediately reinforces the hypothesis of a locally trained artist. Given the lack of surviving Christian wall paintings in Iraq, the first comparison to be made is with two Syriac lectionaries made for the Syrian Orthodox Church: the one from Deir Mar Mattai (Vat. Syr. 559), dating from 1220 or 1260¹¹⁵, and the related London codex (Add. 7170), from about 1220 (see Chapter 4).¹¹⁶ These two manuscripts display the same tendency towards the flattening and simplification of forms, although admittedly they are painted with more tonalities and subtle shading, in particular in the dress and the faces. In the simple treatment of the facial features of the Holy Women, John the Baptist, and the angels, the wall painting echoes the figures depicted in three-quarter view in both lectionaries, with the distinction that the latter figures, which often feature almond-shaped eyes, more closely follow trends in Islamic painting. While the painting employs a limited palette, the lectionaries are typified by a broad range of colours, such as orange, vermilion, yellow, light green, and ultramarine, which are often heavily contrasted. Although they share some general characteristics, the suggestion of a direct link between the manuscripts and the painting can be excluded.

Besides sharing some general stylistic and compositional features with the illuminations from the two lectionaries, the style of the painting at the Church of Mar Giworgis also shows some similarities, albeit very general, with thirteenth-century wall paintings from Lebanon and Syria, executed in what is known as the 'Syrian style' (see Section 2.6). These too are typified by a restrained palette, the simplified use of colours and shadows, a distinct linearity in design, and compact, squarely-built figures with round or egg-shaped heads. Typical exponents of this local style are found in Lebanon in the Church of Mar Tadros in Bahdeidat,¹¹⁷ the Church of Mar Charbel in Ma^cad,¹¹⁸ and the Church of Mar Saba in Eddé al-Batrun,¹¹⁹ all three probably dating from around the second or third quarter of the thirteenth century.¹²⁰ Paintings in a comparable style also adorn the walls of several churches in Syria, such as Layer 3 in Deir Mar Musa (A.D. 1208/09),¹²¹ as well as the Church of Sts Sergius and Bacchus and the second layer in the Chapel of Deir Mar Ya^cqub (c. 1200-1266), both in Qara.¹²² This group is contrasted with a second cluster of paintings whose formal characteristics betray Byzantine influences.¹²³

Despite obvious differences in execution and craftsmanship, some basic characteristics shared with the 'Syrian style' paintings mentioned are the general tendency towards the flattening and simplification of forms, together with a common preference for strongly indicated folds and contours. In other words, these works exhibit a comparably flat, linear style which does not aim at portraying the human figure with mass and volume. On a more detailed level, the frontally depicted figures display the same shape of head and neck. The small figure of Eve (Pl. 32) may be compared with the Virgin *Galactothrophousa* in the Church of Sts Sergius and Bacchus in Qara,¹²⁴ the Virgin with souls on her lap in Deir Mar

¹¹⁵ Leroy 1964, 280-302.

¹¹⁶ Leroy 1964, 302-313.

¹¹⁷ Cruikshank Dodd 2004, cat. no. 19; Hérou 1999, 16-17, Pls 1-6; *idem* 2006, 66-67; Immerzeel 2009, 101-105, Pls 64-70.

¹¹⁸ Cruikshank Dodd 2004, cat. no. 18; Hérou 1999, 17-18, Pls 7-9; Immerzeel 2009, 105-108, Pls 71-79.

¹¹⁹ Cruikshank Dodd 2004, cat. no. 15; Hérou 1999, 18-19, Pls 10-12; Immerzeel 2009, 108-111, Pls 80-89.

¹²⁰ Immerzeel 2009, 140-142.

¹²¹ Cruikshank Dodd 2001. On the date of A.D. 1208/09 for the paintings of Layer 3, see ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2007, 167-168, inscr. no. B18.

¹²² Schmidt/Westphalen 2005, 120-124, Pls IX-XI, 4-12, 15.

¹²³ Cruikshank Dodd 2001, 112-114, 117-119; *idem* 2004, 95-96, 102-103; Immerzeel 2004a, 24-26; Schmidt/Westphalen 2005, 120-124.

¹²⁴ Cruikshank Dodd 2001, 110-111, Pl. 89; *idem* 2004, Pl. C5; Schmidt/Westphalen 2005, Pl. 12a; Westphalen 2000, 496, Fig. 26.

