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

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6. Sculptural Decoration in a Monastic Context: Deir Mar Behnam near Qaraqosh

6.1 Introduction

Along with metalwork and manuscript illustration, monumental sculptural decoration found in Syrian Orthodox churches and monasteries attests to a distinct overlap between Christian and Islamic art in the Mosul area during the period known as the Syrian Renaissance. In contrast to the previous chapters, which were mainly concerned with art from the monastic context, the following two chapters each study a given medium of 'Syrian Orthodox art' in two contexts: both monastic and parish churches. Given that Syrian Orthodox sculptural decoration from the medieval period has survived in both types of churches, it is possible to assess whether there are any artistic differences between the two types, either in terms of their precise relationship with contemporary Islamic art, or in the possible expression of Syrian Orthodox communal identity. The numbers of surviving examples are relatively limited. Nonetheless, especially in light of the fact that monks and monasteries played a key role in the transmission and preservation of the Syrian Orthodox tradition, one might perhaps expect, for instance, to come across genuine Syrian Orthodox elements in the decoration of monastic churches more than in city or parish churches.

The following chapter will deal with the sculptural decoration of Syrian Orthodox parish churches in the Mosul area. First, however, in the present chapter, we will focus on the church decoration of Deir Mar Behnam, a famous monastery located some 36 km southeast of the modern city of Mosul, between the rivers Tigris and the Upper Zab, and approximately six km northeast of the ancient Assyrian capital Kalhu (Nimrud). More specifically, the monastery is situated in the southernmost part of the area ecclesiastically known as Beth Nuhadra, close to the small town of Qaraqosh (Fig. 1).

Having suffered a long period of decline, this Syrian Orthodox monastery was finally brought under the jurisdiction of the Syrian Catholic Church in the early nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the monastery continued to lead a poor existence until around 1936, when Ephrem Abdal established a new community of monks there. In addition to revitalizing Deir Mar Behnam's library, Abdal initiated the first of a series of large-scale restoration activities carried out at the monastery during the twentieth century. These restorations were continued by his successors, in particular by the present superior, Francis Jahola (p. x). Today, Deir Mar Behnam is one of the most flourishing Christian sites in the Mosul area.

Deir Mar Behnam comprises a fortress-like complex, the main buildings of which are the monastic church and a separate octagonal mausoleum housing the relics of Mar Behnam (Figs 5-8). The mausoleum is commonly referred to as either the 'Pit' or the 'Outside Martyrion'. As for references to Deir Mar Behnam in the written sources, the monastery is encountered under several different names. In reference to the martyrion situated near the church, it is known in Syriac as *Beth Gubbā*,[1] and in Arabic as *Dayr al-Jubb*, 'Monastery of the Pit'.[2] Other names used to refer to the monastery include more expanded versions, such as 'Monastery of Mar Behnam and his sister Sarah',[3] and 'Lower Monastery of Mar Behnam of the Pit'.[4]

Because the literary and archaeological documentation on Deir Mar Behnam are both scant, the history of the monastery, especially its coming into being, is still shrouded in

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[1] BL Add. 12174, A.D. 1197 (Wright 1870-1872, III, 1135); BL Add. 7200, thirteenth century (Rosen/Forshall 1838, no. LIX, 93; Hoffmann 1966, 19).
[2] Pognon 1907, 132; Harrak 2009.
[3] BL Add. 17263: Wright 1870-1872, III, 1080.
[4] Barhebraeus, *Chron. Eccl.*: Abbeloos/Lamy 1872-1877, II, cols 825-826. Cf. Pognon 1907, 136.

obscurity. According to Syrian Orthodox hagiography, the monastery was founded in the fourth century on the site of the graves of the martyrs Behnam (Persian for 'Beautiful name') and his sister Sarah.[5] It remains to be seen, however, whether there is any evidence to corroborate this hagiographical assertion.

Since Preusser's 1911 documentary publication (p. x), Deir Mar Behnam has received little systematic scholarly attention. This negligence is all the more remarkable given that the monastery contains the only full programme of medieval church decoration to have survived to the present day from Iraq in general, and the Mosul area in particular. Despite the enormous art-historical significance of the rich sculptural decoration, especially, the few studies dedicated to this site have primarily been directed towards the rich collection of Syriac inscriptions preserved there. The main study in this respect is Harrak's 2009 corpus of Syriac and Garshuni inscriptions in Iraq, which contains a large section on Deir Mar Behnam.[6] Harrak's corpus, which provides editions and translations of virtually all the inscriptions that have survived at the monastery, greatly facilitated the present art-historical research. The history of Deir Mar Behnam is traced in Fiey's monumental work on the development of Christianity in Northern Iraq, entitled *Assyrie Chrétienne*, which also includes an analysis of the legend of the monastery's patron saint.[7]

As far as Deir Mar Behnam's monumental decoration is concerned, previous scholarship is usually brief and often rather superficial. The monastery is included in Zibawi's general surveys on Eastern Christian art, Syriac art, and Christian wall paintings from Syria and Lebanon, for instance, but his discussions go no further than contesting that the visual language of the monastery's figural stone reliefs displays a remarkable overlap with contemporary Islamic art.[8] Similar observations, again with no further explanation, are found in a number of handbooks on Islamic art,[9] in Leroy's 1964 study of illuminated Syriac manuscripts,[10] and in a 2006 exhibition catalogue on medieval art from the Jazira.[11]

The close correspondence between the architectural reliefs at Deir Mar Behnam and those of Islamic monuments in the region is likewise briefly remarked upon by Joachim Gierlichs. Gierlichs includes the monastery in his 1996 catalogue of medieval sculptured animal reliefs from Anatolia and Northern Mesopotamia, but, given his subject matter, naturally largely excludes the reliefs with human figures and narrative scenes from his survey.[12] In short, although certain aspects of Deir Mar Behnam's monumental decoration have already attracted some attention, the corpus has not yet been the subject of comprehensive research.

In order to fill this gap in the scholarly literature, the present chapter aims to give a more detailed art-historical investigation of Deir Mar Behnam's monumental decoration, focusing on the style and iconography of the individual architectural reliefs, as well as exploring the larger programmatic messages in the extensive cycle of sculptural reliefs. To provide a proper context for the art-historical analysis, the first section details the history of Deir Mar Behnam up to around the year 1300, taking into account both external and internal documentation on the monastery. Particular attention is paid to the legend of Mar Behnam, since this

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[5] *AMS*, II, 397-441. On the legend and cult of Mar Behnam, see Fiey 1965, II, 565-613; *idem* 2004, 54-55; Wiessner 1978; Younansardaroud 2002; Novák/Younansardaroud 2002; Horn 2006-2007, 451-460.
[6] Harrak 2009, cat. no. AE.01.
[7] Fiey 1965, II, 565-613. Fiey also wrote a small booklet on the monastery, which was published by the Iraqi Ministry of Information (Fiey 1970b). A similar booklet, though with much better photographs, was already published by the Syrian Catholic Patriarchate of Antioch in 1954.
[8] Zibawi 1995, 61-62, Figs 43-44; *idem* 2005, 345-346, Figs 4-8; *idem* 2009, 164-165, plates on pp. 165-167.
[9] R. Hillenbrand 1999, 124; Ettinghausen/Grabar/Jenkins-Madina 2001, 293, Fig. 479.
[10] Leroy 1964, 68-71.
[11] Catalogue Berlin 2006, 22, 122.
[12] Gierlichs 1996, cat. no. 75, Pl. 59.

hagiographical source provides a key to unlock the symbolic meaning(s) of the monastery's pictorial programme.

The sections on the history of Deir Mar Behnam are followed by a study of the style and iconography of the monastery's monumental decoration, especially with an eye to identifying specifically Syrian Orthodox elements within the overall decoration. In addition, this discussion seeks to determine whether Syrian Orthodox communal identity was indeed reflected in monastic church decoration during the medieval period. The inscriptions are taken into account continuously throughout the chapter, but are discussed in more detail in Chapter 8, when comparing the linguistic situation at Deir Mar Behnam with those of other Syrian Orthodox strongholds. The architecture of Syrian Orthodox churches in the Mosul area and the symbolic meaning of liturgical space in the Syrian Orthodox tradition will be discussed briefly in Chapter 7.

A full description of Deir Mar Behnam is provided in Appendix A. Harrak's numbering of the extant inscriptions at the monastery (cat. nos AE.01-AE.02) has been retained in order to facilitate cross-references. Further, Harrak's English translations of the inscriptions dating from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are given in Appendix B, which also records their precise location within the monastic complex. Finally, the arrangement of the figural reliefs discussed in this chapter is marked on Preusser's ground plan of the church (Fig. 7).

6.2 History of the Monastery: External and Internal Evidence

6.2.1 The Legend of Mar Behnam

The oldest written account of the legend of Mar Behnam is preserved in a Syrian Orthodox manuscript currently at the British Library (Add. 12174), which contains the lives of saints and fathers of the church. The manuscript was purchased by Tattam in 1839 at Deir al-Surian (p. x). Two notes, which according to William Wright were both written by the scribe, can be found on fol. 452v. The first note comprises an attestation by Patriarch Michael the Syrian and states that the book was written at the expense of Deacon Saliba from Deir Mar Barsauma near Melitene (Malatya), in order to be deposited in the library of that monastery in the year 1508 of the Greeks (i.e., A.D. 1197).

The second note states that 'the book was written by a monk named Joseph, a cousin of the above mentioned Saliba, resident at the time in the convent of Abu Ghalib, whence he was summoned for the purpose'.[13] In addition to BL Add. 12174, the legend of Mar Behnam has been preserved in a number of other Syrian Orthodox manuscripts dating from the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, including a collection of *Histories of Saints and Martyrs* that was copied in 1199 at Deir al-Surian by the monk Zakhe from Deir Mar Mattai (see Section 3.5.2).[14]

The legend of Mar Behnam has already been conveniently summarized in English by Cornelia Horn on the basis of Paul Bedjan's 1891 edition (*AMS*, II, 397-441):

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[13] Wright 1870-1872, III, 1137-1139.

[14] BL Add. 14733 (Wright 1870-1872, III, 1139). Cf. BL Add. 14735, thirteenth century (Wright 1870-1872, III, 1148); BL Add. 17267, thirteenth century (Wright 1870-1872, III, 1146); BL Add. 7200, thirteenth century (Rosen/Forshall 1838, cat. no. LIX, 93; Hoffmann 1966, 17-19). More recent examples, dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, are listed in Baumstark 1922, 192 n. 4. For a list of Arabic manuscripts containing the legend of Mar Behnam, dating from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries, see Graf 1944-1953, I, 525.

At the time [A.D. 352]*, persecution had forced some ascetics to move to the region of Nineveh. One of them, Mār Mattai, settled on the mountain and quickly became famous for the power of healing with which he was gifted. Also Sanherib, King of Āthōr, whose daughter Sarah had been suffering from leprosy for years, learned of Mār Mattai and kept track of what the Christians were reporting about this wonder-working ascetic. One day, Sanherib's son Behnām had a dream, which led him to search for Mār Mattai. While being on a hunting trip, Behnām found Mār Mattai, learned from him about Christ, and brought Mār Mattai to Āthōr, where the ascetic secretly healed the girl Sarah. In response to the healing miracle, also the sister learned of the Christian faith and was baptized. Since both of them refused to continue to worship the pagan deities, their father had the children executed.*

Shortly after having violently put his children to death, Sanherib fell sick. A dream motivated his wife to visit the burial site of their son Behnām, and in a subsequent dream Behnām sent his mother to Mār Mattai, for healing and conversion. Eventually, Sanherib himself converted and built a church and monastery for Mār Mattai on Mount 'Alpap. Behnām's mother also ordered the construction of a monastery at Kōkyātā as well as of a cistern at the site where her children were buried. A few years later, a Christian traveller from Persia, who was on a pilgrimage journey to Jerusalem, stopped at the place, prayed there, and learned about the events surrounding the children's martyrdom. This traveller, named Isaac, also had a dream in which Behnām appeared to him and requested that a house of prayer be erected at the site. Again with the support of Behnām's mother, a monastery was built there. According to the legend, it was the monastery of Beth Gubbe, where according to tradition the relics of Mār Behnām and his sister Sarah are kept.[15]

Previous studies on the legend of Mar Behnam have concentrated mainly on issues of historicity and dating. Pointing out the complex chronology of the legend's development, Fiey concludes that its core is essentially fictional.[16] Along similar lines, Gernot Wiessner emphasizes that the story of the martyrdom of Mar Behnam follows a distinct narrative pattern familiar from foundation legends, a certain type of hagiographical genre which was aimed at providing churches and monasteries with credentials of great antiquity.[17] The basic structure of these foundation legends offered their compilers with a sort of blueprint, which could easily be elaborated.

Depending on the political and religious agenda of the hagiographer in question, such narrative frameworks were expanded through the inclusion of particular themes and motifs, and coloured in with regional topographical details in order to provide them with a distinct *couleur locale* and a sense of historical verisimilitude. In general, the legend of Mar Behnam may be classified among the corpus of Persian martyr acts, which recount the story of the major persecutions of Christians that took place during the reign of Shapur II (309-379).[18] On a more detailed level, the legend of Mar Behnam is related to martyr legends grounded in the Adiabene region, such as the legend of Mar Qardagh.[19]

Until now, little attention has been paid to the rationale behind writing down the legend of Mar Behnam and how the legend was meant to function. A useful starting point in discussing this matter is the legend's epilogue. Brief as it is, this part of the legend was evidently intended to explain, from a distinctively Syrian Orthodox perspective, the origins of three

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[15] Horn 2006-2007, 453-455. Cf. Novák/Younansardaroud 2002, 168-170; Younansardaroud 2002, 186-187.
[16] Fiey 2004, 54.
[17] Wiessner 1978, 120.
[18] On the Persian martyr acts, see Wiessner 1967; Brock 1968; Walker 2006, esp. 113-120.
[19] Fiey 2004, 156-157; Walker 2006.

monasteries situated in the realms of the former Persian Empire, a region that was traditionally dominated by East Syrian Christians (see Sections 2.2 and 2.3). The following is the passage in question from a thirteenth-century Syrian Orthodox manuscript in the British Library (Add. 7200), in Georg Hoffmann's German translation:

> *Als im weitern Verlaufe Behnām und seine Schwester Sarā von Mattai getauft und von ihrem Vater hingerichtet waren, baute dieser, schliesslich selbst bekehrt, für Herrn Mattai das Kloster auf dem Berge, d.h. dem Berge Alpeph, nach den Tausenden von Mönchen genannt, die auf dem Gebirge theils in Felsenspalten, theils Höhlen, theils „Höfchens", d.s. Hürden wohnten. Zur Zeit von Mattai's Nachfolger Zakkāi, ward unter der Leitung von dessen Stellvertreter Abhrāhām, von Behnam's Mutter erbaut das Kloster des Herrn Abhrāhām, oder „Kloster von Kūkhjāthā"; ferner das Kloster von Beth Gubbē, wo die Reliquien Mar Behnām's und Sārā's bestattet sind.*[20]

Fiey has already emphasized that the foundation of Deir Mar Mattai, Deir Mar Abraham, and Deir Mar Behnam, as described in the epilogue of the legend of Mar Behnam, is not a historical account; he suggests, rather, that the hagiographer has retrojected to the past the situation of his own day.[21] Despite difficulties in recovering the exact date of the composition of this legend, there is some evidence to suggest that it was not written down before the late twelfth century, as will be clear from the following.

Like most martyr legends in the Syriac hagiographical tradition, the account of the martyrdom of Mar Behnam was probably designed initially for oral presentation. There seems to have been an oral tradition concerning Mar Behnam from at least the tenth century onwards, as Barhebraeus mentions that a church dedicated to this saint was erected in Tripoli in 961, at the hands of a group of Syrian Orthodox refugees from Mosul.[22] Whatever the case may be, the legend of Mar Behnam was apparently limited to oral versions until the Syrian Renaissance. A revealing passage is found in a manuscript containing the West Syrian *Synodicon*, which deals with the monasteries and churches that were built and renovated by Bishop John of Mardin (1125-1165), more specifically Deir Mar Hananya.[23] Strikingly, this passage explicitly mentions the want of a written history of Mar Behnam (in Arthur Vööbus' English translation):

> *The reason, however, why this Mār Jōḥannān has remembered the names of the monasteries which he built, is that they would be kept for the future because these monasteries might become desolate through some changes or emptied (of their inhabitants) so that it will be not known by whom they were built and renewed and on the name of which saint, as had happened (also) to this holy monastery of Mār Ḥanānyā. For we could never find out when, how, and by whom it was built nor the name of the saint by whose name it was (first) known and proclaimed before Bishop Ḥanānyā – as this has happened to many monasteries whose stories of the saints on whose names they were built (have been lost). As for example that of the holy and famous Mār Behnām* [Deir Mar Behnam]*, who now in our days is doing miracles and mighty works (just) as in the time of the apostles, to all those who come to him in faith. There is no story at all about him except only that which is told in oral tradition – and one as it pleases him can tell it in an elaborate or in a concise (way). So this is the*

[20] Hoffmann 1966, 19. Cf. BL Add. 12174 (Wright 1870-1872, III, 1135).
[21] Fiey 1965, II, 761-762.
[22] Barhebraeus, *Chronography*: Budge 1932, I, 167.
[23] Ma^{c}arrat Saydnaya, Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate, Ms. 8/11, A.D. 1204, fols 202v-206v: Vööbus 1975-1976, II, 212-222. This text comes from the restored part of the manuscript.

reason why we remembered these monasteries, the origin of their building and the names of the saints who built on the resting places of the saints, (although), indeed, it would be proper that there ought to be a special story for each monastery.[24]

Moreover, in addition to implying that the legend of Mar Behnam had not been written down before the mid-twelfth century, this text sheds much light on the rationale behind the construction and writing down of saints' lives in the Syrian Orthodox Church. The text shows clearly that hagiographical works were useful tools in inventing Syrian Orthodox tradition, and that legends like that of Mar Behnam were constructed, above all, to serve the purpose of monastic charters.[25] It simultaneously shows that hagiographical works were considered useful in laying claims to religious sites, especially in periods of change, when the sites in question were either renovated or reoccupied; for example, after they had become 'desolate through some changes or emptied of their inhabitants'. What is more, the text unequivocally identifies Deir Mar Behnam as one of those monasteries, like Deir Mar Hananya, of which it was not known at the time by whom it was erected and to which particular saint it was originally dedicated. We will return to this matter shortly.

Besides this contemporary observation of a lack of any written versions of the life of Mar Behnam, and the fact that the earliest surviving manuscripts containing this legend all date from around 1200, another indication that the final version dates from the twelfth century can be found in Mar Behnam's absence from early liturgical calendars. As Table 1 shows, there is no evidence of the cult of Mar Behnam in any Syrian Orthodox liturgical calendar dating from before the beginning of the thirteenth century, but subsequently his commemoration clearly becomes universal in the Syrian Orthodox Church.[26]

Ref.	**Ms**	**Date**	**Mar Behnam**	**Sarah**
II	BL Add. 17134	Late 7th century		
III	BL Add. 14504	9th century		
IV	BL Add. 14519	11th/12th century		
V	BL Add. 14503	A.D. 1166		
VIII	BL Add. 14719	A.D. 1184		
IX	BL Add. 14713	12th/13th century		
XI	BL Add. 17232	A.D. 1210	X	
VII	BL Add. 17246/14708	A.D. 1239/14th century	X	
X	BL Add. 17261	13th/14th century	X	
S	Vat. Syr. 37	14th century	X	
XII	Vat. Syr. 37	A.D. 1465	X	X
VIb	Vat. Syr. 69	A.D. 1547	X	X
A	Mingana Syr. 234	A.D. 1688/89	X	X
VIa	BnF syr. 146	17th century	X	X
XIII	Vat. Syr. 124	18th century	X	

Table 1. Inclusion of Mar Behnam and his sister Sarah in Syrian Orthodox Liturgical Calendars

[24] Vööbus 1975-1976, II, 218.

[25] On the unreal character of hagiographies in the Syrian Orthodox tradition, and other legendary West Syrian hagiographies that served the purpose of monastic charters, see Palmer 1990, 182-184.

[26] References in the left-hand column in Table 1: II (Nau 1915, 31-35); III (Nau 1915, 35-48); IV (Nau 1915, 48-53); V (Nau 1915, 53-56); VIII (Nau 1915, 97-101); IX (Nau 1915, 101-107); XI (Nau 1915, 112-127); VII (Nau 1915, 93-97); X (Nau 1915, 107-112); S (Peeters 1908, 129-200); XII (Nau 1915, 127-131); VIa-b (Nau 1915, 59-87); A (Brock 1970b); XIII (Nau 1915, 132-133). On the Syrian Orthodox liturgical calendars, see Fiey 2004, 9, with further references.