Musa,¹²⁵ and St Daniel as an *orans* in the Church of Mar Tadros in Bahdeidat.¹²⁶ The heads of these figures are all oval-shaped and rest on conical necks, rather resembling an egg in an eggcup. The facial features, however, are strikingly different. In the case of the murals executed in the ‘Syrian style’, the faces are typified by delicate mouths with clearly defined lips, large eyes with curling eyelashes, and heavy dark eyebrows, both continuing into the long straight nose with small circles for the nostrils. By contrast, the eyes of Eve in the Baptism are small, and her nose is slightly curved and indicated only by one line.

Finally, two more general observations can be made. The first is that in the twelfth and thirteenth century the jagged rocky outline of the banks of the river Jordan encountered here is often favoured, as opposed to smoother contours.¹²⁷ The second is that the winding spirals in the decorative frieze underneath the painting, with their regularly winding pattern, call to mind the scrolling stems with hooked leaves that are encountered on the liturgical fan (A.D. 1202/03), made for the Syrian Orthodox community living in Deir al-Surian in Egypt, which was produced in Northern Mesopotamia, most probably Mosul (see Chapter 3; Pls 10-11).¹²⁸ This floral ornament is a common feature of thirteenth-century Syrian and Mesopotamian metalwork and may therefore be an indication of local influence, although at present this must remain a mere hypothesis.

To summarize, the wall painting at the Church of Mar Giworgis is executed in a provincial style, which is comparable to a certain degree with the two Syrian Orthodox lectionaries from Northern Mesopotamia, and with the ‘Syrian style’ murals from Lebanon and Syria, even though some of its features set it apart. The individual style of the painting has no direct parallels. At present, it cannot be established whether the unique characteristics are strictly the result of the primitive style of the artist, or whether they betray a local painting tradition of which no other traces remain. In general terms, similarities can be found in the preference for the simplification of forms, the lack of shading, and the predomination of strong contours, but it is too early to draw particular connections between our painting and those from Lebanon and Syria. Future finds may be more revealing in this matter.

Nevertheless, the art-historical research on the Baptism painting has provided enough elements to support the hypothesis that it was painted in the thirteenth century. Some of the iconographic details, such as the numerous fish and the multiplication of attending angels, are mainly encountered from that period onwards. Furthermore, the stylistic similarities with the Syrian Orthodox lectionaries and a group of wall paintings from Lebanon and Syria executed in the so-called Syrian style contribute additional evidence for attributing the painting to the thirteenth century. In order to shed some more light on the date, we shall turn to the history of Qaraqosh in general and the Church of Mar Giworgis in particular, especially around the thirteenth century and within the greater context of the historical events of that period.

5.5 Wider Historical and Artistic Context

The history of Qaraqosh, which in Sureth is called Beth-Khudedā, Bukhdeda or Bagdeda (‘the home of the gods’), can be traced on the basis of a variety of sources, especially the colophons of manuscripts copied there, and the large number of inscriptions, ranging from the twelfth to the twentieth century, which have recently been compiled and studied by Harrak.¹²⁹ Unfortunately, little is known about the history of the town and its churches prior to the

¹²⁵ Cruikshank Dodd 2001, Pl. 69c.

¹²⁶ Cruikshank Dodd 2004, Pls 19.12, 19.25; Hélou 1999, 16-17, Pl. 4.

¹²⁷ Boyd 1974, 297.

¹²⁸ Snelders/Immerzeel 2004, 116, 130, Pls 1, 3.

¹²⁹ Harrak 2009. On the history of Qaraqosh and its churches, see Fiey 1965, II, 439-461; Khan 2002, 1-7.

twelfth century. It has generally been assumed that Qaraqosh was Dyophysite in late antiquity, but turned to Miaphysitism around the beginning of the seventh century, under the influence of Deir Mar Mattai.¹³⁰ As we have seen in Chapter 2, the Mosul area experienced a flourishing period marked by great artistic activity during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Besides the blossoming of Islamic art, the production of Christian art also reached a peak.

The present study reveals the considerable extent of the output of metalwork (see Chapter 3), manuscript illustration (see Chapter 4), and sculpture (see Chapters 6-7) associated with the Syrian Orthodox community, especially when taken together. One of the Syrian Orthodox monasteries which appears to have profited from the economic and cultural wealth of the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries is Deir Mar Behnam, located about 16 km to the south of Qaraqosh. Although a dedicatory inscription in the sanctuary reports that a significant restoration took place in A.G. 1475 (A.D. 1164), most of the surviving sculptural decoration closely resembles examples from the reign of Badr al-Din Lu'lu', and may therefore be dated to 1233-1259. Some of the artists who contributed to the refurbishment of the monastery's church may also have been responsible for the stone sculpture decorating the Royal Gate in the Church of Mart Shmuni in Qaraqosh, which can be dated, on the basis of stylistic analysis, to the mid-thirteenth century. We will return to these matters in Chapters 6 and 7.

Qaraqosh is also known to have brought forth several famous scribes during this period, such as the monk Isa'aya from Deir Mar Mattai,¹³¹ and the brothers Rabban Sergius and Rabban Bacchus, who were monks at the Monastery of the Mother of God (or of the 'Hermits') in Edessa. In the second part of his long career, Bacchus was active at Deir al-Surian in Egypt, probably between 1230 and 1257.¹³² Moreover, he was not the only monk at Deir al-Surian who originated from Qaraqosh. Only two decades before him, John of Beth-Khudedā, together with the monk Zakhe, donated several manuscripts to the monastery (see Section 3.5.2). Another monk from Qaraqosh, a certain Mansur, also went down in the annals, though not as a scribe. He is credited with the construction, before 1286, of the small cave on the Jabal Maqlub which was used by Maphrian Barhebraeus. The cell is located slightly to the north of Deir Mar Mattai.¹³³

The middle of the thirteenth century was clearly a time when the spiritual and cultural life of Qaraqosh and other nearby Syrian Orthodox villages and monasteries flourished. The prosperous period in the Mosul area soon came to an end with the Mongol invasions (Chapter 2). The political disturbances of early Mongol rule also entailed difficulties for the numerous villages of the Mosul plain. Various bands of raiders, Mongols and Kurds in succession, freely roamed the province, attacking and plundering villages and monasteries on their way. In 1261, Kurdish raiders attacked the Monastery of Mar Mattai as well as Qaraqosh – the first of several attacks the village was to suffer over the following centuries.¹³⁴ Barhebraeus records in his *Chronicle* that the raiders occupied a 'nunnery of the sisters' and massacred its occupants, and killed many women and children.¹³⁵ As a result of the instability and the dangers with which they were confronted, many of the Syrian Orthodox Christians fled from Mosul towards Arbela in 1262.¹³⁶

When it comes to dating the Baptism painting, one should be careful about considering the year 1261-1262 as the *terminus ante quem* for its execution. Despite all the setbacks mentioned, great cultural activities continued in the Syrian Orthodox villages of the Mosul

¹³⁰ Fiey 1965, II, 442; Khan 2002, 1-2; Harrak 2009.

¹³¹ Barsoum 2003, 488; Fiey 1965, II, 443.

¹³² Bigoul el-Suriany 2004, 285; Evelyn White 1932-1934, II, 449; Fiey 1965, II, 444; Leroy 1962, 103-120; *idem* 1964, 106, 318, n. 6.

¹³³ Harrak 2009.

¹³⁴ Fiey 1965, II, 444; *idem* 1975b, 28.

¹³⁵ Budge 1932, I, 441.

¹³⁶ Fiey 1959, 47; *idem* 1975b, 28-29.

plain. In 1282, Barhebraeus commissioned Gabriel of Bartelli, a monk from Deir Mar Mattai, to build a church in Bartelli to house the relics of Yuhanon bar Naggare (see Section 5.6C). Another case in point is the sculptural activity at the end of the thirteenth century at Deir Mar Behnam. In 1295, the monastery was looted by Mongol raiders, a disaster which is commemorated in a lengthy Syriac inscription (AE.01.20) in the church of the monastery.¹³⁷ After these disturbances, the relics of Mar Behnam were transferred to the nearby mausoleum, where they were buried in a new stone grave with ornamental decoration, built in the year 1300 at the behest of Mas'ud ibn Ya'qub ibn Mubarak Naziq of Bartelli.¹³⁸

This finally brings us to the manuscript which preserves the first historical mention of the Church of Mar Giworgis. The manuscript, a service book containing the order of the Fast of Nineveh and the orders of the Commemoration of the Priests, the Strangers and the Dead, is currently preserved in the Church of al-Tahira in Qaraqosh, as Ms. 11. According to the colophon, it was transcribed by Priest John Khamis of Sinjar and Deacon Michael at the Monastery of the Forty Martyrs in Bartelli for the Church of Mar Giworgis in Qaraqosh; the year is given as 1581 of the Greeks, which corresponds to A.D. 1269/70.¹³⁹ Although there is nothing to indicate a direct relation between the date of the manuscript and the painting of the Baptism, the fact that the former was made for the Church of Mar Giworgis at least shows that there was spiritual and cultural activity at this particular church in the second half of the thirteenth century.