In view of the above, it is most likely that the legend of Mar Behnam, as it has come down to us, was written in the second half of the twelfth century. Now that we have established its date with a reasonable certainty, let us turn to the rationale behind the compilation of the legend of Mar Behnam. In order to understand the motivations that lay behind the legend's compilation, it is important to place the legend in its proper historical and ecclesiastical context. In so doing, we will see that both extra-community pressure (East Syrian and Muslim) and intra-community friction have played a role in its coming into being.

Bearing in mind the continuous struggle for power between the Syrian Orthodox and the East Syrians in the ecclesiastical provinces East of the river Tigris (see Section 2.3), we can see a clear agenda in the legend of Mar Behnam to legitimate and strengthen the Syrian Orthodox presence in the region. In retrojecting a later state of affairs, that is, in inventing a new Syrian Orthodox tradition, the hagiographer has adeptly provided the Syrian Orthodox community of the Mosul area with fourth-century credentials. Obviously, the composition of the legend was also aimed at constructing a common origin for Deir Mar Mattai, Deir Mar Behnam, and Deir Mar Abraham. The legend of Mar Behnam not only provides great antiquity for each individual monastery, but also furnishes them with a notion of common ancestry. With the serious prospect that the Syrian Orthodox would lose their grip on Takrit as one of their traditional strongholds (see Section 2.4), the situation of the Syrian Orthodox community and the position of the Syrian Orthodox Church within the eastern provinces had become increasingly precarious during the twelfth century.

In such a charged situation, of which the Syrian Orthodox were arguably aware, it would have been of paramount importance to strengthen their position in the Mosul area, their second stronghold in the region. All the more so, given that the relative stability and unity of the Syrian Orthodox Church was increasingly jeopardised by the political and military events that rocked Middle-Eastern society at the time (see Section 2.1). In the midst of the ever shifting circumstances, the Syrian Orthodox were confronted with a rapidly increasing number of churches, and even monasteries, that were either fully destroyed or converted into Islamic structures, such as mosques and *madrasas* (see Section 2.3). The concurrent proliferation of *ziyara* culture, which, in turn, was accompanied by a growing number of Muslims visiting monasteries like Deir Mar Behnam in order to obtain *baraka*, may have been considered by the Syrian Orthodox as an additional element within the mounting Muslim pressure (see Section 2.7.3).

In short, the concern for preserving their church property must have been great among members of the Syrian Orthodox ecclesiastical elite precisely at the time when the legend of Mar Behnam was first written down. Seen from this perspective, it is perhaps no coincidence that the legend provides Deir Mar Behnam, Deir Mar Mattai, and Deir Mar Abraham with pre-Islamic credentials. This was arguably done in order to strengthen the Syrian Orthodox claim to Deir Mar Behnam in the face of Muslim pressure. Taking into consideration that the Syrian Orthodox, as *dhimmis,* fell under the protection of Islamic law, which prohibited the construction or even renovation of Christian houses of worship, but upheld the security of churches and monasteries that were already built prior to the Islamic conquest (see Section 2.3), it makes sense to suggest that this pre-Islamic dating was the result of a deliberate hagiographical strategy, aimed at safeguarding the three monasteries from Muslim attacks or confiscation.[27]

In addition to countering East Syrian and Muslim pressure, however, the reasons behind the invention of the narrative of descent recounted in the legend of Mar Behnam must

[27] On Syriac historiographical and hagiographical accounts serving the function of discouriging Muslim attacks in order to protect church buildings and monasteries, see Morony 2005, 28.

probably be sought within the context of intra-community friction. In the twelfth century, the stability of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the region of the Maphrianate was threatened not only by outside influences, both East Syrian and Muslim, but also by internal troubles, especially the continuous struggle for ecclesiastical power that raged between Deir Mar Mattai on the one hand, and, on the other, the Syrian Orthodox community of Takrit, with the Maphrian as its main representative. As we have already seen in Section 2.4, the monks from Deir Mar Mattai had contested the authority of the Maphrian from the seventh century onwards, but the conflicts between the two parties reached a climax in the twelfth century, when the Takritan community constituted a larger presence in the Mosul area than ever before.

Since the expanded Takritan community found itself in a better position to lay claim to Syrian Orthodox churches and monasteries in Mosul and the vicinity, and given the increased numbers of Takritans in Qaraqosh,[28] it is perhaps not far-fetched to assume that the Takritans also tried to gain control over nearby Deir Mar Behnam. Indeed, Barhebraeus informs us that Qaraqosh, unlike other Syrian Orthodox villages situated in the Mosul plain, sided with the Maphrian in his disputes with the monks of Deir Mar Mattai, at times providing him with tribute money to buy the assistance of the governor of Mosul. In return, the Maphrian granted Qaraqosh certain privileges as a sign of their mutual trust.[29] Moreover, several maphrians, including Dionysius Musa in 1129[30] and John V of Sarugh in 1188,[31] are known to have resided at Qaraqosh at the time.

Continuously seeking new ways in which to oppose the Takritan primacy, the monks of Deir Mar Mattai adopted various strategies throughout the centuries in order to defend the rights of their own metropolitan and strengthen the monastery's position within the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Syrian Orthodox Church. One of the strategies employed was the rewriting of history in favour of their monastery (see Section 2.4). Against the background of the ongoing struggle for power within the Syrian Orthodox Church, it may be suggested that the final redaction of the legend of Mar Behnam is yet another twelfth-century attempt to re-invent the history of Deir Mar Mattai, so as to assert the legitimacy of its special status within the Church administration. Evidently, the monks of Deir Mar Mattai tried to meet challenges to their position in the Mosul area with reference to their fourth-century credentials. In emphasizing the shared common ancestry of Deir Mar Mattai and Deir Mar Behnam, they communicated a clear message to the Takritan community that they were not in a position to lay any claim to the latter monastery.

If we wish to examine the connection between Deir Mar Mattai and Deir Mar Behnam outside the realm of Syrian Orthodox hagiographical rhetoric, a legislative document containing a set of monastic rules, confirmed by Patriarch Michael the Syrian and Maphrian John V Sarugh during a synod convened at Deir Mar Mattai in 1174,[32] provides us with some evidence to suggest that the two monasteries were indeed closely related at the time. The text of the document is arranged into two columns, the first of which comprises twenty-four ordinances dating from 508/09; the second contains a collection of twelve additional rules designed by Michael the Syrian, which supplement the twenty-four basic rules formulated in the first column. This collection of canons was already mentioned briefly above when discussing the measures taken by Michael to counter the insubordination of the monks of Deir Mar Mattai (p. x). Strikingly, the title of this legislative document links Deir Mar Mattai

[28] Fiey 1965, II, 443; Khan 2002, 2.
[29] Fiey 1965, II, 439-440.
[30] Harrak 2009.
[31] Fiey 1965, II, 443.
[32] Vienna, Mekhitarist Fathers, Ms. Syr. 1, fols 108r-116r: Vööbus 1970, 325-333, 387-394; *idem* 1988, 172-175.

explicitly with Deir Mar Behnam, stating that the ordinances and canons were meant for both monasteries. The text reads as follows (in Vööbus' German translation):

> *Die Bestimmungen und Kanones des heiligen und göttlichen Klosterss unseres Vaters Mār Māttai und des Mār Zakkāi und des Mār Abraham auf dem Berge Alphaph und des wegen seiner Heilungen berühmten Mār Behnām*.[33]

Cogently, the title suggests that Deir Mar Mattai and Deir Mar Behnam were closely related during the period under consideration, something which is also borne out by the text of one of the canons (no. 3) drawn up by Michael the Syrian. Together with other canons listed in the second column, the canon in question is designed to regulate the offices of the various leaders of these two monasteries. More specifically, it delineates the proceedings surrounding the yearly election of the abbot (*rêš dayrā*) of Deir Mar Mattai, as well as the election of both the steward/administrator (*parnāsā*) and the overseer (*sāᶜorā*) for Deir Mar Behnam. The text of the canon reads as follows (in Voöbus' German translation):

> *In der (Ausübung) der apostolischen Autorität befehlen und bestimmen wir: Jedes Jahr, wenn die Zeit kommt, einen neuen* rīšdairā *aufzustellen, dass sich alle Mönche dieses Klosters* [Deir Mar Mattai] *mit dem Maphrian, d.h. dem Haupt der Bischöfe des Ostens, in dem Kloster versammeln und das gemäss der Herrengebot ein* rīš-ᶜumrā*, ein Mann passend für die Zeit, durch die Einwilligung und Wahl aller Mönche gewählt und eingesetzt wird; das gleiche (gilt) für die* parnāsē *und die* sāᶜūrē*, die in das Kloster von Bēt Gūbbā* [Deir Mar Behnam] *gesandt werden sollen. Männer, die dazu geeignet sind ausgesandt zu werden, sollen durch allgemeine Einwilligung aller Mönche gewählt werden*.[34]

As pointed out by Walter Selb, the legislative document thus indicates that Deir Mar Mattai and Deir Mar Behnam were directly linked, at least in terms of economy and administration.[35] Indeed, it would seem that both monasteries were part of a single organizational structure, which in set-up was somewhat comparable with the structure known as the federated monastery, a monastic group consisting of two or more monasteries that were 'joined together either as two branches of the same institution, or as independent communities with information-sharing and personnel exchanges, or as two independent entities faithful to the same set of traditions and rules'.[36]

The existence of such confederations of affiliated monasteries in the ecclesiastical organization of the Syrian Orthodox Church is attested in a canonical document written by the aforementioned Bishop John of Mardin. The document in question contains a series of monastic canons, which he has drawn up for Deir Mar Abai near Qillet (Qeleth) and Deir Mar Hananya near Mardin, both situated in the western part of Tur ᶜAbdin.[37] In the introduction to the list of canons, John states that these two monasteries should act in cooperation, emphasizing that the 'same custom is (followed) in the glorious Eastern Monastery of Mār Mattai, […] where there are three monasteries united with regard to income and expense'.[38]

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[33] Vööbus 1970, 325-326 (Syriac text and German translation); *idem* 1988, 173 (Syriac text and English translation). Cf. Selb 1989, 166-167, 170.
[34] Vööbus 1970, 388 n. 7.
[35] Selb 1989, 166-167.
[36] Hatlie 2007, 105.
[37] Maᶜarrat Saydnaya, Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate, Ms. 8/11, fols 221v-227r: Vööbus 1975-1976, II, 243-245. This document is found in the reconstructed part of the manuscript.
[38] Vööbus 1975-1976, II, 243-244.

All in all, the set of monastic rules confirmed in 1174 by Michael the Syrian seems to reflect a federated system of Syrian Orthodox monasteries in which Deir Mar Behnam was a dependent of Deir Mar Mattai. Deir Mar Mattai, in turn, appears to have functioned as a kind of mother-house for at least three dependencies, which probably included two other monasteries situated on Mount Elpheph, Deir Mar Zakkai and Deir Mar Abraham, as well as Deir Mar Behnam.[39] Significant in this respect is perhaps also the fact that virtually the same group of monasteries is referred to in a manuscript dating from around 1200 (BL Add. 17263), which contains a scribal note stating that this manuscript was transferred to Egypt – perhaps Deir al-Surian – from the Monastery of Mar Mattai, the Monastery of Mar Zakkai, and the Monastery of Mar Behnam and his sister Sarah, by John of Qaraqosh, who was probably a monk from Deir Mar Mattai (p. x).[40]

Deir Mar Mattai and Deir Mar Behnam apparently shared the same rules and seem to have been linked together by a variety of economic and administrative ties. As for exchanges of personnel between the two monastic sites, another characteristic feature of the 'federated monastery', the names of the persons who were responsible for the thirteenth-century refurbishment of Deir Mar Behnam are of particular interest. In addition to the names of the artists, Abu Salim and Abraham, the Syriac inscription (A.E.01.11) framing the Gate of St Peter and St Paul (Fig. 7B; Pl. 33) provides us with the names of the monks who initiated the work: ʿIsa and Fadl-Allah the priests, Abu Nasr and Behnam the deacons, Thomas, and Mahbub. The two deacons, according to Fiey, are probably Abu Nasr of Bartelli and Behnam of Bartelli, two members of the influential Habbo Kanni family.[41] Abu Nasr (d. around 1290) was a monk at Deir Mar Mattai, where he appears to have become abbot around the year 1260.[42] Deacon Behnam (d. around 1292), who may actually have been Abu Nasr's brother, was a famous physician and scribe. In addition to a rich collection of liturgical texts, Behnam is known to have written a long ode on Mar Mattai and the history of Deir Mar Mattai.[43]

Behnam's ode on Mar Mattai has survived in manuscripts in Diyarbakır and Bartelli, as well as in Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Ms. 178 (Sach. 83), which also includes the legend of Mar Mattai.[44] Significantly, the legend of Mar Mattai, which also incorporates that of Mar Behnam, recounts that Deir Mar Mattai was founded by Mar Mattai, Mar Zakkai, and Mar Abraham.[45] As we saw in the introduction to Chapter 4, Deir Mar Mattai is referred to as the 'Monastery of Mar Mattai, Mar Zakkai, and Mar Abraham' in the illustrated lectionary (Vat. Syr. 559) made for the monastery in the thirteenth century (p. x).

On the basis of the above discussion, certain conclusions may be drawn as to the rationale behind the composition and writing down of the legend of Mar Behnam, and the date of the version which has come down to us. Given that the oldest written accounts of the legend all date from around 1200, and the Syrian Orthodox ecclesiastical authorities still had to rely on the oral tradition around 1150, it is most likely that the form in which it has survived dates from no earlier than the second half of the twelfth century. In view of the striking chronological correspondence between this date and the reconstruction activities performed at Deir Mar Behnam in 1164, to which we shall return in the following section, one is inclined

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[39] Selb 1989, 166-167. On the conglomeration of monasteries on Mount Elpheph, see Fiey 1965, II, 756-784.
[40] Wright 1870-1872, III, 1080.
[41] Fiey 1965, II, 599.
[42] Barhebraeus, *Chronography*: Budge 1932, I, 517. Cf. Barsoum 2003, 484. Incidentally, a Syriac inscription (AE.01.40) above the gate to the burial room at Deir Mar Behnam states that is was built through the care of Abu Nasr the Deacon, the son of the late Khalaf. One is inclined to identify this deacon too with Abu Nasr Habbo Kanni of Bartelli (Fiey 1965, II, 592, 599).
[43] Fols 33r-67r: Sachau 1899, II, 575-576; Barsoum 2003, 485 n. 2. On Abu Nasr and Behnam Haddo Kanni of Bartelli, see Barsoum 2003, 484-485; Fiey 1965, II, 423, 426, 591, 598-599.
[44] Barsoum 2003, 484-485.
[45] Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Ms. 178 (Sach. 83), fol. 12r: Sachau 1899, II, 575; Vööbus 1970, 330.

to relate the writing of the legend with these reconstructions. The Syrian Orthodox considered the reconstruction of a church or a monastery a particularly appropriate moment to reinforce Syrian Orthodox tradition by writing down the vita of a patron saint. The obvious inference is that both the hagiographic and reconstruction activities are the result of the new prosperity of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the Mosul region, following the relocation of the Maphrianate from Takrit to Deir Mar Mattai in 1155 (p. x).

Grounded in Syriac hagiographical sources, and functioning as a monastic charter, the foundation legend of Mar Behnam provided the Syrian Orthodox Church in general, and the monasteries of Mar Mattai and Mar Behnam in particular, with the credentials of a fourth-century pre-Islamic origin. The purpose of writing down the legend of Mar Behnam was not so much to give an accurate historical account of the events which led to the martyrdom of the saint, nor of the origins of the monastery bearing his name. Rather, the emphasis on the role of Mar Mattai, Mar Zakkai, and Mar Abraham in shaping monasticism in the Mosul area in the fourth century served as a hagiographical strategy to legitimate the special status of these monasteries within the Syrian Orthodox Church. In stressing their common ancestry, the legend was arguably also used to shape communal identity and to strengthen the Syrian Orthodox claim within a sacred territory, which they shared with Sunni and Shi^{c}i Muslims, as well as East Syrians. It remains to be seen whether Deir Mar Behnam's monumental decoration fulfilled similar functions.

Finally, it is of course difficult to determine the actual effectiveness of the posited hagiographical strategy for the legend of Mar Behnam. The capacity of hagiographical works to shape communal identity was discussed already in Section 1.3.2. Suffice it to emphasize here that the system of recurring celebrations, such as the commemorations of saints within the liturgical cycle, ensured a regular dissemination of any propagandistic message integrated within a saint's life. Although the exact content of celebrations of this kind is unknown, it may safely be assumed that the core passages of the legend of Mar Behnam, such as the twin foundation of Deir Mar Mattai and Deir Mar Behnam, were read on the annual commemoration of the saint. In the Syrian Orthodox Church, the annual commemoration of Mar Behnam is fixed on December 10. The message that Deir Mar Behnam was a traditional satellite of Deir Mar Mattai must therefore have been widely conveyed among the Syrian Orthodox community, at least from the early thirteenth century onwards. From that moment, the cult of Mar Behnam became universal in the Syrian Orthodox Church.

6.2.2 Historical Sources and Inscriptions

Besides the legend of its patron saint, the history of Deir Mar Behnam is attested in the written sources only from the twelfth century onwards, in the form of references encountered in manuscripts, and inscriptions found at the monastery itself. The numerous inscriptions (liturgical, funerary, commemorative, and historical) situated on the walls of the monastic church and mausoleum, which date from the twelfth to the twentieth century, comprise the main source of information.[46] In the present study, however, only the inscriptions dating from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries will be taken into account (see Appendix B). Mainly written in Syriac (*Estrangelo*), but also in Arabic, Armenian, and Uighur, these inscriptions not only include liturgical texts and biblical verses, but also historical information, as well as names of artists and donors. Together with the art-historical data presented below, they enable us to trace the development of the monastery during the late twelfth and the thirteenth century.

[46] Harrak 2009, inscr. nos AE.01.1-AE.01.46, AE.02.1-AE.02.6.

The earliest date mentioned in connection with Deir Mar Behnam comes from the aforementioned legislative document containing the collection of monastic rules affirmed by Michael the Syrian in 1174 (p. x). According to the introduction to this document, the twenty-four canons in the first column were designed and drawn up in the early sixth century by the abbots and monks of Deir Mar Mattai and Deir Mar Behnam.[47] This assertion is almost certainly anachronistic. It is far more likely that this posited event was retrojected into the past when Michael the Syrian appended twelve new canons to the twenty-four canons of A.D. 508/09. We are perhaps on safer ground with the written evidence provided by Barhebraeus, who, in his *Chronicle*, states that Kasrun of Edessa, a monk who had formerly resided in Maragha, was buried at Deir Mar Behnam in 1139.[48]

Evidence that a church had been erected at the site by the twelfth century can be found in the oldest inscription at Deir Mar Behnam. The inscription in question (AE.01.34) is fashioned in Syriac on a stone tablet, which is inserted into the wall of the sanctuary, to the left of the altar. The text of the inscription reads as follows (in Harrak's English translation):

> *[In the name of the Living and Holy God]: This Altar was renovated and fixed through the care of the monks Joseph, priest in name only, Abū al-Faḍl and Gabriel the Deacons, and Friar Ḥasan, in the year one thousand four hundred and seventy [of the Greeks], which is the year fi[ve hundred] and fifty-nine of the Arabs, in the days of the blessed Fathers, our Patriarchs Mōr Atha[nasius of Syria]n Antioch, and Mōr Ewannīs [(of Alexandria]), in the year during which Mōr Igna[tius], Maphrian of the Ea[st], died. May the reader pray for[them]*.[49]

The main message of this inscription concerns the renovation and reconstruction of the 'altar' in 'the year 1475 of the Greeks' (i.e., according to the Seleucid calendar) and in 'the year 559 of the Arabs' (i.e., according to the Hegira calendar), which corresponds with A.D. 1164.[50] Fiey already pointed out that the Syriac word for altar (*madbḥā*) is also commonly used for the room in which the altar is placed, the sanctuary.[51] In his liturgical commentary, Dionysius bar Salibi (d. 1171), for instance, uses the word *madbḥā* in both senses.[52] It was already mentioned in Chapter 3 that in the Syrian Orthodox commentary on the liturgy attributed to John of Dara (c. 825), the Syriac word for altar room (*madbḥā*) is explicitly distinguished from the word for altar (*pāturā*; table). John uses *madbḥā* as a synonym for *qduš qudšin*, 'Holy of Holies'.[53] Consequently, the inscription at Deir Mar Behnam may perhaps relate to the reconstruction of the entire sanctuary in the period preceding the date of the inauguration.[54] Considering that the inscription speaks about a renovation, it may be assumed there was a church at this site prior to 1164.