Furthermore, the peaceful and prosperous situation around the middle of the thirteenth century would have created favourable enough conditions to generate cultural activities in Qaraqosh. Some of the churches and monasteries in the vicinity were provided with new decoration programmes at this time, and it is not improbable that the wall painting in the Church of Mar Giworgis was also executed in this period. All in all, the Baptism painting may provisionally be dated to the thirteenth century.

5.6 Written Evidence for Medieval Wall Paintings in the Syrian Orthodox Church

When we consider Syrian Orthodox church decoration, the first observation is that few churches with monumental wall paintings dating from the medieval period have survived in the Middle East that can be ascribed a West Syrian derivation. It was already shown in Chapter 3 that the Syrian Orthodox community at Deir al-Surian in Egypt, where Syrian Orthodox and Coptic monks lived side by side, was involved in the embellishment of the monastery's church with wall paintings in the early thirteenth century. As far as Lebanon and Syria are concerned, the only monument with medieval wall paintings that has an unquestionably Syrian Orthodox tradition is Deir Mar Musa near Nebk, situated in the eastern Qalamun region. To these two instances may perhaps be added the thirteenth-century paintings in the Church of Mar Tadros in Bahdeidat, Lebanon (see Section 2.6B). Wall paintings are also to be seen, finally, in two churches in the Syrian Orthodox village of Sadad, namely in the Church of Mar Sarkis and the Church of the Archangel Gabriel. However, with the exception of a minor fragment of uncertain date in the latter church, these were executed in the eighteenth century.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Harrak 2004, 101-102; Harrak/Ruji 2004, 68-69, Fig. 3.

¹³⁸ Fiey 1965, II, 606-608; Harrak/Ruji 2004, 66-72, Fig. 4; Zibawi 2005, Fig. 5.

¹³⁹ Barsoum 2003, 74-75, 103, 544; Fiey 1965, II, 435, 458; Sony 2005. For the history of the Monastery of the Forty Martyrs, see Fiey 1965, II, 435-437.

¹⁴⁰ Immerzeel 2009, 43. The paintings in the Church of Mar Sarkis include representations of equestrian saints, patriarchs, apostles, monastic saints (e.g., Mar Behnam), the Presentation in the Temple, and the Last Judgement (Littmann 1928-1929; Chaillot 1993, 20-21; Balicka-Witakowski *et al.* 2001, Pls on 146-150); the murals in the Church of the Archangel Gabriel show the Nativity of Christ and the Dormition of the Virgin (Immerzeel 2007d,

Although the surviving evidence is thus very scant, numerous references in the written sources, including travel accounts, chronicles, and commentaries, suggest that Syrian Orthodox churches were frequently embellished with wall paintings, in particular in the period from the twelfth to the thirteenth century. A systematic compilation and study of these references would therefore be a valuable contribution to scholarship in this field. Unfortunately, such a wide-ranging study is beyond the scope of the present investigation. One essential problem is that the art historian, who tends to be less familiar with the various Semitic languages used in the sources that are most likely to contain pertinent information, is immediately faced with a general lack of adequate translations. To mention but one example, there is as yet not a full translation of *the* gazetteer of the medieval Middle-Eastern world, the Arabic geographical dictionary of the countries (*Mu'jam al-Buldan*) that was written by Yaqut al-Hamawi between 1224 and 1228.¹⁴¹ Moreover, if translations are at hand, they usually betray a certain amount of ambiguity as to how the original texts were translated, a problem already pointed out by Fiey.¹⁴² This section therefore aims at providing an initial impetus towards a more systematic and detailed study of the literary sources, focusing on Syrian Orthodox churches in general and those from the Mesopotamian region in particular.

A) Wall Paintings in Syrian Orthodox Churches in Central Mesopotamia

As yet, few fragments of Christian wall paintings have been discovered in Central Mesopotamia, but arguably many Syrian Orthodox churches and monasteries in Baghdad, Samarra, and Takrit must once have been embellished with painted decoration. We know, for instance, that in the seventh century Maphrian Bar Yeshu^c constructed a church dedicated to Sts Sergius and Bacchus in Takrit, the see of the highest Syrian Orthodox church leader in Mesopotamia from the mid-sixth through the mid-twelfth century, and had it decorated with beautiful images.¹⁴³ Nearly six hundred years later, Yaqut, in his geographical dictionary, recorded a 'small' church of the 'Jacobites', situated in the area of Dayr al-Rum in Baghdad. According to the author, the church contained frescoes and beautiful representations that attracted many visitors.¹⁴⁴