In addition to providing the date of the renovation activities, the dedicatory inscription gives the names of the patriarchs of both the Syrian Orthodox and Coptic Orthodox Church, as well as that of the Syrian Orthodox Maphrian. In accordance with the year 1164, these must have been Athanasius VIII, who was Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church of

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[47] Vööbus 1970, 326.
[48] Barhebraeus, *Chron. Eccl.*: Abbeloos/Lamy 1872-1877, II, col. 330. Cf. Pognon 1907, 133 n. 3; Fiey 1965, II, 583; Vööbus 1970, 394.
[49] Harrak 2009, inscr. no. AE.01.34.
[50] The significance of the use of both the Seleucid and Hegira dates will be discussed in Section 8.3.
[51] Fiey 1965, II, 584 n. 3, 592.
[52] Varghese 1998, xv; Sader 1983, 39-40.
[53] Sader 1983, 39-40.
[54] A similar translation of the word *madbḥā* has been proposed for the tenth-century Syriac inscription from the wooden sanctuary screen in Deir al-Surian, which, cogently, commemorates the reconstruction of the altar room (see Section 3.5.1).

Antioch from 1139 to 1166, John V, who was Patriarch of the Coptic Church from 1146 to 1166, and Ignatius II Lazarus, who was Maphrian between 1143 and 1164. In balancing the Syrian Orthodox and Coptic patriarchs, the inscription is reminiscent of several inscriptions at Deir al-Surian dating from the period between the ninth and thirteenth centuries; these also refer to both ecclesiastical authorities.

The inscriptions at Deir al-Surian were discussed already in Chapter 3. Suffice it to mention here that at Deir al-Surian the Coptic Patriarch is usually mentioned before his Syrian Orthodox counterpart, while at Deir Mar Behnam the two patriarchs, for obvious reasons, are referred to in the opposite order. Whereas the inscriptions at Deir al-Surian were taken to reflect the intercommunal character of life at the monastery, the reference to both patriarchs at Deir Mar Behnam was perhaps simply intended to underline the good relationship between the two Miaphysite Churches at the time. The close contacts between the Syrian Orthodox Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church, which existed on a variety of levels and were maintained in many different ways, are well attested.[55] On the other hand, the inscription at Deir Mar Behnam might also be evidence of regular contact between the monks of Deir Mar Behnam and Egypt, more specifically Deir al-Surian, especially in view of the recorded contacts between Deir Mar Mattai and Deir al-Surian in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century (see Section 3.5.2).

Whatever the exact nature of the restoration work executed at Deir Mar Behnam in 1164, less than a century later the monastery was the site of large-scale refurbishment activities. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, it is commonly recognized that most of the monastic church's extensive sculptural decoration and architectural features closely resemble those encountered in monuments dating from the reign of Badr al-Din Lu'lu', and may therefore be dated between approximately 1233 and 1259. Obviously profiting from the economic and cultural boom in the Mosul area during this period, the interior and exterior of the church were both provided with new stone carving. Three domes with interior stucco decoration probably also date from this period of artistic activity. Along with the extensive sculptural decoration, the wealth of information provided by the numerous thirteenth-century inscriptions, whose number exceeds the epigraphic data of any other period preserved at the monastery, is helpful in tracing part of the history of Deir Mar Behnam.

Although for the period under discussion the inscriptions at Deir Mar Behnam only furnish exact dates in three instances, including the dedicatory inscription of 1164 discussed above, they do present us with the names of some of the persons involved in the creation of both the architectural reliefs and the stuccowork. The inscriptions mention not only those who took the initiatives and provided the finances for the decoration of the church, but in a few cases also the artists who executed the work. As some of the names of both donors and artists recur in different parts of the church, they may be used as guiding points in order to establish the relative chronology of the building and decoration activities. The starting point for this reconstruction is the Syriac inscription (AE.01.11) carved along the three sides of the northern exterior gate (Fig. 7B; Pl. 33), the entrance known as the Gate of St Peter and St Paul, which gives access to the secondary nave of the church.

According to the inscription, the monks ʿIsa and Fadl-Allah the priests, Abu Nasr and Behnam the deacons, and a certain Thomas and Mahbub, initiated the construction of the southern and the northern exterior gates (Figs 7A-7B; Pls 33-34), as well as the outside oratory (Fig. 7C; Pl. 35), or *bet ṣlotā* (Syriac for 'house of prayer'), which is situated between them (Pl. 36). Moreover, these three architectural units are ingeniously connected with each other by means of a continuing frieze enclosing several successive Syriac inscriptions that frame the two main gates, and the outside oratory. In addition to the names of the monks in

[55] Fiey 1972-1973; den Heijer 2004; Snelders/Immerzeel 2004, 131-133; Section 3.5 of the present study.

charge of the reconstruction, the inscription around the Gate of St Peter and St Paul provides us with the names of the artists who were responsible for carrying out the work: Abu Salim and Abraham. Significantly, the names of these two artists also occur in the interior of the church, in the Syriac inscription (AE.01.32) framing the large doorway leading into the sanctuary (Pl. 37), known as the Royal Gate.

Further, an additional Syriac inscription (AE.01.10), carved above the Gate of St Peter and St Paul, states that 'the wife of Muqaddar' contributed to the construction of this portal. The name of the same female benefactor is also found inside the church, in another Syriac inscription (AE.01.24) placed to the left of the Gate of the Two Baptisms, which leads into a side-chapel currently known as the Chapel of Mart Sarah (Fig. 7F; Pl. 38). These two inscriptions indicate that Bahiyya was an important benefactor who contributed to the erection of the two sculptured doorways by means of a donation, and establish a distinct chronological relationship between the two gates. Moreover, a long frieze containing a Syriac inscription of the Creed (AE.01.22, AE.01.25, AE.01.26) starts on the south wall of the nave, to the right of the Gate of the Two Baptisms, and continues right onto the east wall, connecting the Gate of the Two Baptisms with the small doorway to the sanctuary (Fig. 7E; Pl. 39) and the Royal Gate (Fig. 7D; Pl. 37), successively. In this way, the liturgical inscription directly links up the only three interior gates at the monastery that display figural imagery.

In short, the evidence provided by the inscriptions suggests that the three architectural units in the west façade of the church (i.e., the two doorways giving access to the church and the *bet ṣlotā*; Pl. 36), the Royal Gate, the small corner doorway, and the Gate of the Two Baptisms all belong to the same building campaign. It should be noted, however, that the latter two gates were not apparently executed by Abu Salim and Abraham, but by artists whose names have not come down to us. The inference that all these gates and niches form part of the same decoration campaign will be of importance when discussing the significance of Deir Mar Behnam's iconographic programme.

Not all architectural reliefs at the monastery belong to the period of 1233-1259, however. On the basis of two historical inscriptions furnished with dates, Harrak was able to reconstruct the historical development and sculptural activities at the monastery in the last five years of the thirteenth century.[56] A lengthy Syriac inscription (AE.01.20), found inside the monastic church, between the Gate of the Chapel of Mar Mattai (Fig. 7G; Pl. 40) and the Gate of the Two Baptisms (Pl. 38) on the south wall of the nave, states that the monastery and the mausoleum of Mar Behnam were looted in A.G. 1606 (i.e., A.D. 1295) by the invading Mongol army of Il-Khan Baidu. According to the inscription in question, the abbot of the monastery, Rabban Ya^{c}qub (Jacob), astutely reported his grievances to the Il-Khan. Ya^{c}qub's diplomatic skills must have been excellent, for he was able not only to retrieve all the objects that had been stolen, but even to persuade Baidu to make a donation to the monastery's patron saint. This donation was apparently used for the construction of a new grave to hold the saint's relics, which were transferred to the mausoleum adjacent to the monastic church at Deir Mar Behnam (Fig. 6; Pl. 42). An inscription above the grave, written in Uighur (AE.02.1C), and in which the monastery's patron saint is invoked under the name Khidr-Ilyas, reveals the Mongol contribution (p. x).[57] The grave monument is dated by a Syriac inscription to the Seleucid year 1611, which corresponds to A.D. 1300.[58]

In conclusion, though the legend of Mar Behnam purports to give a historically accurate account of the rise of the cult from the time when it was first attested through the dedication of a martyrion for the relics of the saint and his sister Sarah, there is no conclusive evidence

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[56] Harrak/Ruji 2004.

[57] Harrak/Ruji 2004, 67-68, Fig. 2. Cf. Pognon 1907, 140; Fiey 1968, 678; *idem* 1970b, 19.

[58] For the subsequent history of Deir Mar Behnam, see Fiey 1965, II, 608-609; Novák/Younansardaroud 2002, 174-175; Younansardaroud 2002, 195-196; Harrak 2009.

corroborating a fourth-century origin for Deir Mar Behnam. The first secure evidence of the existence of the monastery is encountered in the historical sources only from the twelfth century onwards, one of the earliest being the dedicatory inscription of 1164. As suggested above, the reconstruction activities that were then carried out at the monastery may have occasioned the writing down of the legend of Mar Behnam. The hagiographer responsible was probably connected with Deir Mar Mattai. Since the dedicatory inscription makes mention of a 'renovation', it seems likely that the church existed well before this date. If this is true, this would have been the site where the monk Kasrun of Edessa is said to have been buried in 1139.

At the time, it was apparently not known to which saint Deir Mar Behnam had originally been dedicated. Hence, if we are to assume that the monastic church and the adjacent mausoleum were erected at the site already prior to the twelfth century,[59] one cannot entirely exclude the possibility that the monastery occurs in earlier sources but is concealed under another name.[60] Complicating matters still further, many monasteries in the region are known to have shifted hands between the Syrian Orthodox and the East Syrians, and hagiographies were commonly used by both parties to lay claim to the same sites. A good example is Deir Mar Zakkai on Mount Elpheph, which, according to the Syrian Orthodox tradition, was founded in the fourth century by one of the disciples of Mar Mattai, whereas the East Syrian tradition claims that the monastery was originally built in the seventh century and dedicated to Yohannan and Isosawran, two disciples of the East Syrian saint Rabban Hormizd.[61]

Whatever the case may be, only detailed archaeological research at the site may shed further light on the architectural development of Deir Mar Behnam, but this is beyond the scope of the present study. The art-historical discussion in the following sections will be limited to the monumental decoration of the monastery's church.

6.3 Style

6.3.1 General Observations

At Deir Mar Behnam, the sculptured reliefs (figural decoration, ornamental designs, and inscriptions) are concentrated around doorways and niches, and positioned in such a way that they follow the structure of the architecture, while stuccowork occurs mainly in the insides of the domes. Except for two large stucco panels in the nave, which represent Mar Behnam and his sister Sarah (Figs 7J-7K; Pls 43-44), the remaining surfaces of the walls consist of undecorated plasterwork.[62] The resulting contrast between the plain and carved parts highlights the decoration and attracts the attention of the viewer. This type of arrangement

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[59] Fiey (1965, II, 582) hypothesizes that the first church was erected directly adjacent to the mausoleum, more specifically at the place of the artificial mound at the north-east side, with which the mausoleum is currently connected. During a preliminary archaeological investigation at the site, Victor Place (1867-1870, II, 171) uncovered some building materials from the mound which apparently date from the Sassanian period. Besides, given the octagonal shape of the domed mausoleum, the building may have originally been built as a free-standing baptistery. Such octagonal baptisteries are known from Syria and Tur ᶜAbdin (Palmer 1990, 140-148, Figs 44-46, with further references).

[60] Cf. Palmer 1990, 122.

[61] Fiey 1965, II, 780-783.

[62] Photographs taken in the early twentieth century by Preusser (1911, Pls 3-4, 7-9) and Gertrude Bell (Gertrude Bell Archive, nos M_017-M_022) reveal that, at that time, the walls of the church were covered by layers of plaster, as was presumably already the case in the medieval period. During the restoration activities of the 1990s, the walls of the interior were provided with a new layer of plasterwork, and the exterior was covered up with large stone plates (Diwersy/Wand 2001, Pl. 398). The Gertrude Bell Archive can be accessed via http://www.gerty.ac.uk/.

conforms to the usual tendency in Northern Mesopotamia during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to apply stone carving around architectural features, especially doorways and entrances. Moreover, the placement of the reliefs shows a remarkable coherence in terms of their composition, as they are commonly part of symmetrical arrangements. This compositional scheme was yet another basic principle governing the placement of figural reliefs in the region at the time.[63]

The architectural reliefs at Deir Mar Behnam thus fit neatly into the general framework of medieval sculptural practices in Northern Mesopotamia. In terms of style, however, the decoration shows the closest affinities with sculpture in the Mosul area dating from the reign of Badr al-Din Lu'lu'. This relationship is perhaps best exemplified by a comparison between the sculptured gates at the monastery and those found in other monuments in the vicinity.

6.3.2 Gates

Surveying the sculptured gates at Deir Mar Behnam, one can distinguish two main types: arched doorways, which are used only for the gates giving access to the burial room (Fig. 7H; Pl. 41) and the Chapel of the Virgin (Fig. 7I);[64] and gates with a horizontal lintel and a depressed arch above. The standard design of this second type is composed of several basic elements, including a horizontal lintel consisting of several joggled voussoirs surmounted by a depressed arch, a long inscription band framing the doorway on its three sides, and, finally, a horizontal inscription band, which together with a palmette frieze underneath, functions as a cornice. This type is ubiquitous at Deir Mar Behnam as it is used for the southern and northern exterior gates (Pls 33-34), the Royal Gate (Pl. 37), the Gate of the Two Baptisms (Pl. 38), the secondary entrance to the sanctuary (Pl. 39), and the Gate of the Chapel of Mar Mattai (Pl. 40). The lintel of some of these gates is provided with a stalactite decoration underneath, as is the case on the Royal Gate, where they form three shoulder arches. The closest parallel for this type of gate is seen in 'doorway B' of the Mausoleum of Imam ᶜAwn al-Din in Mosul, which was built in A.H. 646 (i.e., A.D. 1248/49) by Badr al-Din Lu'lu'.[65]

The most elaborately decorated of all doorways at Deir Mar Behnam is the one known as the Gate of the Two Baptisms (Pl. 38). In terms of style and composition, this gate finds its closest analogies in the stone doorways from a number of buildings that were either erected or reconstructed during the reign of Badr al-Din Lu'lu'. One good example is 'doorway A' from the aforementioned Mausoleum of Imam ᶜAwn al-Din.[66] Besides the fact that they share the same general layout, the most eye-catching similarities between the two gates are found in their decoration, more specifically the panels that frame the three sides of both entrances. Although the human figures and crosses are not featured in the mausoleum, the general shape of its panels and the rich floral ornament carved in them are both very similar to those at Deir Mar Behnam.

What is more, the trefoil or keyhole-shaped panels of this kind, which are connected with each other by simple loops, are the most characteristic elements linking the doorway at the monastery with other stone structures encountered in the Mosul area, in both Islamic and Christian contexts. In the city of Mosul, panels of this kind also frame a badly reconstructed *mihrab* from the al-Nuri Mosque,[67] and a doorway from the Mausoleum of Imam Bahir.[68] In

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[63] Whelan 2006, 31.
[64] Preusser 1911, Pl. 7.
[65] Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, II, 266-267, Fig. 262; III, Pl. 8 left; Tabbaa 2001, 64-66, Fig. 23.
[66] Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, II, 265-266; III, Pls V left, VIII right; Uluçam 1989, 137-138, Figs 303-304, no. E.-40; Hillenbrand 1994a, 300-301; C. Hillenbrand 1999, Pl. 4.25; Wirth 1991, 641-642, Fig. 13, Pl. 71b.
[67] Baghdad, Iraqi Museum, inv. no. A. 9888: Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, II, 227; III, Pls V left, XCII; al-Janabi 1982, 171-172, Pl. 160a; Uluçam 1989, 177, Figs 381-382; Tabbaa 2002, 345. Located in the courtyard, some

Sinjar, situated about 100 km to the west of Mosul, similar trefoil panels flank a throne niche (see below), and on the stone sarcophagus of Imam ᶜAli al-Hadi in Mosul this distinctive feature decorates the sides.[69] Finally, the Royal Gate at the Church of Mart Shmuni in Qaraqosh (see Chapter 7; Pl. 66) provides us with another example from a distinctly Christian building.

Defined by the trefoil shape of the torus moulding, the interior decoration of these panels commonly consists of symmetrical arabesque designs, which are typified by an elongated lobed or cusped shape terminating in a foliate finial above. The core of these arabesques displays an intricate pattern of interlaced stems that are set on different planes, creating a sense of three-dimensionality. Sometimes these arabesques are placed underneath small baldachins of *muqarnas* (e.g., Mausoleum of Imam ᶜAwn al-Din; throne niche in Sinjar), but this feature is omitted from the panels at Deir Mar Behnam, perhaps to leave more space available for the foliate crosses with flaring arms (Pls 63-64).[70] In addition to parallels in stonework, similarly shaped arabesque designs are encountered in other types of art associated with Mosul and the vicinity, including some pieces of cast metalwork, carved woodwork, and carved stuccowork attributed to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[71]

Whereas all the panels from 'doorway A' at the Mausoleum of Imam ᶜAwn al-Din are filled with this characteristic type of arabesque design, those at Deir Mar Behnam are not only topped with a foliated cross with flaring arms on a mound, but also alternate with panels showing single figures of monks set against a background of such foliate decoration (Pls 45-46). When we consider the concept of an opening framed by a series of trilobed panels that are interconnected by means of simple loops, in which human figures alternate with arabesque designs, the Gate of the Two Baptisms is greatly reminiscent of a throne niche (c. 1220-1230) from the Gu' Kummet near Sinjar, which is commonly assumed to have belonged to an Ayyubid palace.[72]

The carving of the Sinjar niche, according to Whelan, seems to belong to an earlier phase of the style typified by Badr al-Din's own monuments in Mosul, dating from the 1240s, such as the *mihrab* from the al-Nuri Mosque and 'doorway A' from the Mausoleum of imam ᶜAwn al-Din. In these two monuments, and at Deir Mar Behnam, the opening is framed by similar keyhole-shaped arches linked by simple loops in an arrangement analogous to the Sinjar niche, but the Mosul arches are relatively 'more elongated, the small baldachins with *muqarnas* more elaborate and more conventionalized, while the symmetrical arabesques are more rigid and less three dimensional'.[73]

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ten metres in front of the mosque, this *mihrab* was probably added by Badr al-Din Lu'lu' to the mosque that was erected by Nur al-Din Zangi in 1170-1172.

[68] Baghdad, Iraqi Museum, inv. no. A. 9881: al-Janabi 1982, 179-180, Pls 170-171; Uluçam 1989, 141-143, Pls 314-315; Gierlichs 1996, 230-231, cat. no. 71.

[69] Al-Janabi 1982, 250-251, Pl. 174.

[70] Balicka-Witakowski *et al.* 2001, plate on p. 139.

[71] Mols 2006, 33-34. Illustrative in this respect are a group of cast doorknockers and a number of openwork suspension brackets: Allan 1987, cat. nos 94-95; *idem* 2002, 14-17; Folsach 1990, 109, cat. no. 72; *idem* 2001, 316, cat. no. 505; Maddison/Savage-Smith 1997, 207-209, cat. no. 120; Catalogue Paris 2001, no. 221; Roxburgh 2005, 100-101, 391-392, cat. no. 57. Woodwork: Folsach 1990, 108-109.

[72] Baghdad, Iraqi Museum, inv. no. A. 3105: Reitlinger 1938, 151-153, Figs 14-17; al-Janabi 1982, 175-176, Pl. 164; Whelan 1988, 222, Figs 2-8; *idem* 2006, 408-411, Figs 383-389; R. Hillenbrand 1999, 123, Fig. 96; C. Hillenbrand 1999, Pls 4.11-4.12; Ettinghausen/Grabar/Jenkins-Madina 2001, 257, Pl. 426. The concept of trilobed panels alternately representing single human figures and arabesque designs is also used in the decoration of a brass incense burner from the group of thirteenth-century inlaid metalwork pieces with Christian scenes and figures, for which a Syro-Mesopotamian origin has been proposed (see Section 2.7.1): Edinburgh, Royal Scottish Museum, inv. no. 1956.518 (Baer 1989, 7-10, Pls 7-8).

[73] Whelan 1988, 222 n. 28.

Another characteristic feature of the Gate of the Two Baptisms that shows that the sculpture at Deir Mar Behnam is closely tied into regional artistic developments is the seven pairs of dragons' heads that issue from the gate's upper horizontal panels. Iconographically speaking, these dragons are closely related to those surmounting a thirteenth-century doorway from the Mausoleum of Imam Bahir in Mosul (see below).[74] The correspondence between the Christian and the Islamic groups of dragons, however, extends to the stylistic and compositional levels. On both monuments, the addorsed heads of the dragons are represented with almond-shaped eyes, wide-open mouths with a characteristically curled-up upper jaw, small pointed horns or ears, and protruding tongues. Significantly, the formal characteristics of these dragons recur in a group of cast doorknockers featuring dragon handles, which were produced in Northern Mesopotamia (the Jazira) during the late twelfth or the thirteenth century. The most famous of these are the pair formerly on the doors of the Great Mosque in Jazirat ibn ᶜUmar (Cizre), which was restored between 1208 and 1241.[75]

The same Christian-Muslim stylistic overlap holds true for the human figures at Deir Mar Behnam, which are commonly characterized by their stocky appearance. The figures are rather squat, their bodies rendered with hanging shoulders, on which rest relatively large heads with broad faces. The faces show no individuality, although the monks and apostles are all depicted with beards, while the two equestrian saints are beardless. Despite these small differences, they all share oriental-looking facial features, including almond-shaped or slit eyes, small noses and mouths. As was already pointed out by Tariq al-Janabi, the style of these figures matches that of a variety of works of art dating from the twelfth and thirteenth century, which, in addition to sculptured stone reliefs, also include unglazed barbotine ware vessels (*habbs*) executed in Gerald Reitlinger's Style II and III, and inlaid metalwork.[76]

A typical feature of the standing figures, such as the six monks on the Gate of the Two Baptisms (Pl. 38), for instance, is their hieratic and frontal position, contrasting with the placement of the legs and feet, which are shown in profile and turned towards the centre of the symmetrical composition. This particular approach of depicting human figures can also be observed on the throne niche from Sinjar, and the Royal Gate at the Church of Mart Shmuni in Qaraqosh (Pl. 66), which both belong to the same regional stylistic grouping.

6.3.3 Niches

Equally illustrative of the artistic affinities between the sculptural decoration at Deir Mar Behnam and contemporary Islamic art is the *bet ṣlotā*, the outside oratory situated on the west façade of the monastic church, where the monks and visitors of the monastery assembled during the summertime to pray (Fig. 7C; Pls 35-36). Usually, such an outside oratory consists of a simple apse at the east end of a courtyard, as is seen, for example, in the churches of Tur ᶜAbdin.[77] In several Syrian Orthodox churches in Mosul, however, the western galleries in front of the buildings were designed to perform this liturgical function. In these cases, a small

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[74] Baghdad, Iraqi Museum, inv. no. A. 9881: al-Janabi 1982, 179-180, Pl. 170; Uluçam 1989, Fig. 13; Gierlichs 1996, 35, cat. no. 71.

[75] Istanbul, Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art, inv. no. 3794 (Roxburgh 2005, no. 87, 130-131, 399); Copenhagen, David Collection, inv. no. 38/1973 (Catalogue Berlin 2006, no. 25). The other specimens from this group include: Berlin, Museum für Islamische Kunst, inv. no. I. 2242 (Catalogue Berlin 2006, no. 26); London, Khalili Collection, inv. nos MTW1407 and MTW1408 (Catalogue Amsterdam 1999, 68-69). On this group of doorknockers, see Mols 2006, 32, with further references.

[76] Al-Janabi 1982, 251; Reitlinger 1951, 16-21, Figs 17-20. Good examples include the human figures on the neck of a bronze candlestick made by Da'ud ibn Salama al-Mawsili in 1248 (Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, inv. no. 4414: Whelan 1988, 224, Figs 17-19; Baer 1989, Figs 53-56), and those featured on a barbotine vessel in Berlin, Museum für Islamische Kunst, inv. no. I. 5619 (Helmecke 2005, 447, Fig. 49).

[77] Bell/Mundell Mango 1982, viii, x, Pls 105, 126, 151, 185; Palmer 1990, 136.

niche decorated with a cross is usually placed between the two doorways giving access to the church, in order to accentuate the site of prayer.[78]

The *bet ṣlotā* at Deir Mar Behnam is thus also situated at the western gallery, but what is of primary significance here is the fact that this prayer-niche looks virtually the same as a *mihrab*, which is the essential feature of a Muslim place of prayer. The outside oratory consists of a tripartite structure, with a large central niche flanked by two smaller niches, which were probably destined to hold crosses and/or candlesticks. The background of the central niche is inscribed with a large cross surrounded by several Syriac inscriptions (Pl. 48), one of which states that the niche was reserved for the 'adored and holy Gospel' (AE.01.16).

Significantly, the prayer-niche at Deir Mar Behnam has an Islamic counterpart in the *mihrab* from the Mausoleum of Imam Ali in Mosul, which dates from A.H. 686 (i.e., A.D. 1287/88).[79] Typologically speaking, both architectural units are based on the same tripartite structure. In both cases, a large central niche flanked by two smaller niches is framed on its three sides by two ascending and descending friezes, the innermost of which contains a decorative design, while the outer frieze encloses a monumental inscription. On a more detailed level, however, the two constructions differ markedly, especially as far as their decoration is concerned. Whereas the hood of the *mihrab*'s central niche is filled with several layers of *muqarnas*, and the lower half consists of a five facetted recession, the conch of the central niche of the *bet ṣlotā* is decorated with an intricate arabesque design topped with a cross (Pl. 47), and the background is flat. Furthermore, the five facets of the central niche of the *mihrab* are each decorated with a representation of a mosque lamp; the background of the *bet ṣlotā* is decorated with a cross (Pl. 48), thus in keeping with the traditional decoration of the Christian outside oratory.

In short, apart from the fact that it is encountered in a distinctively Christian context, the prayer niche at Deir Mar Behnam can only be identified as 'Christian' on the basis of the Syriac inscriptions and two crosses: the large cross inscribed in the back wall of the central niche, and the one in the hood. In every other aspect, the outside oratory looks the same as an Islamic *mihrab*. In other words, the Syriac inscriptions and the symbol of the cross function as markers of Christian identity. The niches at Deir Mar Behnam and the Mausoleum of Imam Ali demonstrate not only that this architectural division can be used equally within an Islamic or a Christian context, but also that the difference in religious context does not impact on the general symbolism of this particular architectural feature, which in both cases indicates the site of prayer.

6.3.4 Domes

In the early twentieth century, three domes with interior stucco decoration could still be seen in the church at Deir Mar Behnam: one in the sanctuary (Fig. 7, room 6; Pl. 49), another in the Chapel of the Virgin (Fig. 7, room 4; Pl. 50), and a third, which was destroyed in 1913, in the Chapel of Mar Mattai (Fig. 7, room 10; Pl. 51). As in the case of the monumental sculptural decoration, the closest parallels for this kind of stuccowork are found in medieval Islamic monuments in the Mosul area. Domes with interior decoration appear to have been a standard feature in Islamic architecture during the period under consideration, especially in case of mausoleums. Although the interiors of the domes in Mosul were occasionally left plain, as at the Mausoleum of Imam ᶜAbd al-Rahman (1180-1193), the more elaborate ones were commonly provided with *muqarnas* executed in stucco, including a number of shrines that

[78] Fiey 1959, 93; Harrak 2004, 76.

[79] Baghdad, Iraqi Museum, inv. no. A. 1134: Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, II, 275-277, Figs 266-269; III, Pl. VII right, IIC 1; al-Janabi 1982, 176-178, Pls 166-168.

were erected during the reign of Badr al-Din Lu'lu', more specifically the Mausoleum of Imam Yahya ibn al-Qasim and the Mausoleum of Imam ᶜAwn al-Din (1248/49).[80]

The most elaborately decorated of all the domes at Deir Mar Behnam is the one surmounting the Chapel of the Virgin (Pl. 50), which displays thirty-two ribs forming a rich star pattern. The dome rests on an intricate transitional zone formed by four rows of corbels, set at different angles. Such ribbed or gored domes were a characteristic architectural feature of Mosul and the vicinity, where a number of examples can be found that are generally datable to the late twelfth and the first half of the thirteenth century.[81] Closely related to the interior dome surmounting the Chapel of the Virgin is the dome over the *mihrab* in the al-Nuri Mosque (c. 1170-1172) in Mosul, which rests on an octagonal zone, from which spring twenty-four ribs. The octagon itself rests on a transition zone consisting of pendentives with large *muqarnas* cells.[82]

Another eye-catching analogy is found in the twenty-four ribbed stucco dome at the Mausoleum of Sittna Zainab at Sinjar, which was probably built in 1248 at the orders of Badr al-Din Lu'lu'.[83] The upper corners of the square room are filled with rows of corbels, but whereas the corbels at Deir Mar Behnam are elaborately carved, those at the Mausoleum of Sittna Zainab are plain in appearance. The device of corbelling is also encountered in the altar room at Deir Mar Mattai, where a series of brick corbels, similarly situated in the four upper corners of the room, support a stuccoed dome.[84] Significantly, the decoration of this dome provides a striking similarity to the one at Deir Mar Behnam, in that it also features a complex star pattern.

The stucco dome in the Chapel of the Virgin at Deir Mar Behnam is enhanced by additional polychrome decoration, executed in what appears to be blue paint. Besides a variety of crosses and the names of the craftsmen responsible, ʿIsa al-Nattafah and Michael (AE.01.46B-C), the undersides of the ribs are decorated with a continuing type of ornamental pattern commonly known as a Greek key motif (Pl. 52). Developed already in ancient times, and adopted by various cultures and in different regions, this particular type of ornamentation was used on a wide variety of works of art from the medieval Middle East, both Christian and Islamic. The many examples include the two Syrian Orthodox lectionaries from the Mosul area, Vat. Syr. 559 and BL Add. 7170,[85] the eleventh-century wall paintings at Deir Mar Musa in Syria,[86] the inlaid metalwork vessel known as the Freer Canteen (Pl. 9), and a number of thirteenth-century candlesticks attributed to Siirt.[87]

6.3.5 Inscriptions

Although a study of the palaeography of the Syriac and Arabic inscriptions at Deir Mar Behnam is beyond the scope of the present study, some general observations concerning the technique in which the monumental inscriptions are executed may nevertheless be made. In this matter, it is revealing to compare the medieval Syriac inscriptions at Deir Mar Behnam

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[80] On *muqarnas* domes, see Tabbaa 1985; *idem* 2001, 103-136. On domes in medieval Iraq, see al-Janabi 1982, 234-240.
[81] Tabbaa 2002, 347.
[82] Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, II, 216-223; al-Janabi 1982, 237; C. Hillenbrand 1999, Pl. 4.5; Tabbaa 2002, 347, Fig. 12.
[83] Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, II, 308-311, Figs 285-286; al-Janabi 1982, 237; Gertrude Bell Archive, photograph no. R_082.
[84] Preusser 1911, 15-18, Pl. 24.2.
[85] Leroy 1964, Pls 81.3, 89.4, 92.1, 94.4.
[86] Westphalen 2007, Pl. 17; Immerzeel 2009, Pl. 30; Zibawi 2009, plates on p. 109.
[87] London, Nuhad Es-Said Collection, inv. nos 7-8 (Allan 1999, cat. nos 7-8); Copenhagen, David Collection, inv. no. 2/1963 (Catalogue Berlin 2006, no. 32).

with the extant Syriac inscriptions in Tur ᶜAbdin, as presented in Andrew Palmer's corpus. With the exception of one fifteenth-century inscription, the Syriac inscriptions in Tur ᶜAbdin date from between 534 and 1226.[88]

Significantly, unlike most of the inscriptions at Deir Mar Behnam, the Syriac inscriptions that have survived in Tur ᶜAbdin are *engraved* with a chisel in limestone. Some are moulded in relief in plaster, and others were painted. Considering the professional background of the persons who were responsible for the execution of these inscriptions, Palmer, mainly on the basis of stylistic arguments, has convincingly argued that they were not professional masons, but rather scribes; in other words, these were the same craftsmen who were also responsible for the calligraphy in Syriac manuscripts.[89]

In contrast to the Tur ᶜAbdin inscriptions, the monumental inscriptions at Deir Mar Behnam, such as those surmounting and framing the various gates at the monastery, are *sculptured* in relief. Obviously, these sculptured inscriptions are the work of professional masons rather than scribes. Nonetheless, it seems highly likely that the professional masons sculpted the letters in stone, using a preliminary design prepared by a scribe, perhaps one of the monks who commissioned the work. According to Harrak, the monumental inscriptions at Deir Mar Behnam are somewhat reminiscent, in terms of style, of the type of Syriac script encountered in a manuscript written in 1264 by ᶜAziz of Bartelli, who was a monk from Deir Mar Mattai (p. x).[90]

6.4 Iconography

The extensive figural stone reliefs adorning both the interior and exterior of the church at Deir Mar Behnam represent the most complete medieval Christian decoration programme that has been preserved in Iraq. Assuming that most of these reliefs belong to one and the same decoration campaign, which, in view of the stylistic analogies with monuments erected at the order of Badr al-Din Lu'lu', was probably carried out in the 1240s, it may be argued that they were intended to communicate a thematically coherent message. Before suggesting an overall interpretation of the decoration programme, however, the iconography of each of the images encountered in the various parts of the church will be discussed individually, starting with the animal motifs, followed by an evaluation of the human figures and narrative scenes.

Excluded from the following discussion is a stone panel embedded in the wall of the façade of the church, at the upper right-hand side of the tripartite niche (Pl. 35), which is decorated with a very naïve rendering of the Crucifixion (Pl. 53), the only New Testament scene at Deir Mar Behnam. The crude execution of the sculpture, the formal characteristics of which are different from all other reliefs at the monastery, does not allow for any reliable dating on the basis of stylistic analysis. Nevertheless, the fact that the cross on which Christ is crucified is provided with branch-like beams, the surface of which is covered with a continuing pattern of incised lines that were clearly meant to imitate tree-bark, may point towards a relatively late dating for the panel. The tree-like appearance of the cross was most probably intended to enhance the idea of Christ's cross as the Tree of Life, which appears to have been an unfamiliar iconographic concept in Crucifixion imagery in the Middle East until after the medieval period.

6.4.1 Animal Motifs

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[88] Palmer 1987; *idem* 1988; *idem* 1989; *idem* 1990, 200-226.
[89] Palmer 1989; *idem* 1990, 222-224.
[90] Paris, BnF syr. 56: Harrak 2009; Hatch 2002, 188.

One of the most conspicuous elements in Deir Mar Behnam's sculptural decoration programme is the prominence accorded to a series of fantastic and real animals, dragons and lions in particular. As such, the monastic pictorial programme matches contemporary iconographic developments in Anatolia and Northern Mesopotamia. The use of these subjects should be seen against the background of the widespread popularity of animal motifs within the realm of monumental sculptural decoration during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, more specifically in the architecture of the various Great Seljuk successor states (see Section 2.4).

Numerous different possible sources for the animal reliefs in the Great Seljuk successor states have already been suggested, ranging from Central Asian and Byzantine works of art, to Chinese models.[91] Current scholarship, however, is inclined to see Armenian and Georgian sculptural decoration as the most important and direct source of inspiration.[92] In discussing the influence of Armenian church architecture on Islamic buildings in Anatolia, Robert Hillenbrand, for example, points out that the resemblance between the medieval architectural reliefs from both regions 'extends beyond style to the very choice of animal – rams, bulls, lions, eagles and so on – as well as to their location in spandrels, over doorways, and their use as water-spouts, gargoyles and corbels'.[93] Along similar lines, Katharina Otto-Dorn and Gierlichs draw attention to the fact that Armenian and Georgian craftsmen were working in Anatolia and Northern Mesopotamia at the time,[94] which would indeed explain the overlap in both style and iconography.

On the other hand, Otto-Dorn, Gierlichs, and Eastmond, while highlighting the fluidity of motifs and the mobility of craftsmen, have each emphasized the reciprocal nature of this influence, pointing out that elements of architectural decoration in Christian palaces in Armenia, for instance, can be linked to sources in Muslim buildings in Anatolia.[95] What emerges from these recent studies is the widespread occurrence of the animal reliefs in a large geographical area, which covers Georgia, Armenia, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and Syria. Along with a rich variety of ornamental patterns, such as certain floral interlace work and *muqarnas* designs, the popularity of this common vocabulary of animal reliefs is attested by its use among various different cultures, religious groups, and denominations. The mechanics of cultural interchange and syncretism sketched by Gierlichs and Eastmond form the context in which the Deir Mar Behnam's church decoration came into being.

A) Dragons

A pair of addorsed dragons, with horns and interlaced tails, are depicted on the southern entrance to the church (Fig. 7A; Pls 34, 54). Each dragon has a forked tongue, which extends above a chalice-like object (Pls 55-56). In addition to these two dragons, seven pairs of entwined dragons frame the Gate of the Two Baptisms, situated in the southern wall of the nave (Fig. 7F; Pls 38, 63-64).

The closest iconographic parallels for the pairs of dragons at Deir Mar Behnam are found in medieval Islamic art in general and that of the Jazira in particular. As mentioned above, the dragon symbol enjoyed great popularity in the realm of monumental sculptural decoration in Anatolia and Northern Mesopotamia during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Although in this region and period dragon figures were occasionally used in the decoration of Islamic religious buildings, such as mosques and mausoleums, they were more often displayed on secular structures, including city walls and gates, palaces, caravanserais (*khans*), and

[91] Öney 1969a, 216; *idem* 1969b, 67; Otto-Dorn 1980, 145-149; Gierlichs 1996, 77-114.
[92] Gierlichs 1996, 77-78, 80-106.
[93] Hillenbrand 1994a, 308.
[94] Otto-Dorn 1980, 105; Gierlichs 1996, 80-81.
[95] Otto-Dorn 1980, 104-106; Gierlichs 1996, 82; Eastmond 2004, 77-96.

hospitals.[96] The dragons were commonly depicted in antithetically arranged pairs, facing each other in threatening attitudes, or else in a similar pose directed towards either other animals or human beings. Whether featured in a religious or secular context, the pairs of dragons were usually associated with entranceways, as at Deir Mar Behnam.

Within this general framework, the most eye-catching analogy for the pairs of dragons on the Gate of the Two Baptisms is a thirteenth-century stone portal from the Mausoleum of Imam Bahir in Mosul, which, as we have seen above (p. x), is similarly framed on its three sides by a series of interconnected trilobed panels.[97] The analogy extends to the rendering of the horizontal panels at the top, which are surmounted by six pairs of dragons' heads. On both monuments, Christian and Muslim, the addorsed heads of the dragons are portrayed with characteristic open mouths and curled-up upper jaws, small pointed horns, and protruding tongues. The only difference is found in the moulding of the trilobed panels; whereas at Deir Mar Behnam they are left plain, those at the Mausoleum of Imam Bahir are decorated with scales, obviously to enhance the idea of them being the elongated bodies of the dragons. Even though the pair of addorsed dragons placed above the southern entrance to the church at Deir Mar Behnam lack such a close similarity, it is clear that they fit neatly within the same broad iconographic context.

When we turn to the possible meanings attached to the dragon motifs, it should be mentioned that pairs of dragons, in addition to architectural reliefs, were fashioned in various types of other artistic media produced in the Jazira at the time, in particular carved wooden doors and cast bronze doorknockers, examples of which will be referred to shortly. Whatever the precise artistic medium, the dragon pairs were thus commonly placed in positions that suggest that they were intended to perform a protective function. Such a protective function is evoked in the pilgrimage guide of al-Harawi (d. 1215), who refers to the Church of Mart Daris in Mayyafariqin, which contained an image of a two-headed serpent, apparently intended to ward off snakes.[98]

When it comes to the symbolic value and meaning of these dragons, however, it is important to emphasize that they are actually highly ambiguous, often allowing for a multi-layered interpretation. The same ambiguity holds true for the symbol of the lion, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section. Gierlichs distinguishes three main, albeit not necessarily mutually exclusive, layers of meaning for the animal reliefs: apotropaic, astral-mythological, and political.[99] Depending on the context in which a certain animal motif is featured, it may be ascribed either one or more of these levels of meaning. When depicted within a larger series of symbols of planets and constellations, for instance, the dragons and lions may be assumed to have expressed astral-mythological messages. In another context, the emphasis is more likely to be on an alternative or additional layer of meaning.

According to the astral-mythological interpretation, which is widespread in the study of Islamic iconography, the dragon figure symbolizes a pseudo-planet of evil portent that is held responsible for solar and lunar eclipses. Traditionally, the terrifying phenomenon of the disappearance of the sun and the moon during an eclipse was attributed to a giant dragon that swallowed the two great luminaries. This dragon was known as *al-jawzahr* (Persian for 'dragon'), a monstrous being whose head and tail were identified with the ascending and

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[96] For a list of dragon reliefs in Anatolia and Northern Mesopotamia from this period, see Gierlichs 1996, 140. Cf. Öney 1969a; Otto-Dorn 1980, 125-136.