Archaeological excavations conducted during the 1990s at the site of al-Chenisa (Kanisat al-^cAbid; 'Church of the Servants'), situated on the banks of the Tigris at the other side of Takrit, have brought to light the remains of a West Syrian monastery. Small fragments of wall paintings were found, including isolated figures of monks, animal motifs, crosses, and ornamental designs.¹⁴⁵ Syriac inscriptions and archaeological artefacts indicate that the monastery was inhabited at least from 774 right into the thirteenth century.¹⁴⁶ Although the paintings have not yet been published and studied in full, they may at least be assumed to date from before the end of the fourteenth century. In 1394, the Mongols nearly destroyed the entire city and its vicinity, with the result that Christianity disappeared from Takrit.¹⁴⁷

Here we should also refer to a tenth-century poem by Abdul-Nasr al-Basri, in which he describes a famous representation at Deir Mar Sarkis, which was located in the vicinity of Samarra. The poem reads (in Bishr Farès' French translation): *Dans une chapelle, un tête me séduit; Puisse Allah éprouver celui qui l'ataillée. Un pinceau – abus de charme – a fleuri sa*

85, Fig. 17; Chaillot 1993, Pl. on p. 21). Underneath the murals in the latter church, there are some traces of older painted decoration. Eighteenth-century wall paintings have also been discovered in the Syrian Orthodox Monastery of Mar Gabriel near Mardin and other churches in Tur ^cAbdin (Chaillot 1993, 21-23).

¹⁴¹ In the absence of a translation, see the six-volume edition by Wüstenfeld (1866-1873).

¹⁴² Fiey 1969, 357-362.

¹⁴³ Chaillot 1993, 18.

¹⁴⁴ Quoted by Hinde 1943, 277; Nasrallah 1969, 70.

¹⁴⁵ Harrak 2001, 13-14, 16, 19.

¹⁴⁶ Harrak 2001, 14, 27.

¹⁴⁷ On the Christian history of Takrit, see Fiey 1963.

*beauté ... Au prêtre je l'envie ; Que n'a-t-elle été un jour par caprice broyée.*¹⁴⁸ Although the image featured in the chapel at the monastery was painted with a brush, apparently with some mastery, it remains unclear as to whether the poet was charmed by a wall painting or an icon. The same uncertainty applies with regard to a passage from a twelfth-century treatise against the West Syrians, in which the East Syrian priest Sabrisho bar Paulus mentions that he saw a representation of Christ and His Mother in a Syrian Orthodox church. According to Sabrisho, the image was provided with an inscription stating that 'this is Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the World'.¹⁴⁹

B) Wall Paintings at Deir Mar Barsauma near Melitene

As in the case of the programme of Maphrian Bar Yesu^c in the seventh century, the initiatives to build or decorate a church in subsequent centuries continued to be taken by members of the upper echelons of the Syrian Orthodox Church, albeit not exclusively (see Section 2.5). One of the most famous examples is Patriarch Michael the Syrian (1166-1199), who had a new church built and painted at Deir Mar Barsauma, then the seat of the Syrian Orthodox patriarchate. Having already commissioned several building activities at the monastery during the 1170s (see Section 2.3), Michael started the construction of a new church in 1180. In his *Chronicle*, Michael himself gives a detailed account of the entire enterprise, including information about how the building materials were obtained, the difficulties he encountered during the process, and such matters. To his dissatisfaction, the church could only be completed in 1193. It was officially consecrated on 15 May 1194, on the Feast day of Mar Barsauma.¹⁵⁰

As far as the appearance of the new church is concerned, the *Anonymous Chronicle of 1234* mentions that there was a beautiful dome in the middle of the church, decorated from top to bottom with paintings.¹⁵¹ Although we hear nothing about the subjects that were painted, the decoration must indeed have been sumptuous, for Barhebraeus informs us that the decoration campaign alone had taken no less than two years.¹⁵² A few decades later, new paintings were commissioned by Patriarch Ignatius II David (1222-1252), after the monastery had been struck by a fire and an earthquake in quick succession.¹⁵³ Ignatius commissioned murals for Michael's cell, which by then had been converted into a chapel. In addition, the main sanctuary erected by Michael was covered with lead because it was leaking and 'threatened to destroy the admirable frescoes that covered the walls'.¹⁵⁴ Ignatius is also known to have been responsible for the decoration of the Monastery of the Cursor near Melitene (Malatya).¹⁵⁵

C) Wall Paintings at Deir Mar Yuhanon bar Naggare near Bartelli

The above examples illustrate that wall paintings are often merely alluded to in the written sources. Occasionally, however, such references contain more detailed information, which sheds light on the circumstances of the patronage, the identity of the patrons, the background of the artists contracted to do the work, and even the iconographic programme. Particularly well-documented is the construction and decoration of the church at the now-lost Monastery

¹⁴⁸ Farès 1961, 5 (Arabic), 7 (French); Fiey 1968, 118 n. 8. The same is repeated by the Arab historian al-Umari (1301-1249): quoted by Nasrallah 1969, 77-78.