[97] Baghdad, Iraq Museum, inv. no. A. 9881: al-Hadithi/Khaliq 1974, Pl. 82; al-Janabi 1982, 179-180, Pl. 170; Uluçam 1989, Fig. 13; Gierlichs 1996, 35, cat. no. 71.

[98] Meri 2004, 162: 'Mayyāfariqīn contained a talismanic object against dogs, who from the hour of the late afternoon prayer do not remain there but leave for a village called al-Kalbīya at the entrance to the town. It contains in the Church of Mart Dāris a talismanic design of serpents, which is an image of a two-headed serpent'.

[99] Gierlichs 1996, 115-128. Cf. Öney 1969b, 213-216; Otto-Dorn 1980, 136.

descending node of the moon's orbit, respectively. Both of these nodes posed a threat to the sun and the moon. In addition, the exaltation of the dragon's head was assigned to *Gemini*, and its tail to *Sagittarius*.[100] One of the earliest renderings of the eclipse dragon in the Islamic realm is found in the sculptural decoration on the Tigris Bridge (mid-twelfth century) near Jazirat ibn ᶜUmar (Cizre). On the piers of the bridge, the seven visible planets and the pseudo-planet are each juxtaposed with one of those zodiacal signs that constitute their exaltation. Within this framework, *al-jawzahr* and its constellation *Saggitarius* are represented as a centaur drawing a bow and shooting an arrow at a menacing dragon issuing from his own tail.[101]

Oya Pancaroğlu points out that within the framework of figural representations of the planets and constellations encountered across a wide geographical area, depictions of the sun, the moon, and the pseudo-planet *al-jawzahr* appear to have been particularly favoured in Iraq, the Jazira, and Anatolia.[102] She has shown that, in addition to representations of the three celestial bodies in isolation, the image of *al-jawzahr* is inextricably linked with those of the sun and the moon. Paired dragons are frequently shown in the characteristic threatening attitude directed towards the effigy of a lion, the animal symbol of the sun, or a bull, the animal sign of the moon.[103] This category of images encompasses the group of bronze doorknockers from the Jazira, featuring a pair of dragons menacing a central lion's head, such as the two specimens from the wooden doors (1208-1251) of the Great Mosque in Jazirat ibn ᶜUmar (p. x).

The strong connection between the dragon and the sun and the moon also generated images in which an anthropomorphic representation of either one of these great luminaries is threatened by a pair of dragons. An ingenious visualization of the swallowing of the personified moon by the eclipse dragon is found in the double frontispiece miniatures of the Paris *Kitab al-Diryaq*, which dates from 1199.[104] The two illustrations show the personification of the moon, depicted as a cross-legged seated female figure holding up a crescent, surrounded by a pair of entwined dragons. The most common iconography of *al-jawzahr*, however, conceives the eclipse monster as two dragons flanking a frontally seated person who overpowers one or both dragons by seizing them by the throat. This subject is first encountered as part of larger cycles featuring a systematic series of celestial systems, more specifically on eastern Iranian metalwork from the middle of the twelfth century.[105]

The image of a person dominating two dragons soon found its way to the Syro-Mesopotamian region, where variations of the theme were also used in architectural decoration, apparently mainly for their sovereign connotations. One good example is the now lost Talisman Gate in Baghdad, which, according to its Arabic inscription, was built and restored in 1221/22 by the Abbasid Caliph al-Nasir (1180-1225) as part of the construction of an extensive defensive wall in order to protect the city against invaders and floods.[106] At the apex of the arched gateway, a crowned and cross-legged seated figure was depicted

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[100] For a full discussion of astrological symbolism in medieval Islamic iconography, see Hartner 1938; *idem* 1959; *idem* 1973-1974; Baer 1983, 245-274; Pancaroğlu 2000, 196-237. On *al-jawzahr*, see further *EI*², II, 501-502 (W. Hartner).

[101] Preusser 1911, 26-28, Pls 38-40; Hartner 1938, 114-115, 119-122, Fig. 2; Gierlichs 1996, cat. no. 57, 214, Pl. 47.4; Whelan 2006, 422-429, Fig. 404.

[102] Pancaroğlu 2000, 32, 224.

[103] Pancaroğlu 2000, 228-233.

[104] Paris, BnF arabe 2964, pp. 36-37: Azarpay 1978, Fig. 1; Kerner 2004, 207-222, Pls 6-7.

[105] Pancaroğlu 2000, 225-228, Fig. 39. One good example is the vessel known as the Bobrinski Bucket: St Petersburg, Hermitage, inv. no. IR-2268, made in Herat in 1163 (A.H. 559) (Hartner 1973-1974, Fig. 18; R. Hillenbrand 1999, Fig. 66; Ettinghausen/Grabar/Jenkins-Madina 2001, Fig. 257).

[106] Preusser 1911, Pl. 16; Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, I, 34-42, inscr. no. 39 (M. van Berchem); II, 151-156, Fig. 190; III, Pls X-XI; Gierlichs 1996, 124, Pls 66.1-66.2; Catalogue Berlin 2006, Pl. 12.

subjugating two large dragons by grasping them firmly by the tongue. In addition to its obvious apotropaic function, the decoration of the gate was probably intended to highlight the splendour and power of its princely patron, especially considering the strong political message expressed by the erection of public buildings in general and city gates in particular. It may be assumed that the royal person dominating over two lions symbolized al-Nasir triumphing over his enemies.[107]

In the case of monumental architectural decoration in the Seljuk successor states, the dragons and lions, notwithstanding their multivalency, appear to have been chosen mainly for their sovereign connotations. That the dragons and lions were used primarily as symbols of power is substantiated by the fact that they are usually combined directly with inscriptions of a distinctly political nature, in which the majority of the space is given to detailed titularies of the founders, their genealogies, and other self-glorifying phrases.[108] Propagandistic considerations, in particular, similarly appear to have motivated the erection and decoration of two closely related gates that were commissioned by Badr al-Din Lu'lu': the al-Khan Gate near Sinjar,[109] and the Mosul Gate in ᶜAmadiya.[110]

The spandrels of the al-Khan Gate are each occupied by a standing male figure, with nimbus and beard, who thrusts a lance into the mouth of a dragon. The imagery is repeated on the Mosul Gate, albeit that the dragon-slayers are now holding swords instead of lances. Taking the inscription that frames the al-Khan Gate on its three sides as a point of departure, Gierlichs argues that both monuments served as an instrument of dynastic legitimization and affirmation. He points out that the inscription contains a eulogy for Badr al-Din Lu'lu', in which the Atabeg ruler is explicitly compared with the popular sixth-century Persian hero Rustam, who according to tradition fought many mythical monsters, including a dragon.[111] The inscription's emphasis on the hero Rustam in conjunction with the heroic imagery of the dragon-slayer may thus be explained as Badr al-Din Lu'lu's desire to underscore his souvereign claims in the region.

Given that from ancient times the dragon was commonly seen as a potent symbol of Evil, the images of such dragon-tamers and dragon-slayers may be assumed to have generally symbolized the struggle between Good and Evil, between insiders ('us') and outsiders ('them'). Throughout the centuries, the dragon-slayer was used as a triumphal symbol by different groups and denominations in order to serve their own needs. During the period under consideration, the image of the mounted dragon-slayer, for instance, enjoyed popularity among both Muslims and Christians alike (see Sections 2.7 and 7.3.2). Obviously, the triumphal message expressed by the dragon-tamer and the dragon-slayer also applies to those scenes in which dragons, rather than human beings, are seen attacking other types of animals, such as lions and bulls.

Indeed, whether intended to express apotropaic, astral-mythological, or political messages, the various dragon themes were arguably all chosen essentially for their triumphal symbolism and apotropaic connotations, especially since these concepts are central to all three possible layers of meaning. We will return to the meaning of Deir Mar Behnam's dragon reliefs below, but will first discuss the lions and birds that are depicted at the monastery.

B) Lions

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[107] Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, I, 34-42; Otto-Dorn 1959, 75; *idem* 1982, 166-167; Gierlichs 1996, 124.
[108] Whelan 2006, 36-37.
[109] Preusser 1911, 11, Pl. 17.2; Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, I, 13-15, 205, Fig. 7; Reitlinger 1938, 149-150, Figs 9-12; al-Janabi 1982, 253, Fig. 51; Gierlichs 1995; *idem* 1996, cat. no. 65; Whelan 2006, 429-431, Figs 405-406.
[110] Al-Janabi 1982, 253, Pl. 175; Gierlichs 1995; *idem* 1996, cat. no. 66, Pls 56.1-56.3.
[111] Gierlichs 1996, 124; von Gladiss 2006b, 122-123, Fig. 16.

Two different types of lion representations are featured at Deir Mar Behnam: seated lions and lion heads. Pairs of seated lions are depicted on the southern exterior gate and on the small gate leading into the sanctuary (Pls 34, 39, 55-56, 59). The lions on the southern and northern exterior gates are enhanced with tails ending in dragon heads. In addition to the full size lions sitting on their hind legs, lion heads are virtually a standard feature in the sculptural decoration of the gates at Deir Mar Behnam. They are seen surmounting the southern and northern exterior gates (Pls 33-34), the Royal Gate (Pl. 37), and the Gate of the Two Baptisms (Pl. 38).

The lion is one of the most frequently represented animals in the Middle East; its depiction can be traced back to ancient times. It therefore perhaps comes as no surprise that the lion, like the dragon symbol discussed above, is ubiquitous in medieval sculptural decoration in the Seljuk successor states, as well as in Armenia and Georgia.[112] Excluding partial representations and freestanding sculptures from his discussion, thus focusing only on the bas-reliefs, Gierlichs distinguishes three main types: walking or standing lions in profile; lions sitting on their hind legs with bodies in profile and heads en face, frequently with a dragon issuing from the end of the tail; and winged lions.[113]

Whatever the iconographic type, the lions are commonly depicted in confronted pairs. Although lion pairs sometimes appear in isolation, they are usually incorporated into larger pictorial compositions, in which they are either combined with other animals, flanking the Tree of Life, or juxtaposed with an effigy of the sun. In addition, lions are frequently shown attacking other animals, especially the bull, in a theme commonly known as the 'conquering lion'.[114] As potent symbols of power, and in keeping with their generally acknowledged protective connotations, pairs of lions were consistently placed in connection with areas of passage in order to ward off all sorts of evil and hostile attacks. As in case of the dragon reliefs, this particular arrangement is encountered in secular and religious contexts, both Muslim and Christian.[115]

As for the sources and models for the lions at Deir Mar Behnam, the image of the dragon-tailed lion can be traced back as early as the fourth millennium B.C. The strong connection between the lion and the sun in Hellenistic and Islamic astrology, as the sun has its *domicilium* in Leo, generated representations of a menacing dragon emerging from the tail of a lion, which carries an effigy of the sun on its back, a combined representation that was widely represented in Islamic inlaid metalwork from Herat, Mosul, and Siirt.[116] One good example is a bronze bowl known as the Vaso Vescovali (c. 1200).[117] Decorated with an intricate astrological programme, the twelve medallions around the body of the bowl each contain the personification of a planet combined with the sign of the zodiac representing its respective day or night house.

Within this framework of astrological iconography, the effigy of the sun, represented as a tripartite radiant disk, is shown surmounting a lion whose tail ends in a dragon's head. Obviously, this detail here symbolizes the eclipse monster *al-jawzahr*, who threatens to devour the great luminary. The image of the Sun in Leo is also encountered on a late twelfth-century ewer in Tiflis, which, besides complex astrological imagery, is decorated with a lengthy poetical inscription. The content of this poem indicates that the combined images of

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[112] Gierlichs 1996, 9-18. Cf. Öney 1969b; Otto-Dorn 1980, 109-114.
[113] Gierlichs 1996, 9-15.
[114] Gierlichs 1996, 16-18.
[115] For a list of medieval lion reliefs in Anatolia and Northern Mesopotamia, see Gierlichs 1996, 139.
[116] Hartner 1938, 115, 119, 138, 146, Figs 1, 14; *idem* 1959, 242-243; Allan 1999, 49-53, figure on p. 50; Pancaroğlu 2000, 228-230.
[117] London, British Museum, inv. no. oa 1950.7-25.1: Hartner 1973-1974, 114, Figs 10, 14.

the planets and the zodiac, along with the vessel's benedictory inscriptions, were potent apotropaic symbols for the owner and maker.[118]

Especially when such images feature independently of a larger series of planetary figures and signs of the zodiac, the emphasis may be assumed to have shifted to another layer of meaning. As mentioned above, the animal motifs in the medieval architectural reliefs in the Great Seljuk successor states appear to have functioned primarily as symbols of power, with apotropaic connotations. Lions with dragon-headed tails are encountered in medieval architectural reliefs in the Great Seljuk successor states, where they are commonly featured in connection with entranceways, although it should be noted that they are not particularly widespread. In addition to the examples from Deir Mar Behnam, dragon-tailed lions are depicted at the Hüdavent Hatun Türbe in Niğde (1312),[119] an anonymous Türbe near Erciş (fifteenth century),[120] the Behram Paşa Khan in Sivas (thirteenth century),[121] the Syrian Orthodox Church of Mar Ahudemmeh in Mosul (see Section 7.3.3), the Syrian Orthodox Church of Mar Behnam in Jazirat ibn ᶜUmar,[122] and an East Syrian Church of unknown dedication,[123] also in Jazirat ibn ᶜUmar. Significantly, this subject is even less common in Armenian and Georgian architectural decoration, where there is currently only one known example, in the grave chapel of Prince P'rrošean (1283) at the monastic complex of Gełard.[124]

The talismanic reading of the dragon-tailed lions is enhanced by their usual position in connection with entrances. While the seated lions at Deir Mar Behnam and the Church of Mar Ahudemmeh are located in the spandrels of the portals in question, the lions in both churches in Jazirat ibn ᶜUmar form the lower part of the door jambs. Obviously, in each case the location on either side of an entrance brings out the apotropaic function of these lions as sanctuary guardians. An interesting observation to be made concerning the particular disposition of the lions in the two churches in Jazirat ibn ᶜUmar is that they are placed at the men's entrance to the church; the women's entrance lacks any comparable decoration. This was probably intentional, rather than the result of an accidental division, in order to distinguish visually between the separate entrances for men and women and to underline the relative importance of the men's entrance.[125]

Like the dragon-tailed lions, the lion heads at Deir Mar Behnam may also be seen as symbols of power with apotropaic connotations. Although partial representations of lions are comparatively rare in Islamic art, lion heads are a common feature in monumental sculptural decoration in the Great Seljuk successor states, where they are often made to function as corbels or gutters (gargoyles). Along with other fantastic and real animals, lion heads are depicted in religious and secular structures, including mosques and churches, city walls, towers, and caravanserais.[126] As far as their position surmounting a gate is concerned, the lion heads at Deir Mar Behnam are similar to those surmounting thirteenth-century gates at the aforementioned Church of Mar Ahudemmeh, the East Syrian Church of Mar Simᶜun al-Safa, both located in Mosul, and at the Alara Han (1229-1232) in Alanya.[127] Similar projecting lion heads are also featured on the façades of a number of Armenian churches, including the

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[118] Tiflis, Georgian State Museum, accession number not known: Allan 1999, 49; Ward 1993, 76-77; Pancaroğlu 2000, 218-220.
[119] Gierlichs 1996, 12, 180, Pl. 26.
[120] Gierlichs 1996, 12, 188, Pls 33.5-33.7.
[121] Gierlichs 1996, 12, 258-259, Pls 64.10-64.11.
[122] Diyarbakır, Archaeological Museum, inv. nos 64-65: Preusser 1911, 24-25, Pl. 34.2; Hartner 1938, 143-144, Fig. 23; Öney 1969b, 209, Fig. 34; *idem* 1971, 52, Fig. 54; Gierlichs 1996, 12, 235, Pls 60.5-60.6.
[123] Preusser 1911, 25, Pl. 35.2; Hartner 1938, 143-144, Fig. 24; Gierlichs 1996, 12, 234.
[124] Gierlichs 1996, 88.
[125] Hartner 1938, 143-144; Gierlichs 1996, 234.
[126] Öney 1969b, 46-48, Figs 18-19 (Great Mosque at Diyarbakır, 1156-1178; Aladdin Mosque in Niğde).
[127] Öney 1969b, Figs 20-21.

Church of the Holy Cross (915-921) on Aght'amar in Lake Van, and the Church of 'Gavith' (1181) in Sanahin.[128]

Notwithstanding the differences in the rendering of the facial features, the projecting lion heads in sculpture are highly reminiscent of the lion heads that often form the suspension pin of the aforementioned group of bronze doorknockers and handles from Northern Mesopotamia, including the two pairs that once decorated the doors to the Great Mosque in Jazirat ibn ᶜUmar (p. x). These heads, modelled fully in the round, are threatened by menacing dragons. Reference should also be made to a pair of thirteenth-century door handles with single projecting lion heads, which were most probably produced in Mosul.[129] Further, lion heads appear on a number of *habbs* decorated in Reitlinger's Style III, some of which have been associated with Badr al-Din Lu'lu'.[130] On these pieces, the lion heads are incorporated within a larger figurative context consisting of court scenes, including cross-legged figures holding a cup, court officials, military attendants, and musicians. The same motifs were also employed in architectural decoration in the Mosul area, both in Muslim and Christian contexts, a matter to which we will return later on in this study.

C) Birds

Two pairs of confronted birds occupy the lintel of the southern entrance to the church (Pl. 57). Placed on either side of the cross on the keystone, the birds are shown with their heads turned back. The tails of the pair on the left-hand side end in dragons' heads. Although it is difficult to determine the exact species, the curling tails seem to suggest that they were meant to represent peacocks.[131]

Paired birds are extremely common in medieval Islamic art.[132] As for the depiction of birds in medieval architectural reliefs in Anatolia and Northern Mesopotamia, two main types may be distinguished: birds of prey, in particular eagles and falcons; and peacocks.[133] By far the most frequently depicted bird motif in the architectural reliefs in the Great Seljuk successor states is the double-headed eagle, which appears to have functioned primarily as a symbol of power, and occasionally as a dynastic emblem.[134] Peacocks are relatively uncommon within the realm of monumental sculpture, but they are widespread in Islamic art in general. Probably regarded as a symbol of immortality and good fortune, peacocks are frequently depicted in connection with the enthroned prince.[135] The closest iconographic parallels to the two pairs of birds at Deir Mar Behnam are two early thirteenth-century *habbs*, which both display a cross-legged seated prince holding a cup, who is surmounted by a pair of confronted birds with their heads similarly turned back.[136]

In order to round off the iconographic discussion of the animal reliefs at Deir Mar Behnam, we will conclude with an assessment of their function and meaning. Hartner and Otto-Dorn have interpreted the lions and dragons depicted at the monastery in strictly astrological terms, as symbols of the sun and the pseudo-planet *al-jawzahr*, without taking into account the

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[128] Der Nersessian 1965, Figs 4, 39; Otto-Dorn 1980, 110.
[129] Kuwait, private collection, I/523, 1 and 2: Allan 1987, cat. no. 95.
[130] Baghdad, Iraqi Museum, inv. nos A.M. 5706, A.M. 7150 (Reitlinger 1951, 19-20, Figs 17-20); Berlin, Museum für Islamische Kunst, inv. no. I. 3714 (Catalogue Berlin 2006, no. 8); London, Victoria and Albert Musem, inv. no. 340 (Sourdel/Sourdel 1968, 385, Fig. 154; Otto-Dorn 1982, 157-158, Fig. 11).
[131] Gierlichs 1996, 237.
[132] On birds in Islamic art, and the peacock in particular, see Gelfer-Jørgensen 1986, 129-131.
[133] Gierlichs 1996, 21-25; Otto-Dorn 1980, 114-125.
[134] Otto-Dorn 1980, 118-125; Gierlichs 1993, 27-29; *idem* 1996, 116-117; Whelan 2006, 273-286.
[135] Gelfer-Jørgensen 1986, 131.
[136] London, Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. no. 340 (Sourdel/Sourdel 1968, 385, Fig. 154; Otto-Dorn 1982, 157-158, Fig. 11); Baghdad, Iraqi Museum, inv. no. A.M. 5706 (Reitlinger 1951, Fig. 17).