¹⁴⁹ Hindo 1943, 315; Leroy 1964, 41 n. 6; Chaillot 1995-1996, 80.

¹⁵⁰ Chabot 1899-1924, III, 409. Cf. Honigmann 1951, 50; Kawerau 1960, 66-67; Balicka-Witakowski *et al.* 2001, 153.

¹⁵¹ Abouna 1974, 235. Cf. Kawerau 1960, 66.

¹⁵² Abbeloos/Lamy 1872-1877, I, col. 593. Cf. Honigmann 1951, 50; Balicka-Witakowski *et al.* 2001, 153.

¹⁵³ Abbeloos/Lamy 1872-1877, I, col. 649. Cf. Honigmann 1951, 50, 68; Balicka-Witakowski *et al.* 2001, 154.

¹⁵⁴ Abbeloos/Lamy 1872-1877, II, col. 650. Cf. Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 18.

¹⁵⁵ Abbeloos/Lamy 1872-1877, I, cols 665, 667. Cf. Honigmann 1951, 68.

of Yuhanon bar Naggare ('John son of the Carpenters') near Bartelli, which we already referred to above in sketching the artistic context surrounding the painting of the Baptism of Christ in the Church of Mar Giworgis. In his *Chronicle*, Barhebraeus informs us that he commissioned an artist from Constantinople, who had previously been working in Tabriz for Mary, the illegitimate daughter of the Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII Palaeologus (1258-1282), to decorate this church.¹⁵⁶ The commissioning of a Byzantine artist should be considered in the context of the religious and political activities of Barhebraeus during his Maphrianate and the historical circumstances at the time.

Around the middle of the thirteenth century, the political and military face of the Middle East was changed by the Mongol invasions. The two capital cities of the newly established Mongol Empire, Tabriz and Maragha, attracted many ecclesiastical dignitaries and officials of neighbouring states, who all tried to gain some influence at the Ilkhanid court. In order to maintain peace and to strengthen the diplomatic ties with the new power in the Middle East, the Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII Palaeologus sent his illegitimate daughter Mary to Persia in 1265, where she married the Ilkhanid Khan Abaqa, the son of Hülagü and his East Syrian wife Doquz Khatun. The East Syrian Patriarch often frequented Maragha in this period, and Barhebraeus is known to have served as one of the personal physicians of Hülagü in 1263.

Having been elected Maphrian in 1264, Barhebraeus continued his attempts to strengthen the position of the Syrian Orthodox community under Mongol rule by, for example, generating several building activities; he ordered the construction of a maphrianal cell and an oratory for a newly built church in Maragha (1171), and the addition of an oratory to a church in Tabriz, which had already been erected in 1173. Especially in the period between 1282 and 1286, Barhebraeus spent much of his time in Tabriz, a multi-cultural city with a large population of Christians, including Orthodox Greeks, Armenians, East Syrians, and Syrian Orthodox.

On his way to Tabriz in 1282 to complete this oratory, Barhebraeus received the news of the death of Abaqa khan and was invited to assist at the coronation of the new Mongol leader, Ahmad. Having obtained from Ahmad an official licence to build churches in 'Azerbaijan, Assyria and Mesopotamia', Barhebraeus commissioned Gabriel of Bartelli to build a new church near Bartelli. This church was to house the relics of Yuhanon bar Naggare, since the Mongols had destroyed the previous church dedicated to this saint in the nearby village of Beth Agre.¹⁵⁷ Barhebraeus himself returned to Tabriz in order to take care of the completion of the oratory in the church there. The Syrian Orthodox were not the only community engaged in building activities in Tabriz at the time. The Greek Orthodox were also building a church, sponsored by princess Mary, who brought in two artists from Constantinople to decorate the church. Once they had finished their work, Barhebraeus, clearly making the most of the opportunity, was able to contract one of them to paint the newly erected church near Bartelli.