Syrian Orthodox monastic context in which the animals are featured.[137] As for the importance of astrology in the Syrian Orthodox context, the view that heavenly bodies influence terrestrial events was widely accepted, as is evidenced by authors such as Barhebraeus. Throughout his *Chronicle*, Barhebraeus connects important events with the positions of the stars and the planets, and cites comets as portents. Rather than serious astrology, however, this simply reflects widespread popular belief.[138] Moreover, in his *Cream of Wisdom*, Barhebraeus explicitly rejects astrology as a 'science'.[139] A passage from the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian is also revealing in this context: the author points out that the knowledge of astrology did not save Deacon Abu Sa^{c}ad of Edessa from being captured and killed by the Artuqids when they invaded the city in 1138.[140]

Notwithstanding the fact that astrology played a role in popular Syrian Orthodox thinking, the Syrian Orthodox Church officially refuted astrology, as is clearly reflected in a passage from the *Synodicon*, in which astrology is pinpointed as one of the weapons of the devil.[141] Without entering into a detailed discussion of Syrian Orthodox perspectives on astrology, it may nevertheless be concluded the animal reliefs at Deir Mar Behnam were probably not intended to function as astrological symbols. Obviously, one cannot rule out the possibility that some of the reliefs were accorded astrological meanings by those visiting the church, but the present discussion is concerned only with the intentions of the Syrian Orthodox monks who commissioned the work.

In assessing the possible meanings of the animal reliefs at Deir Mar Behnam, it is important to bear in mind that in Christian monumental decoration the choice of particular iconographic subjects was commonly determined by the liturgical function of the room or the section of the church building in which they were represented (p. x). In keeping with this practice, it does not seem far-fetched to assume that the Gate of the Two Baptisms, with its iconographic and epigraphic emphasis on the theme of baptism (see Section 6.4.2B), indicated the site where the baptismal liturgy was performed at the time. In addition to being likened to the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (see Section 5.3.5), the act of baptism in the Syrian Orthodox tradition was seen in terms of a fight with the devil. Within this framework, the anointing of the person to be baptized with the oil of Chrism indicated that he entered the contest against Satan, and the oil itself was seen as invincible armour against demons.[142]

Significant in this context is also a passage from the *Synodicon* dealing with exorcism, which was an essential part of the standard baptismal rite in the Syrian Orthodox Church. The text states that it is thanks to God the father of Jesus Christ that '… the whole army of the adversary is subdued and the devil is fallen and the serpent is trodden down and the dragon is killed'.[143] According to Syrian Orthodox theology, Satan was thus defeated at the moment of baptism, and it is therefore conceivable that this concept, besides general apotropaic

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[137] Otto-Dorn 1980, 132; Hartner 1938, 144, Fig. 27.

[138] This also holds true for Barhebraeus' prophecy of his own death, 'when Chronos and Zeus are in conjunction with the zodiacal sign of Aquarius', which is quoted by his brother Barsauma in the latter's continuation of the *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* (Budge 1932, I, xlviii, xxviii).

[139] Barhebraeus, *Cream of Wisdom, Book of Generation and Corruption*, Chapter 2, § 5. I would like to thank Prof. Hidemi Takahashi, who is currently preparing a translation and edition of this text, for this information. A related passage in Barhebraeus' refutation of astrology can be found in the *Cream of Wisdom, Book of Minerals*, Chapter 3, § 3 (Takahashi 2004, 312).

[140] Barsoum 2003, 448.

[141] Vööbus 1975-1976, I, 53.

[142] George, Bishop of the Arab tribes, *Exposition of the Mysteries* (Connolly/Codrington 1913, 12, 14); Moses bar Kepha, *Commentary on the Liturgy* (Connolly/Codrington 1913, 25); Barhebraeus, *Lamp of the Sanctuary*, Ch. 2, § 3 (Kohlhaas 1959, 35). Cf. Spinks 2006, 83, 86.

[143] Vööbus 1975-1976, I, 53.

connotations, played a role in the depiction of the pairs of dragons on the Gate of the Two Baptisms.

As for the snake-like dragons and lions on the southern exterior gate, the apotropaic interpretation finds additional confirmation in the fact that one of the Syriac inscriptions (AE.01.7), placed directly underneath the pair of lions, indicates that the gate is only opened to the righteous. Moreover, the two chalice-like objects threatened by the dragons on this gate (Pls 55-56) were arguably intended to represent Eucharistic chalices. If correct, the entwined dragons and the chalices probably symbolized the healing power of the Eucharist, in keeping with the theological term 'Medicine (lit. poison) of Life', which was a favourite title of Christ in the early Syriac tradition, especially.[144] As pointed out by Sidney Griffith, the constant epithet for the Eucharist in the writings of Ephrem the Syrian, for instance, 'is the phrase "living medicine" or "medicine of life" (*sam ḥayye*). The body and blood of the Lord are thought to bring healing, forgiveness of sin, and preservation of eternal death to the faithful Christian'.[145]

Finally, there are similarities with the common Christian iconographic concept of opposing Good ('the Christians') and Evil ('the others'), as seen expressed in the case of the two equestrian saints slaying a demon and a dragon on the lintel of the Royal Gate, which will be discussed in the following section. In an analogy, the imagery on the southern exterior gate may further be seen as a representation of a triumphant Christianity, symbolized by the cross on the keystone, the two chalices in the corners, and the two triumphing lions, in opposition to the outside world, symbolized by the threatening dragons. The triumphal message is enhanced by the two pairs of peacocks on either side of the cross, which may be interpreted as symbols of immortality and eternity, a common reading in both Christian and Islamic iconography.[146]

6.4.2 Human Figures and Narrative Scenes

In the following sections, the various motifs and themes featuring human beings will first be examined independently, after which they will be discussed together with the animal reliefs in evaluating the entire iconographic programme and its meaning in Section 6.5.

A) Equestrian Saints: Mar Behnam and St George

The lintel of the Royal Gate is decorated with two confronted equestrian saints, flanking a sculpture in high relief (Pls 37, 60). Due to severe damage, it is impossible to establish what the central relief originally represented; it may have been a representation of a lion and its prey,[147] or perhaps even a depiction of the Virgin and Child Enthroned.[148] The mounted saint depicted at the left is spearing a prostrate figure, probably representing a demon, whose entire body is encircled by a snakelike dragon (Pl. 61).[149] In front of the saint, an angel approaches from the top right-hand corner, holding a scroll in his left hand. The rider on the right is killing a knotted dragon with a spear surmounted by a cross.

Introduced into the iconographic repertoire of Eastern Christian art in the pre-Islamic period, the mounted military saint was one of the most popular subjects in the decoration of churches in the Middle East during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, especially in Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria.[150] Among the most frequently venerated of the warrior saints are George,

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[144] Brock 1992, 99-114. I would like to thank Prof. Harrak for this suggestion.
[145] Griffith 1999, 239.
[146] Gierlichs 1996, 237.
[147] Leroy 1958, 240; Fiey 1965, II, 600, 601 n. 5.
[148] Scholz 1994-1995, 317.
[149] Snelders/Jeudy 2006, Pl. 16.
[150] Bolman 2002, 40-47, 61-62, 92-93; Immerzeel 2004b; *idem* 2009, 145-158; Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 70-75; Snelders/Jeudy 2006; Immerzeel/Jeudy/Snelders, forthcoming.

Theodore Stratelates ('general'), Demetrius, Mercurius, and Sergius and Bacchus.[151] According to the hagiographical sources, most of these saints were Roman soldiers who, having been converted to Christianity, were martyred during the persecutions of Christians in the third and fourth centuries. As martyr saints, they were considered true Christian warriors and soldiers of Christ. It should be noted that saints who are not known to have had a military career, such as Mar Elian and Mar Behnam, were sometimes admitted to this heavenly army as well. In a wide geographical area, stretching from Georgia in the north to Ethiopia in the south, the equestrian saints are represented as triumphing cavalrymen, dressed as soldiers, either with or without a defeated adversary at the feet of their horses. The defeated adversary is commonly depicted as a dragon, a ferocious beast, or a prostrate human being.

The message of the triumph of Good over Evil expressed by the image of an equestrian figure surmounting a vanquished adversary, which was developed already in ancient times, was universally understood, and this secured its use throughout the centuries, by different communities and cultures.[152] In addition to Christian usage, the mounted dragon-slayer was readily adopted by Muslims, who fluently put the clear triumphal message it conveyed to their own use (see Sections 2.7 and 7.3.2). Along with their triumphal messages, the apotropaic or protective connotations of the equestrian saints made them particularly suitable as guardians flanking doorways on the exterior of the church, as well as in the interior, at the entrance to the sanctuary. In the painted programmes of Eastern Christian churches, the mounted saints usually occupy the walls of the nave, their number varying in accordance with the amount of space available. At Deir Mar Musa, for example, three pairs of mounted saints are painted on the side walls of the nave (Layer 3; A.D. 1208/09), all galloping towards the East (p. x). In Coptic churches, pairs of equestrian saints are also often carved on wooden sanctuary screens.[153] It seems likely that the paired equestrian saints on the Royal Gate at Deir Mar Behnam are part of the same tradition, and are equally meant to serve as sanctuary guardians.

In an article on medieval representations of equestrian saints in Egypt and Northern Mesopotamia, written in collaboration with Jeudy, the present author has argued that the equestrian saints depicted on the Royal Gate represent Mar Behnam and St George.[154] It was further shown that the iconographic and compositional predecessors of the two confronted equestrian saints can be located in the Armenian and Georgian sculptural tradition, more specifically in certain images in which St George killing the Roman Emperor Diocletian is paired symmetrically with St Theodore slaying the dragon.[155] Developed from the sixth century onwards, this particular iconographic type often decorated church entrances, perhaps the most famous examples being those encountered at Nicorcminda (1010-1014) in Georgia.[156]

In spite of the chronological and geographical differences, both the composition and disposition above a doorway are so similar that the image of the pair of equestrian saints at Deir Mar Behnam must be part of the same pictorial tradition. As we have seen above, the influence of Armenian and Georgian monumental sculpture on Anatolian and Northern Mesopotamian architectural reliefs, and vice versa, was strong at the time. The fluid transmission of Christian iconographic themes would of course fit neatly within this larger framework of artistic interaction between these two regions.

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[151] For a general introduction to the military saint, see Walter 2003.
[152] Immerzeel 2004b, 36-39; Snelders/Jeudy 2006, 105; Immerzeel/Jeudy/Snelders, forthcoming.
[153] Snelders/Jeudy 2006, 114-122, Pls 3, 12; Immerzeel/Jeudy/Snelders, forthcoming: Church of Abu Saifein in Old Cairo (Hunt 1998d, 301, Fig. 11; Jeudy 2006, 110-117, Pl. 18b); Church of Sts Sergius and Bacchus in Old Cairo (Hunt 1998d, 302-303, Figs 12-13; *idem* 2000e, 18-20, Fig. 6; Jeudy 2006, 188-193, Pls 42d, 43a-b).
[154] Snelders/Jeudy 2006, 126-135, Pls 15-16.
[155] Snelders/Jeudy 2006, 128-129.
[156] Alpago-Novello/Beridze/Lafontaine-Dosogne 1980, 36, Fig. 450; Thierry 1999, Fig. 6. For more examples, from the realms of both sculpture and wall painting, see Snelders/Jeudy 2006, 128, with further references.

Although the artists at Deir Mar Behnam made use of this particular composition, they did not represent St George together with St Theodore. Whereas the latter is traditionally depicted with a pointed beard (p. x), both saints at Deir Mar Behnam are beardless. In addition to this modification, the saint on the left, that is Mar Behnam, is not shown spearing a human being, but a demon. Significantly, this scene recurs at the monastery on a crudely sculptured stone tablet in the sanctuary (Pl. 62), which presumably dates from the twelfth or thirteenth century,[157] and on a large polychrome stucco relief (Pl. 43) occupying the east wall of the nave, to the left of the Royal Gate. The stucco image of Mar Behnam is paired with another such stucco relief, representing his sister, Sarah (Pl. 44). Due to the lack of sufficient reference material, however, these stucco reliefs can, for the time being, be given only a very approximate dating between the thirteenth and sixteenth century.[158]

The basic design of the pair of equestrian saints on the Royal Gate is firmly grounded in the Eastern Christian tradition, but Mar Behnam's weaponry is very close to that seen on West-Iranian ceramics of the thirteenth century, while the form of Behnam's spear, which appears to have a bamboo shaft, is normally associated with the Arabs.[159] It seems as though the centuries-old theme has been adapted here to meet local standards in the depiction of military equipment. This phenomenon is somewhat familiar from thirteenth-century icons from the County of Tripoli that depict equestrian saints wearing armour consisting of a mixture of Seljuk, Mamluk, and perhaps Mongol elements. It has been suggested that the mounted saints on these icons are thus equipped as *turcopoles*, a group of local Christian and Muslim mercenaries who were recruited by the Crusaders.[160] On the other hand, the representation of the two equestrian saints at Deir Mar Behnam, which is clearly the result of a variety of sources, may be seen as a characteristic example of Mosul's syncretistic cultural milieu at the time.

Although only a limited number of representations of Mar Behnam have survived, the image of him as a mounted saint appears to have spread quickly. From the end of the thirteenth century onwards, the subject of Mar Behnam on horseback seems to have enjoyed certain popularity in Ethiopia, where he is featured in manuscript illustration and wall painting, including the thirteenth-century murals in the Church of Mädhane Aläm (Redeemer of the World) near Lalibäla.[161] In contrast to the depictions of Mar Behnam at his monastery near Mosul, at the Church of Mädhane Aläm the saint is explicitly identified through the addition of a clarifying Ethiopian inscription ('*saint Marbəhnam the martyr*'), making this the oldest securely named representation of the saint.

The practice of depicting Mar Behnam as an equestrian saint continued for centuries, as is attested, for instance, by an eighteenth-century wall painting in the Syrian Orthodox Church of Mar Sarkis in Sadad (Syria),[162] and an eighteenth-century icon painted by Yuhanna al-Armani al-Qudsi for the Chapel of Mar Behnam in the Syrian Catholic Church of Mar Behnam in the Monastery of St Menas in Old Cairo (p. x; Pl. 1).[163] Incidentally, this church

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[157] Snelders/Jeudy 2006, 130, Pl. 17. Cf. Preusser 1911, 5, Pl. 6.2; Leroy 1964, 69; Fiey 1965, II, 602-604, Pl. F (drawing); *idem* 1970b, 16.

[158] Snelders/Jeudy 2006, 130-132, Pls 18-19. Cf. Preusser 1911, 5, Pl. 16.1; Leroy 1958, 240-241; *idem* 1964, 69; Fiey 1965, II, 604-605; *idem* 1970, 14-15; Zibawi 2005, 346, Figs 6-7; Harrak 2009, inscr. nos AE.01.36, AE.01.38.

[159] Nicolle 1988, no. 423.

[160] Nicolle 1988, no. 843; Folda 2005, 340-341, Figs 198-199; Immerzeel 2009, 131, 148-149.

[161] Balicka-Witakowska 2004, 25, Figs 6, 27. Cf. Budge 1976, 228-229; Rainieri 1996, 100-103.

[162] Littmann 1928-1929, 290.

[163] Atalla 1998, 86; Skalova/Gabra 2006, cat. no. 32; Guirgis 2007, 83, 106; Immerzeel 2009, 8-9, Pl. 1. Other surviving representations of Mar Behnam include an eighteenth-century icon from the Syrian Orthodox Monastery of St Mark in Jerusalem (Howell 1968, Fig. 3), and a miniature from a Syrian Catholic manuscript dating from 1690 at Deir al-Sherfe in Lebanon (Ms. Syr. 5/14: Leroy 1964, 424).

seems to have been in the hands of the Syrian Orthodox from at least the fourteenth century onwards, until it was eventually transferred to the Syrian Catholics.[164]

B) The First and Second Baptism of Mar Behnam

Two of the seven panels on the upper lintel of the Gate of the Two Baptisms (Pl. 38) are decorated with scenes from the life of Mar Behnam. In the second panel from the left (Pl. 63), a bearded figure with shoulder-length hair, apparently naked, stands in a river which is indicated by two large fish swimming at his feet. Another person, placed to the left, baptizes the male figure with his left hand, while gesturing with his right. Although the iconography and composition of this scene is obviously borrowed from the Baptism of Christ (see Section 5.3), the image diverges from standard depictions of the scene in that it portrays the baptizer as a monk wearing a mantle and characteristically pointed hood. A clue for the identification of this baptismal imagery is provided by the Syriac inscription (AE.01.23) carved in the rabbet of both left and right jambs of the gate, which reads as follows (in Harrak's translation):

> *The Martyr Mār Behnam reached full stature through two baptisms. He was immersed in water; but this was not enough for him, so he did more, he was bathed in his own blood. When his body was drenched with the blood from his neck, and the Church saw him and investigated his matter, she asked: Who is this with his garments stained with blood?*

The scene in question here can be interpreted as the first baptism of Mar Behnam, the one in water. According to the legend of Mar Behnam, the saint was baptized by Mar Mattai, after the latter had miraculously cured Behnam's sister, Sarah, from her leprosy (see Section 6.2.1).

When it comes to the source or model of this unique representation of the Baptism of Mar Behnam, it should first be observed that by the early thirteenth century the saint's iconography had not yet been developed, perhaps because, as we have seen above, the legend of Mar Behnam was not written down until the late twelfth century. Whatever the case may be, it does not seem far-fetched to assume that the widespread popularity of Mar Behnam within the Syrian Orthodox Church from around 1200 onwards created a demand not only for written accounts of his life, but also for visual commemorations of the saint. Since there does not seem to have been an established tradition of depicting Mar Behnam, the artists and patrons who were engaged in the creation of the decoration programme at Deir Mar Behnam therefore probably had to rely on other available models. The Baptism of Christ, being both the epitome of Christian baptism and the typological standard for every other baptism in the Christian Church, would of course have been the most fitting iconographic model.

In replacing the figure of John the Baptist with that of a monk, the artist at Deir Mar Behnam has turned the Baptism of Christ by John the Baptist into the Baptism of Mar Behnam by Mar Mattai the anchorite. Clearly, a well-known image has been adapted here to meet the demands of the monastic community that commissioned the work, whereby it was turned into a particularly fitting subject to decorate a church dedicated to Mar Behnam. Since it is not uncommon in Eastern Christian art for Christological scenes to be used as models for depicting other themes, especially in cases where there is a symbolic correlation between the two,[165] similar considerations may also have played a role in this instance. We will return to this matter shortly.

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[164] Guirguis 2007, 57; Immerzeel 2009, 8-9, with further references.

[165] One good example is the composition of the Old Testament scene of the Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek, as represented in the thirteenth-century wall paintings of three Coptic churches (Deir Abu Maqar, Deir Anba Antonius, Deir al-Baramus), which is clearly modelled on the Communion of the Apostles. The

On the second panel from the right (Pl. 64), a man with a beard is portrayed sitting side-saddle on what in view of its relatively large ears appears to be a donkey. The rider raises his right hand in front of his chest and holds a scroll in his left. A small figure, carrying an elongated object in his raised right hand, walks in front of the donkey. According to Fiey, he is brandishing a sword or baton of some sort.[166] Unfortunately, the relatively small size of the sculpture, in addition to its rather rough execution, impedes a proper identification of this particular attribute. A second small figure crouches below the belly of the donkey. If one takes the Syriac inscription (AE.01.23) on the rabbets of the gate as its explanatory caption, the scene refers to Behnam's second baptism, the one in blood.

Frequently used in patristic writings and hagiography, at least from the third century onwards, the metaphorical expression 'second baptism' or 'baptism in blood' used to allude to the tortures of martyrdom suffered by Christian martyrs. In the Christian Church, the act of martyrdom was conceived of from very early on as a second baptism in blood, which was thought to result in the martyr's immediate sanctification and direct admittance into heaven, where he or she would be dressed in white garments and allowed to share ranks with the angels.[167] The concept of martyrdom as a baptism in blood, in addition to the Syriac inscription at Deir Mar Behnam, is also encountered in a Syriac version of the legend of St George.[168] Furthermore, the theme of the 'two baptisms' is found in St Ephrem's commentary on the *Diatessaron*, where it concerns Christ (in Harrak's English translation): 'two baptisms were found with our Lord, who purifies all: one in water and the other of the cross'.[169]

In keeping with the accompanying Syriac inscription, the image depicted in the second panel may thus be seen as a symbolic representation of Mar Behnam's martyrdom. Turning to the scene's iconography, however, it should first be observed that despite the fact that the saint is seated on a beast of burden, he is clearly not represented as an equestrian saint – which would of course have been a fitting visual reference to his martyrdom, considering that equestrian saints, as a rule, are martyr saints. Indeed, Behnam is represented as an equestrian saint both on the lintel of the Royal Gate (Pl. 61) and on a stone panel in the sanctuary (Pl. 62), as well as on a large stucco panel in the nave (Pl. 43). It is more likely that the image of Behnam in the second panel on the Royal Gate is fashioned according to the Entry into Jerusalem, especially in light of the saint's side-saddle position, which corresponds with Christ's traditional sitting position in Byzantine and Eastern Christian versions of the theme.[170] An additional argument pointing towards the Entry into Jerusalem being the main iconographic source for the second baptism of Mar Behnam is found in the fact that a distinct Christological model was already identified above as the visual type used by the artist for rendering Behnam's first baptism, the one in water.