The construction and decoration campaign took three years (1282-1285), and, according to the description of Gabriel of Bartelli himself, the following scenes were represented: the Chariot of Ezekiel surrounded by cherubim in the dome, above the altar; prophets, probably on the walls of the transitional zone under the dome; four evangelists on the undersides of the archways supporting the dome; and, behind the altar, the Virgin flanked by Church Fathers.¹⁵⁸ The designation 'the Chariot of Ezekiel surrounded by Cherubim in the dome' deserves our further attention. What does this 'Chariot of Ezekiel' refer to? The phrase refers to the chariot-throne described by Ezekiel in his vision of the Throne of God (Ezekiel 1:4-21). The

¹⁵⁶ Abbeloos/Lamy 1872-1877, III, cols 462-466. Cf. Kawerau 1960, 66; Fiey 1965, II, 433-434; Hindo 1943, 312-14, 304-305, 315.

¹⁵⁷ Fiey 1965, II, 433-434; *idem* 1975a, 96; Kawerau 1960, 59, 66, 115 n. 8, 120.

¹⁵⁸ Fiey 1965, II, 433-434.

throne of Ezekiel 1 was traditionally regarded as a chariot, by, among others, Ephrem the Syrian, Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, and Pseudo-Athanasius.¹⁵⁹ Therefore, the painting in the dome most probably consisted of the enthroned Christ inside a mandorla, surrounded by the four four-winged apocalyptic creatures, that Ezekiel calls 'cherubim'.¹⁶⁰

The decoration programme with Christ enthroned in the dome and the Virgin flanked by Church Fathers (as opposed to the twelve apostles) behind the altar, brings to mind the programme of Deir Mar Musa (Layer 3; A.D. 1208/09), a Syrian Orthodox stronghold in Western Syria. As we have seen in Section 2.6A, the apse at Mar Musa is adorned with a Deisis Vision in the half-dome, composed of Christ Enthroned within a mandorla, the symbols of the four evangelists, a cherubim and a seraphim, and the Virgin and St John the Baptist; and in the lower zone with the Virgin *Blachernitissa* (i.e., with the bust of Christ in a tondo) between eight Church Fathers, who are identified by Syriac inscriptions (Pl. 2).¹⁶¹ The arrangement of the Church Fathers with the Virgin in their midst corresponds with common Byzantine programmes from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, as found for instance in Sicily and Cappadocia.¹⁶² A geographically closer example dating from the thirteenth century is found at Deir Mar Ya'qub, a Melkite stronghold in Western Syria, where the upper zone of the apse in the lower church shows a Deisis with two angels, twelve apostles and two prophets, while the lower zone is decorated with the Virgin *Blachernitissa* flanked by Church Fathers, some of whom are identified by inscriptions.¹⁶³

In conclusion, this short and provisional overview, together with the surviving material presented above, shows that there is evidence of a Christian tradition of painting in Mesopotamia throughout at least the eleventh to the thirteenth century, that is, the period in which the art of the Christian communities of the Middle East in general witnessed a remarkable flourishing. According to the written sources, the walls of several Syrian Orthodox churches in Mesopotamia, ranging from Baghdad in the south and Mosul and Melitene in the north, must once have been covered with wall paintings. Nevertheless, it would seem that the production of wall paintings in Mesopotamia in general and the Mosul area in particular never reached the level of that in other regions in the Middle East, such as Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. This perhaps also explains the reason why Barhebraeus received a passing Byzantine artist with open arms; this unexpected visitor allowed him to have the church he erected at Deir Mar Yuhanon bar Naggare decorated according to fashionable standards. Besides the fact that the decoration programme appears to have followed the Byzantine hierarchical system of church decoration, the style, executed by a Constantinopolitan artist, would have been truly Byzantine.

5.7 Conclusion

The art-historical research conducted on the wall painting in the Church of Mar Giworgis has furnished enough elements to support the hypothesis that it was painted in the thirteenth

¹⁵⁹ Van Moorsel 2000, 103, 109-110.

¹⁶⁰ Van Moorsel 2000, 118.

¹⁶¹ Sts Cyril, Basil, Athanasius, and John Chrysostom on the left of the Virgin, and Ignatius and James (Syriac, 'Jacob') on the right: Cruikshank Dodd 2001, 41-46, Pls 8b, 16-24b; Westphalen 2007, 110-111, Pl. 18; Immerzeel 2009, 65, Pl. 34.

¹⁶² Cruikshank Dodd 2001, 45-46. Several examples of this disposition are encountered in Cappadocia, for instance: Monastery at Eski Gümüş, dated between the eleventh and thirteenth century (Jolivet-Lévy 1991, 278-282, Pl. 151.2); Direkli Kilise, tenth/eleventh century (Rodley 1985, 90, Pl. 80; Jolivet-Lévy 1991, 323-325, Pl. 180); possibly also at the Church of Ayvali, twelfth/thirteenth century (Jolivet-Lévy 1991, 152-153, Pls 96-97).

¹⁶³ Sts Gregory, Athanasius, John of Alexandria, and James of Jerusalem: Westphalen 2005, 96-110, Figs 19-28, Pls IX-XI, 3-11, 15b; Immerzeel 2009, 70.

century, a period of rich cultural and artistic activities in Qaraqosh and nearby Deir Mar Behnam. Although the written sources suggest that churches in the Mesopotamian region were often furnished with monumental wall paintings during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the mural is the only relatively well-preserved specimen that has come down to us so far. Covering the wall above the entrance to the northern side-room of the church, the painting comprises an elaborate version of the Baptism of Christ, that is unusual in its iconography. Whereas most iconographic details are in agreement with standard depictions of the theme, in Byzantine art in particular, the two pairs of subsidiary figures in the lower part of the painting are exceptional.

It has been argued that this unique rendering of the Baptism is a highly sophisticated version, in which the basic components of a standard Baptism of Christ have been supplemented with two Holy Women (Myrophores) and Adam and Eve, in order to enhance the resurrectional symbolism inherent in the theme. They are regarded as an ingenious visual reference to two prototypes of the Resurrection of Christ, the two women alluding to the Women at the Tomb, and Adam and Eve to the Anastasis. The ultimate literary source for the thematic association between the Baptism and Resurrection of Christ in the painting in the Church of Mar Giworgis may be found in the Pauline teachings of Romans 6, according to which the sacramental rite of baptism is considered an active participation in the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ. Even though no direct visual models have been discovered as of yet, the pictorial synthesis between the Baptism and the Anastasis, particularly widespread in Middle Byzantine art, has been suggested as a possible visual precedent.

Nothing in the iconography or the style of the painting can be designated a criterion for the identification of Syrian Orthodox art. Despite the fact that this particular version of the Baptism has as yet only been encountered in a distinctively Syrian Orthodox setting, simply because no other depictions of this type have survived, the general iconology fits within a much broader context. The accumulation of resurrectional symbolism of the Baptism of Christ would have been equally valid in churches of any other Christian denomination. From the Early Christian period onwards, the thematic association between Baptism and Resurrection was developed in the Eastern and Western churches. In short, without the documentary evidence it would be impossible to ascribe the Church of Mar Giworgis a Syrian Orthodox denomination on the basis of the iconography of its wall painting.

A similar conclusion holds true for the stylistic aspects of the painting. Whereas other works of art connected with the Syrian Orthodox community in the Mosul area are generally characterized by their strong stylistic connection with contemporary Islamic art, this does not seem to be the case with the wall painting. One should, however, be cautious in concluding that this was the result of a conscious choice on the part of the Syrian Orthodox community to differentiate themselves in terms of style from the surrounding Muslim community. The lack of Islamic wall paintings in the region does not allow for any such conclusions. Moreover, when one considers the apparently limited skills of the painter responsible for its execution, it is impossible to establish whether the unique stylistic characteristics of the wall painting are the direct result of the primitive style of the artist, or whether they are characteristic of a local painterly tradition of which no other traces remain.

The assumed use of style as an identity marker can be further questioned in relation to the now-lost wall paintings in the church at Deir Mar Yuhanon bar Naggare near Bartelli, which were painted by a Byzantine artist at the request of Barhebraeus. Bearing in mind that this painter was first directly contracted from Constantinople by Mary Palaeologus to decorate the Byzantine Orthodox church in Tabriz, one may safely assume that he was a highly skilled professional trained in the fashionable stylistic trends of the Byzantine capital. Whatever the case, this is a unique documented instance of two different Christian groups commissioning

the same painter. This suggests that there would have been nothing in the style of the wall paintings in the Syrian Orthodox church in Bartelli and the Byzantine Orthodox church in Tabriz that would have provided the scholar with conclusive indications to distinguish between their respective denominations.

The question remains whether the application of Byzantine-style paintings by the Syrian Orthodox community should be considered a deliberate attempt to distinguish themselves stylistically from the surrounding Muslim community. This seems highly improbable. The main reason for Barhebraeus to charge a Byzantine artist to decorate the church at Deir Mar Yuhanon bar Naggare was arguably the singular opportunity of having a highly skilled specialist at his disposal; Byzantine artists would probably not have been contracted if Mary Palaeologus had not already brought them from Constantinople, and without Barhebraeus' personal contacts in Tabriz.