The choice of Christ's entry into Jerusalem as a model was arguably intended to enhance the idea of Mar Behnam's martyrdom as a triumphal entry into the Heavenly Jerusalem; for whereas Behnam's baptism in water indicated his entrance into the true faith and the community of the earthly church, Behnam's baptism of blood marked his direct and irrevocable admittance into the heavenly congregation of Christ. The arrangement of the scene within the architectural setting also seems to be significant in this respect. Represented

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visual link between the two themes was made in order to enhance the Eucharistic overtones of the Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek, and, simultaneously, to reinforce the Christ-Melchizedek typology of Psalm 109(110):4 (van Loon 2004, 1382-1383, Figs 1-6).

[166] Fiey 1965, II, 600; *idem* 1970b, 12.

[167] Malone 1950, 1, 118-120; Griffin 2002. Moreover, the theme of the 'two baptisms' is found in St Ephrem's commentary on the Diatessaron

[168] Brooks 1925, 112; Kiraz 1991, 21.

[169] For the Syriac text, see Leloir 1963, 218. I would like to thank Prof. Harrak for this reference and translation.

[170] On the Entry into Jerusalem, see Dinkler 1970; Scholz 1992; *ODB*, I, 702-703 (A. Weyl Carr); *RBK*, II, 22-30 (E. Lucchesi Palli).

riding to the left, Mar Behnam is shown literally heading towards the entrance to the sanctuary, which, in symbolic terms, commonly represents the gate of Heaven and the entrance to the Heavenly Jerusalem (see Section 7.1.2).[171]

Moreover, the visual link between the Entrance into Jerusalem and the symbolic image of the martyrdom of Mar Behnam reinforces the triumphal meaning of the latter scene, but also the mimesis typology of the martyr as an imitator of Christ. Similar typological considerations may also have played a role in depicting the Baptism of Mar Behnam in the guise of the Baptism of Christ. As will be suggested later in this chapter, the concept of mimesis apparently played an important role within the creation of the decoration programme at Deir Mar Behnam.

The two small subsidiary figures were perhaps also derived from the Entry into Jerusalem, which usually includes a variety of supplementary personages, such as children casting down their garments in the path of Christ's donkey. Another figure who, in Byzantine art, is sometimes seen squatting underneath the belly of the donkey, thus in a similar position to one of our small figures, is the 'Spinario', a small boy retrieving a nail from his foot. In addition, Christ and the donkey are frequently preceded by children waving palm branches or a person holding the reins of the animal, as, for instance, in the two thirteenth-century Syrian Orthodox lectionaries from the Mosul area.[172] Assuming that this scene is a symbolic representation of martyrdom, on the other hand, it is conceivable that the two small subsidiary figures in front and below the donkey were derived from images depicting the violent struggle between mounted martyr saints and their human adversaries.[173] In line with representations of this kind, one could then assume that the two subsidiary figures in the symbolic image of Mar Behnam's martyrdom were meant to represent assailants, the one in front carrying an object which would then represent a stick or a sword rather than a palm branch.

In trying to reconstruct the visual precedents of this scene, one should therefore seriously consider the possibility that the image is the result of the conflation of two models. Accounting for this hypothesis, the common image of the Entry into Jerusalem was the source for representations of Mar Behnam sitting sideways on a donkey. To this central element, the artist has then added the two small assailants, familiar from representations of combatant equestrian saints, in order to transform the image into a martyrdom scene.

C) Six Monastic Saints

Of the fourteen side-panels of the Gate of the Two Baptisms (Pl. 38), three on each side bear a figure of a bearded monk holding a cross in his left hand and a book in his right (Pls 45-46). Bearing in mind the capacity of ecclesiastical dress as a possible marker of communal identity, it is significant that all these monks wear a traditional monastic costume consisting of a tunic, a mantle clasped at the chest, a pointed hood, and a vestment that hangs down the front of their bodies, which may be interpreted as a *scapular*. Originally developed in the Coptic tradition, this typical monastic dress was introduced in the Syrian Orthodox context probably in the early eleventh century.[174]

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[171] I would like to thank Prof. Glenn Peers for this observation.

[172] BL Add. 7170, fol. 115r and Vat. Syr. 559, fol. 105r: Leroy 1964, Pls 86.1-86.2.

[173] The wall paintings at Deir Anba Antionus (1232/33), for example, display a rich variety of little personages dispersed between the legs and in front of the legs of the horses of mounted saints, including not only the commonly defeated adversaries, such as Roman soldiers and emperors, but also various types of rescued figures and supplicants (van Moorsel 1995-1997, 88-85, Pls 39-46; Bolman 2002, 61-62, Figs 6.24, 7.31, 4.26; Snelders/Jeudy 2006, 108, Pls 1-2). Imperial assailants attacking equestrian saints are also known from medieval works of art from Armenia and Georgia, including an eleventh-century metalwork icon from Labedčina showing St George fighting with Diocletian (Amiranashvili 1971, 84, Pl. 43; Alpago-Novello/Beridze/Lafontaine-Dosogne 1980, Fig. 61).

[174] Innemée 1992, 132-133.

As far as their vestments are concerned, the six monastic saints at Deir Mar Behnam are reminiscent of the image of a monastic saint in a Syrian Orthodox Gospel Book dating from 1055, which was made for Deir Mar Barsauma near Melitene. One of the four full-page miniatures in this manuscript shows the monastery's patron saint, Barsauma, whose name is added in both Greek and Syriac inscriptions (Pl. 5).[175] He wears a light-brown, full-length tunic with cuffs, which is covered by two outer vestments: first, a dark *scapular* with a hood attached, which falls down the front of the saint and is decorated with bands of white embroidery; and second, a dark-brown mantle or cape, covering the shoulders and similarly clasped at the chest. Like the monks at Deir Mar Behnam, Barsauma is thus dressed in monastic habit which is apparently grounded in the Coptic tradition.

A second close iconographic parallel is found in the image of a monastic saint in a Syrian Orthodox Psalter which was written in 1204/05 at the Monastery of the Mother of God near Edessa.[176] The style of the manuscript's five line drawings, which are all located on the folios added to the front of the volume, clearly betrays Western influence. This may perhaps be explained by the Edessan origin of the manuscript, but further research is needed to corroborate this assumption. A Syriac inscription identifies the monastic saint as Mar Mattai, but his name is written over an erasure, and it seems that the original name was Mar Barsauma.[177] Like Barsauma in the Gospel Book from Melitene, the bearded saint is this manuscript wears a distinctive shoulder cape that is clasped at the neck, a tunic, and a *scapular* with a pointed hood. Small differences are found in the fact that the tunic is uncuffed and the *scapular* undecorated, and the 'panel' which hangs down the front of the saint is longer. Further, instead of a knotted black rope, the tunic is girded with a light-coloured girdle which is not joined by three knots. In addition, the saint holds a long staff, in the form of an elongated tau cross, in his left hand.

Significantly, the monastic costume worn by Barsauma in the two manuscripts and by the six saints at Deir Mar Behnam differs from the type of monastic vestments of the four anonymous monks depicted in the lectionary made for Deir Mar Mattai, Vat. Syr. 559 (Pl. 27; see Section 4.7C). Instead of the characteristic shoulder cape clasped at the neck, these four saints are depicted wearing a *gallā* (Syriac for 'blanket' or 'monk's cloak'), an all-enveloping outer garment, which is draped over the shoulders and covers the arms as far as the wrists, while the back falls down to the calves or even the ankles. In addition, the four monastic saints wear a hood and a tunic. As such, the four monastic saints in Vat. Syr. 559 are in keeping with the typical attire of the Syrian Orthodox monk in the thirteenth century, which, according to Barhebraeus' *Nomocanon*, consisted of a tunic, belt, cowl, *gallā*, sandals, and a cross.[178] According to Palmer, we are dealing with two different types of Syrian Orthodox monastic costume, which were used to distinguish between regular monks, such as those featured in Vat. Syr. 559, and monks who were considered advanced ascetics ('mourners').[179] On the other hand, one cannot entirely rule out the possibility that the image of the four monastic saints in the Vatican lectionary was copied from a Byzantine model without any further ado (see Section 4.7C).

Notwithstanding the fact that there is nothing in the physiognomy of the six monastic saints at Deir Mar Behnam, their dress, or the attributes they carry which can help us to identify their personal identity, one is perhaps inclined to consider their vestments as markers of a Miaphysite identity, given that such vestments were worn by Coptic Orthodox and Syrian

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[175] Ma^{c}arrat Saydnaya, Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate, Ms. 12/8, fol. 350v: Leroy 1964, 226, Pl. 52.2; Zibawi 1995, 58, Pl. 3; *idem* 2009, 144-148, plate on p. 146; Doumato 2001, 32, Fig. 1.
[176] London, BL Add. 7154, fol. 2v: Leroy 1964, 259-261, Pl. 60.2; Hunt 2009, 337.
[177] Leroy 1964, 259; Palmer 1990, 86 n. 77.
[178] Palmer 1990, 84 n. 66.
[179] Palmer 1990, 85-87.

Orthodox alike. Innemée, in his profound study on ecclesiastical dress in the medieval Near East, however, argues that one should not simply perceive religious costume, or parts of it, as a reflection of theological or ecclesiastical orientation.[180] On the other hand, it does not seem far-fetched to assume that the monastic community of Deir Mar Behnam, at least, but presumably also others visiting the church, saw the monastic saints as representatives of the orthodox tradition as represented by the Syrian Orthodox Church. Like Mar Barsauma, who was given the epithet 'chief of the mourners' in the 1204/05 Psalter Book, the monastic saints at Deir Mar Behnam were perhaps seen as top-level athletes in the ascetical arena.

Be that as it may, the personal identity of two of the saints can be established on the basis of Syriac inscriptions engraved in the moulding that frames them: the saint in the fifth panel from the bottom on the right is designated as Mar Daniel; the saint in the third panel from the bottom in the same row, as Mar Bar Sahde.[181] According to Harrak, these inscriptions are contemporary with the sculptures they identify, but Fiey does not exclude the possibility that they were added later.[182] If we can accept Harrak's assumption, these two saints are not only distinctively Syrian Orthodox, but also bear a remarkable local signature. Along with Mar Mattai and Mar Behnam, who are both depicted in the two upper panels of the same gate (Pls 63-64), the two monastic saints are typical representatives of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the Mosul area in general and Deir Mar Mattai in particular, as will be clear from the following.

Mar Daniel

Although several monastic saints bearing this name are known in the Syrian Orthodox tradition,[183] the presence of a Mar Daniel in this particular monastic context strongly suggests that we are dealing with one of the disciples of Mar Mattai (Pl. 46).[184] As maintained by the local hagiographical tradition, this Daniel was one of the fugitive monks who, together with Mattai, settled on Mount Elpheph after fleeing the region of Amid (Diyarbakır) to escape the persecutions of Christians by the Roman Emperor Valens (374-378). After the erection of Deir Mar Mattai in honour of his illustrious master, Daniel supposedly also founded a monastery of his own in the region, known as Deir Mar Daniel. According to this legend, another of their companions, Mar Abraham, settled on the opposite side of Mount Elpheph, where he founded Deir Mar Abraham.[185]

The cult of this Mar Daniel is exclusive to the Syrian Orthodox Church, though it should be noted that the name of this founding father is encountered in just two of the surviving Syrian Orthodox liturgical calendars: a calendar compiled in the early fourteenth century by Rabban Saliba from the village of Hah in Tur ᶜAbdin, and one attributed to Jacob of Edessa, which has been preserved in a seventeenth-century manuscript written in Qaraqosh.[186] In these two calendars, Mar Daniel is commemorated on October 20.[187] In addition to the fact that no other representations of Mar Daniel are known, this seems to indicate that while the saint may have enjoyed a certain popularity in Tur ᶜAbdin and the Mosul area, i.e., in his

[180] Innemée 1992, 166.
[181] Harrak 2009, cat. no. AE.01.24.
[182] Harrak 2009, cat. no. AE.01.24; Fiey 1965, II, 601.
[183] Fiey 2004, cat. nos 114-121.
[184] Fiey 2004, cat. no. 114. Harrak (2009, cat. no. AE.01.24) has identified the Mar Daniel represented at Deir Mar Behnam as the founder of the 'Hanging Monastery' (Deir al-Muᶜallaqa) on Mount Aride (Jabal Butman). According to the Syrian Orthodox hagiographical tradition, however, the founder of the latter monastery is Mar Sarkis of Mount Aride (Fiey 2004, 171).
[185] Fiey 1965, II, 616; Vööbus 1970, 393-394.
[186] Peeters 1908, 135, 166; Brock 1970b, 421.
[187] Fiey 2004, 66.

place of origin and in the place he eventually settled, respectively, he was probably not widely venerated elsewhere.

In order to explain why one of the monastic saints at Deir Mar Behnam was identified explicitly as Mar Daniel, we have to turn to the legend of the saint and the history of Deir Mar Daniel. Today, only a few remains of the monastery are still visible on the top of a small mountain now known as Jabal ᶜAyn al-Safra, which is located to the northeast of Mosul, near the small town of Bartelli.[188] As for the history of Deir Mar Daniel, nothing is known prior to the thirteenth century, when the name of the monastery starts to appear in the written sources. In the writings of Syrian Orthodox authors such as Barhebraeus, the monastery is simply referred to as either Deir Mar Daniel or Deir al-Habshustyata, 'Monastery of the Beetles' (p. x).[189] Deir Mar Daniel is also referred to as the 'Monastery of the Beetles' in Arabic works of contemporary Muslim geographers and historians, such as Yaqut (c. 1225) and Quazwini (c. 1275).[190]

Unfortunately, little information is available concerning the position of Deir Mar Daniel within the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Syrian Orthodox Church. In his *Chronography*, Barhebraeus records that after the Mongol raids of 1261-1262, a large group of Christians from the village of Baskhraya and the city of Mosul took refuge in the monastery, before finally heading for Arbela.[191] Yaqut mentions that there were only two monks at the monastery at the time of his visit, but the relative importance of the monastery during the period under consideration is nevertheless suggested by the fact that Maphrian Gregory Barhebraeus II (1275-1288) took up residence there for some time towards the end of the thirteenth century.[192] Deir Mar Daniel was thus certainly in Syrian Orthodox hands in the thirteenth century, but it may originally have been an East Syrian foundation, as was the case with numerous other monasteries in the region (see Section 2.3). Moreover, the monastery appears to have shifted hands several times during its history, for it is known that Deir Mar Daniel served an East Syrian community in the early seventeenth century.[193] This brings us to the rationale behind the construction of the legend of Mar Daniel as it has come down to us.

Pointing out that the legend of Mar Daniel is inextricably bound up with that of Mar Mattai, and indirectly with that of Mar Behnam, Fiey is probably correct in assuming that the story was not developed prior to the twelfth century.[194] The legend, functioning as a kind of monastic charter, was probably constructed at the time in order to legitimate the Syrian Orthodox claim to the monastery in the face of East Syrian and Muslim pressure. The legend of Mar Daniel seeks to link his monastery with that of Mar Mattai in particular, but also with Deir Mar Abraham, providing these monasteries, yet again, with fourth-century, pre-Islamic credentials and a distinct Syrian Orthodox pedigree. Together with the legend of Mar Behnam and other Syrian Orthodox documents (see Section 6.2.1), the legend of Mar Daniel thus contributes to the creation of a common myth of descent for a number of monasteries situated in the Mosul area: Deir Mar Mattai, Deir Mar Behnam, Deir Mar Daniel, and Deir Mar Abraham. In short, the life of Mar Daniel is a foundation legend, a piece of Syrian Orthodox rhetoric, which, in terms of its distinct hagiographical function, is comparable with the legend of Mar Behnam. As such, it seems most likely that the legend of Mar Daniel, along with the legend of Mar Behnam, was developed in monastic circles connected with Deir Mar Mattai.

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[188] On Deir Mar Daniel, see Fiey 1965, II, 615-620.
[189] Barhebraeus, *Chronography*: Budge 1932, I, 441. Cf. Fiey 1965, II, 615-620; Brock 1970b, 421.
[190] Fiey 1965, II, 615-616.
[191] Barhebraeus, *Chron. Eccl.*: Abbeloos/Lamy 1872-1877, II, col. 497. Cf. Fiey 1965, II, 618.
[192] Barhebraeus, *Chron. Eccl.*: Abbeloos/Lamy 1872-1877, II, col. 497. Cf. Fiey 1965, II, 618.
[193] Wilmshurst 1998, 190, 200, 202, 221, 354.
[194] Fiey 2004, 65.

In view of the Syrian Orthodox rhetorical purposes that seem to have initiated the construction of the legend of Mar Daniel, it makes sense to suggest that similar considerations governed the decision to mark one of the six monastic saints at Deir Mar Behnam as Mar Daniel. As was argued in Section 6.2.1, the legend of Mar Behnam was intended to assert the special status of Deir Mar Mattai within the Syrian Orthodox Church, and to pin down Deir Mar Behnam as its traditional satellite. Expressing this particular view of Syrian Orthodox monastic history, the legend of Mar Behnam apparently played a role within the continuing struggle for power between the abbot and the monks of Deir Mar Mattai, on the one hand, and the Takritan community and the Maphrian, on the other.

The depiction of Mar Daniel at Deir Mar Behnam should perhaps also be explained from the same perspective. As the disciple of Mar Mattai, and the founder of a monastery closely related to Deir Mar Mattai, the representation of Mar Daniel may perhaps have been intended to underscore the federated monastic relationship between Deir Mar Mattai and Deir Mar Behnam. Arguably, the antiquity of this monastic connection is expressed in the image of Mar Mattai baptizing Mar Behnam, which clearly shows that Mar Mattai was the forerunner of Mar Behnam. We will return to this matter in Section 6.5.

Mar Bar Sahde

According to the Syrian Orthodox tradition, Bar Sahde (Syriac for 'son of martyrs') was an abbot of Deir Mar Mattai who, together with twelve of his monks, was martyred in the 480s by Barsauma, the East Syrian bishop of Nisibis (p. x). As such, the Syrian Orthodox sources make Mar Bar Sahde a champion of the Miaphysite doctrine in general and Syrian Orthodox monasticism in particular. To date, the image at Deir Mar Behnam is the only representation of this saint that has come down to us. Mar Bar Sahde is not mentioned in any liturgical calendar and does not have his own hagiography, but he is featured prominently in Syrian Orthodox historiographical works: more specifically, in accounts that were intended to explain, from a Syrian Orthodox perspective, the spread and establishment of East Syrian Christianity in the former Persian Empire. It is important to discuss these accounts briefly, for they may explain why one of the six monastic saints on the Gate of the Two Baptisms was explicitly identified as Mar Bar Sahde.

The Syrian Orthodox sources describing the 'Nestorianization' of Persian Christianity were studied in detail already by Stephen Gero, in his monograph on Barsauma of Nisibis.[195] Pointing out the obvious anti-East Syrian character of the accounts of Barsauma's supposedly violent campaign to 'Nestorianize' the Persian Church, Gero argues that this story was most probably developed towards the end of the sixth century in monastic circles connected with Deir Mar Mattai.[196] The earliest explicit account of Barsauma's persecution campaigns is found in a seventh-century letter written by Marutha of Takrit (d. 649), a former monk from Deir Mar Mattai and the first occupant of the Maphrianate. This letter is preserved in the twelfth-century *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian, who appears to have borrowed the material from the ninth-century *Chronicle* of Dionysius of Tel-Mahre. Finally, an abbreviated, and slightly different, version of Barsauma's violent campaign is featured in the thirteenth-century *Chronicle* of Barhebraeus.[197]

Marutha's letter, as found in Michael the Syrian, introduces a long narrative of the East Syrian persecution of Miaphysite Christians living in the Persian Empire. Focusing especially on Barsauma's persecution of monastic settlements in the region of Nineveh, the account describes Deir Mar Mattai as *the* centre of Miaphysite resistance. After roaming the northern

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[195] Gero 1981, esp. 110-119. On Barsauma of Nisibis, see further Schmitz 2004, 102-110.
[196] Gero 1981, 118.
[197] Gero 1981, 10-11, 110-116; Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*: Chabot 1899-1924, II, 435-440; Barhebraeus, *Chron. Eccl.*: Abbeloos/Lamy 1872-1877, III, cols 60-76.

bishoprics, Barsauma is said to arrive at the monastery where he arrests Bar Sahde along with twelve monks and ninety priests. On refusing to embrace the Dyophysite doctrine, the priests are massacred and the monastery is burned down. Bar Sahde and his fellow monks are subsequently taken to Nisibis, where they are eventually executed.[198]

Barhebraeus' version of the story, which includes some significant additions to and divergences from the account found in the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian, recounts that the ninety priests were executed at the 'upper monastery of the blessed Mar Daniel'.[199] This site can be identified with Deir Mar Daniel ('Monastery of the Beetles') near Bartelli, which according to the local Syrian Orthodox hagiographical tradition, as we have seen above, was founded by one of the disciples of Mar Mattai. Another noteworthy change is that according to this version, the body of Bar Sahde was not translated to the Monastery of Bizonita, as recounted in the version preserved by Michael the Syrian, but was interred at Deir Mar Mattai – where his relics are revered today.[200]

In reconstructing the actual historical events surrounding the martyrdom of Mar Bar Sahde, Gero has shown that most of the claims put forward in the accounts of Barsauma's persecution can be put down to Syrian Orthodox rhetoric.[201] Along with the legends of Mar Mattai, Mar Behnam, and Mar Daniel, this story was clearly aimed at strengthening the Syrian Orthodox claim within a territory that was simultaneously claimed by the East Syrian Church. Significant in this respect is Gero's observation that the narrators of the accounts are very keen on naming the various Syrian Orthodox centres that supposedly resisted Barsauma. Obviously, mentioning monasteries such as Deir Mar Mattai and Deir Mar Daniel served a double historiographical strategy: it emphasized the steadfastness of these centres in the face of East Syrian persecutions, and asserted their Syrian Orthodox origin.

A similar function might be proposed for a document containing a description of the aftermath of the martyrdom of Mar Bar Sahde, which has also been preserved in Michael the Syrian's *Chronicle*.[202] The account in question is linked with the famous letter of Patriarch Athanasius I Gamolo addressed to the monks of Deir Mar Mattai, in which he announces the new ecclesiastical organization of the eastern dioceses of the Syrian Orthodox Church (p. x). Although this document presents itself as an original 'account found at Deir Mar Mattai', it provides us with an artificial report of the historical events which took place at the monastery after the assault of Barsauma had supposedly taken place.[203] According to this document, the survival of Miaphysite Orthodoxy at Deir Mar Mattai was guaranteed by the involvement of the Armenian Catholicos Christopher, who is said to have ordained one of the surviving monks, Garmai, as the first bishop of the monastery. In order to suggest Miaphysite continuity at Deir Mar Mattai for the period between around 540 and 629, the document puts Garmai at the head of a monastic genealogy consisting of four consecutive bishops, each of which supposedly proclaimed his own successor.

All in all, it may be argued that in stressing resistance to the introduction of East Syrian Christianity, the accounts of Mar Barsauma's violent campaign were considered useful tools in shaping Syrian Orthodox communal identity and strengthening the Syrian Orthodox claim within a territory shared with the East Syrian Church. Seen from this perspective, the images of Mar Daniel and Mar Bar Sahde at Deir Mar Behnam are distinct markers of Syrian Orthodox identity. Both saints played an important role in the local history of the Syrian Orthodox Church and were instrumental in shaping Syrian Orthodox monasticism in the

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[198] Gero 1981, 110-113.
[199] Gero 1981, 115-116.
[200] Harrak 2009, inscr. no. AG.01.2.
[201] Gero 1981, 116-119.
[202] Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*: Chabot 1899-1924, II, 417.
[203] Gero 1981, 113-114.

Mosul area. Moreover, the depiction of Mar Bar Sahde may be assumed to have evoked strong anti-East Syrian connotations.

D) St Peter and St Paul

The corners of the northern entrance to the church (Fig. 7B; Pl. 33) are occupied by two nimbed figures with pointed beards, standing frontally and each holding a cross-staff and a scroll (Pl. 65). Their names are engraved in Syriac (AE.01.12 a-b): 'St Peter' on the left, and 'St Paul' on the right.[204] Obviously, the image of Sts Peter and Paul is a fitting subject to be placed at the entrance of a church, especially in light of St Peter's role as the keeper of the Gate to Heaven. In line with this symbolism, the two apostles are frequently shown flanking or surmounting church entrances, in medieval Armenian architectural reliefs, for instance.[205] As for the depiction of the two apostles at Deir Mar Behnam, however, it should be pointed out that they do not seem to conform to the common Christian iconographic tradition of St Peter and St Paul.

Firstly, the two saints at Deir Mar Behnam are not distinguished from each other in terms either of their facial features, or the attributes they carry.[206] Secondly, the two saints are not portrayed wearing a *chiton* and *himation*, which make up the standard outfit of the apostles. On the contrary, they are dressed in what appears to be a long tunic with a girdle around the waist, comparable to the vestments worn by the two equestrian saints on the Royal Gate which, notably, were executed by the same craftsmen, Abu Salim and Abraham. The rather crude execution of the sculpture, however, makes it difficult to establish the particulars of dress properly. It is unclear, for example, whether the half-moon shape at the top of the figures' heads is meant to represent hair, which seems most likely, or some kind of head-dress, perhaps a cap of some sort. A similar uncertainty pertains to the zigzagging pieces of cloth, which appear to be hanging down from the arms with which the saints hold their crosses, and the big necklace-shaped objects hanging in front of their chests. Whatever the case may be, nothing in the appearance of the two saints conforms to the traditional iconography of the apostles Peter and Paul.

A few examples will serve to illustrate the point. In one of the four miniatures from the aforementioned Syrian Orthodox Bible donated to Mar Barsauma in 1055, Sts Peter and Paul are depicted on either side of Christ with their names written in both Syriac and Greek.[207] Peter carries a scroll in his left hand, and Paul holds a book in his right. In accordance with the iconographic tradition, St Paul is featured with a bald forehead, dark hair, and a pointed beard of the same colour. Despite the deterioration of the face, St Peter's characteristic facial features are still recognizable in the white, curly hair and rounded beard. In several churches in Greater Syria, Sts Peter and Paul are placed in the lower zone of the apse, underneath the half-dome, where they share ranks with the other apostles, evangelists, prophets, or saints.[208] Commonly wearing a *chiton* and *himation*, each is invariably depicted in keeping with his

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[204] Whereas Harrak (2009, inscr. no. AE.01.12) assumes that these inscriptions are contemporary with the sculptural reliefs, Fiey (1970b, 7) does not exclude the possibility that the inscriptions were later additions. Future study on the style of the script may shed some more light on this matter.

[205] See, for instance, the Monastery of St Stephen at Ałjocʿ, c. 1260 (Zakarian 2007, 326, Fig. 1) and the Church of the Virgin in Amahgou, A.D. 1339 (Zibawi 1995, 115, Fig. 86).

[206] According to Syrian Catholic Patriarchate of Antioch 1954 (without page indication), St Peter is equipped with a set of keys. This attribute, however, is not visible on any of the photographs available to me, neither is it mentioned by any of the previous scholars who have visited Deir Mar Behnam and were able to study the sculpture *in situ*.

[207] Maᶜarrat Saydnaya, Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate, Ms. 12/8, fol. 439r: Leroy 1964, 227, 229-230, Pl. 51.1; Zibawi 2009, 143-144, plate on p. 143.

[208] Church of Mar Fauqa in Amiun (Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 160-161, Pls 1.13-1.22; Immerzeel 2009, 89); Church of Mar Tadros in Bahdeidat (Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 340-342, Pl. 19.2; Immerzeel 2009, 102); Church of Mar Charbel in Maᶜad (Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 317-319, Pl. 18.4; Immerzeel 2009, 106, Pl. 72).

traditional physiognomy.[209] Occasionally, St Peter is given a set of keys as a distinguishing attribute.[210] At Deir Mar Musa (Layer 3; A.D. 1208/09), St Peter receives the keys from Christ (*Traditio clavium*), who is no longer visible, while St Paul receives a scroll (*Traditio legis*).[211] Only in one instance, in the thirteenth-century wall paintings at the Church of Mar Charbel in Ma^{c}ad (Layer 1), is St Peter provided with a small cross.[212]

Although St Peter is depicted with a cross from the early Christian period onwards, the fact that both saints at Deir Mar Behnam are shown holding a cross is remarkable. The only other examples currently known to me in which Peter and Paul are both seen carrying a cross date from Late Antiquity, including a sarcophagus produced in Ravenna in the late fifth century.[213] The distance is too far, both geographically and temporally, to suppose any connection between these depictions and the image of the two saints at Deir Mar Behnam. The fact that St Paul is provided with a cross was perhaps simply the result of a preference for symmetry, especially considering that this was a governing principle in the decoration of the gates at Deir Mar Behnam.

In short, the image of the two saints at Deir Mar Behnam deviates from standard depictions of Sts Peter and Paul. This divergence may perhaps be explained as resulting from a lack of proper models, with the artists responsible having to turn to other, as yet unidentified, models available to them in order to comply with the wishes of the monastic patrons. Considering the accumulation of different sources in the image of the two equestrian saints on the Royal Gate, which was also made by Abu Salim and Abraham, the image of the apostles may even have been the result of an amalgamation of different prototypes. On the other hand, Fiey has suggested that the two Syriac inscriptions stating the saints' names may have been later additions.[214] If this were indeed the case, it would be equally conceivable that the two saints were originally not even meant to represent apostles. Future study of the palaeography of these inscriptions may shed further light on this matter.

E) Veneration of the Cross by Angels

The lintel of the northern entrance to the church (Fig. 7B; Pls 33, 65) shows two angelic beings flanking a large central cross, which stands on an oblique elevation.[215] In view of the numerous jewel-like rectangles that decorate the surface of its vertical cross-beam, the cross is obviously rendered as a *crux gemmata*. Each angel carries two attributes, but because the sculpture has suffered damage, especially in case of the angel on the right-hand side, it cannot be established with certainty what these attributes are meant to represent. The only exception is the item in the left hand of the angel on the left-hand side, which appears to be some kind of hand-cross or fan. The following discussion of the iconographic development of the image of two angels flanking a cross, a subject known as the Veneration of the Cross, may be revealing in this matter.

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[209] Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 48-51.

[210] St Peter is equipped with a pair of keys in the Church of Mar Charbel in Ma^{c}ad, Lebanon (Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 54, 318, Pl. 18.5), and with three keys at Deir Mar Ya^{c}ub in Qara, Syria (Schmidt/ Westphalen 2005, 102, 103 n. 69 and 73, 107 n. 88, Fig. 26, Pl. 9a).

[211] Westphalen 2007, 114, Fig. 4; Immerzeel 2009, 65.

[212] Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 54, 318, Pl. 18.5.

[213] Kollwitz/Herdejürgen 1979, cat. no. B17, Pl. 53.3. On the cross as an attribute of St Paul, see *RBK*, II, 145-147 (E. Dinkler, E. Dinkler von Schubert).

[214] Fiey 1970b, 7.

[215] Preusser 1911, 11, Pl. 15.1; Fiey 1970b, 7, Fig. 2; Zibawi 1995, 62, Fig. 44. According to Syrian Catholic Patriarchate 1954 (without page indication), the two flanking figures are Mar Behnam and his sister Sarah. This identification is repeated by Leroy (1964, 69-70), who apparently also fails to note the wings of the two angelic beings.

The iconography of the Veneration of the Cross by angels, which in terms of design and development is closely related with the Veneration of the Cross by apostles and the Elevation of the Cross by angels, can be traced back to the Early Christian and Byzantine world. Based on Roman imperial triumphal imagery, the earliest representations of two angels adoring the cross are encountered from the sixth century onwards, on a rich variety of minor works of art for which a Syro-Palestinian origin has been proposed, such as pilgrimage *ampullae*. As a reference to the heavenly veneration of the cross, the angels are usually shown approaching the cross from either side, guarding it with their hands ceremonially covered, holding ceremonial rods, or presenting either books or pyxides.[216]

It has generally been assumed that the cross featured in these images ultimately alludes to the replica of the True Cross, which was erected at Jerusalem in an open area between Golgotha and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.[217] Although this symbolic link is commonly invoked, the cross flanked by angels is also often shown standing on the Mountain of Paradise from which the four rivers flow, in order to emphasize a second central element in cross iconography: the typology which identifies the cross on Mount Golgotha with the Tree of Life in Paradise. Along with other representations of holy sites, the Veneration of the Cross was perhaps derived from a monumental composition decorating an apsidal niche in one of the churches in the Holy Land. Such a disposition is testified by the mosaic that once decorated the apse of the Chapel of Adam in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, which for a long time was thought to be part of a seventh-century renovation, but may in fact have been executed during the large-scale renovation and refurbishment activities carried out in the years 1042-1048 by the Byzantine Emperor Constantine Monomachos.[218]

If we consider the possibility of an eleventh-century dating for the lost apsidal mosaic in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, it is perhaps no coincidence that the Veneration of the Cross by angels enjoyed a renewed interest in Byzantine art precisely from this period onwards.[219] According to a church inventory of A.D. 1077, an unnamed monastery in Constantinople was in the possession of a reliquary, presumably containing the relic of the True Cross, which was embellished with two angels flanking a cross.[220] Unfortunately, this reliquary does not seem to have survived, but another good extant example of this iconographic resurgence is a double-sided icon dating from the late twelfth century, which features an adaptation of the old composition. In contrast to earlier versions of the theme, the cross is decorated with a crown of thorns, and the archangels Michael and Gabriel, instead of carrying ceremonial rods, are holding a lance and the reed with the sponge attached, the symbols of Christ's Passion.[221]

Furthermore, Byzantine intermediaries may have played a role in this composition finding its way to Western Europe, where it became one of the main iconographic subjects in the decoration of True Cross reliquaries from the Meuse region during the twelfth century.[222] On these Mosan relic containers, the relic of the True Cross is frequently flanked by angels bearing the *arma Christi*, but they are occasionally also shown holding liturgical implements, such as censers.[223] The Veneration of the Cross by angels, along with iconographic subjects

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[216] Grabar 1958, 33-34, Pls 32-33; Elbern 1962, 25-27, Figs 1-2, 7-8; Catalogue New York 1997, nos 482-545.
[217] Verdier 1973, 101; Baert 2004, 148.
[218] Ihm 1960, 90-91, 194-195, Fig. 24; Deichmann 1976, 267; *RBK*, V, 102 (E. Dinkler, E. Dinkler-von Schubert). Crucial in establishing a possible *terminus post quem* for the execution of the apse mosaic is the precise determination of the different building phases of the Chapel of Adam. Unfortunately, the history of the architecture of this part of the Holy Sepulchre is extremely unclear (Folda 1995, 229-239).
[219] Schiller 1966-1980, II, 199, Fig. 7; Grabar 1953.
[220] Grabar 1953, 123.
[221] Verdier 1973, 209-210, Fig. 3.
[222] Verdier 1973, 99-105, Figs 4-7, 10, 21; Holbert 2005, 353-357.
[223] Schiller 1966-1980, II, 199, Figs 8, 644, 650; Baert 2004, 111-116, Fig. 19a; Holbert 2005, Fig. 174.

such as the Three Patriarchs in Paradise and the Wise and Foolish Virgins, thus appears to have been one of those Eastern themes that were widely disseminated during the Crusader period, when cultural contacts and artistic interaction between the East and the West were intensified.[224]

Despite the fact that the main body of representations of the Veneration of the Cross by angels date from the sixth and seventh centuries, and while no other post-iconoclastic representations of the theme appear to have survived in Greater Syria, a few examples from other parts of the Middle East and related areas demonstrate the subject's wider distribution. In Coptic Egypt, for example, this particular motif is encountered in an early thirteenth-century wall painting at Deir Anba Antonius. Painted on the back wall of a deep niche situated in the eastern wall of a side chapel, the mural shows a richly decorated cross that is draped with a veil and flanked by two angels swinging censers.[225] Several Coptic inscriptions underline the importance of the cross, alternately referring to it as 'the precious Cross', 'the tree of life', and 'Jesus Christ'.[226] A small wall painting (c. 1000) in the southern nave of the Cathedral in Faras in Nubia features two angels worshipping a cross.[227] Finally, an Armenian cross relic, dated to A.D. 1300, displays the archangels Michael and Gabriel standing on either side of a cross, each waving a liturgical fan.[228]

Considering the iconographic development of the theme of the Veneration of the Cross by angels, it is conceivable that the attributes carried by the two angels at Deir Mar Behnam were meant to represent either the *arma Christi* or liturgical implements, or perhaps even a combination of both. Whatever the exact nature of these attributes, the representation of two angels flanking a cross at Deir Mar Behnam stands in a long iconographic tradition in the East. Although the subject and design of this image derive from Christian sources, whether Eastern Christian or Byzantine, it is significant to observe that the vestments of the angels are more closely related with examples of local Islamic art. Instead of the common tunic and mantle, the angels are shown wearing a knee-length tunic with a girdle around the waist, and a pair of trousers. In addition, the sleeves of their tunics are decorated with *tiraz* bands.

Another divergence from standard depictions of angels is seen in the pair of pigtails that hang down from the sides of the figures' heads, a hairstyle which immediately brings to mind that of the winged figures represented in Islamic manuscripts attributed to Northern Mesopotamia in general and Mosul in particular (p. x). Good examples include the two frontispiece miniatures from the Paris *Kitab al-Diryaq* (1199), each of which displays a personification of the moon surrounded by four winged figures, as well as the pairs of flying winged figures that hold up a canopy over the head of a ruler in the six surviving volumes of the dispersed *Kitab al-Aghani* (c. 1217-1219), commonly assumed to have been made for Badr al-Din Lu'lu'.[229]

As far as the angels' hairstyle and dress is concerned, another close parallel is found in the two thirteenth-century stone reliefs featuring a pair of winged and crowned figures wearing girdled garments with *tiraz* bands that once surmounted one of the gates of the Konya

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[224] On the dissemination of Eastern Christian themes to the West, see Cruikshank Dodd 2000; *idem* 2007.
[225] Van Moorsel 1995-1997, 175-176, Pls 112-113; Bolman 2002, 75-76, Fig. 4.40.
[226] Bolman 2002, 75, 237, inscr. nos C1.1-C1.3.
[227] Van Moorsel 2000, 65-66, Fig. 7; Seipel 2002, cat. no. 16.
[228] Etchmiadzin, Cathedral, inv. no. 731: Catalogue Paris 2007, no. 143.
[229] Whelan 2006, 205. Enthroned: vols IV, XI, XVII: Cairo, National Library, Adab Fârsî 597 (Rice 1953c, Figs 16-17; Farès 1961, Pls 1, 8); Istanbul, National Library, Feyzullah Efendi, no. 1566, fol. 1r (Rice 1953c, Fig. 18; Roxburgh 2005, Pl. 54; Ettinghausen 1962, plate on p. 65). On horseback: vols IX and XX: Istanbul, National Library, Feyzullah Efendi, no. 1565 (Rice 1953c, Fig. 19); Copenhagen, Royal Library, arab. 168 (Farès 1961, Pl. 12; Catalogue Berlin 2006, Pl. 1).

citadel.[230] Evidently, Abu Salim and Abraham took a centuries-old theme and adapted it to local fashionable standards, just as they did in the case of the two equestrian saints on the Royal Gate.

When it comes to the meaning of the scene, finally, the iconographic formula of the Veneration of the Cross by angels, derived from Roman imperial conquest imagery and connected in origin with the cult of the True Cross in Jerusalem, essentially celebrates the victory of Christianity over its enemies. Bearing the strong pro-Christian connotations of this image in mind, it is conceivable that anti-Muslim considerations played a role in its depiction. In this respect, it is significant that much of the complex symbolism of the decoration programme at Deir Mar Behnam revolves around the theme of the Triumph of the Cross, a matter to which we will turn in the following section, when discussing Deir Mar Behnam's pictorial programme in its entirety.

6.5 The Iconographic Programme and Its Meaning

Although each subject depicted in the church of Deir Mar Behnam is an independent iconographic unit representing one or more specific ideas, it may be argued that the entire line-up of scenes is not the result of an accidental compilation of images, but rather a deliberate grouping made by the artists and patrons in order to create a thematically coherent programme. In the thematic reading of the sculptural decoration programme presented below, which takes into account contemporary Syrian Orthodox written sources, two main layers of meaning will be proposed.

A) Victory of the Cross and the Triumph of Christianity over its Enemies

Especially when compared with the medieval Christian wall paintings in Greater Syria, the symbol of the cross, generally considered *the* emblem of Christianity, has received abundant pictorial attention in Deir Mar Behnam's decoration programme. Obviously used to mark off Christian religious space, the symbol of the cross not only decorates the keystone of virtually every gate at the monastery (Pl. 58), but also recurs in most of the iconographic subjects depicted there. In addition to the image of the two angels venerating a *crux gemmata* (Pl. 65), St George is seen slaying a dragon with a lance topped with a cross (Pl. 60), while the six Miaphysite monastic saints are each shown carrying a cross (Pls 38, 45-46), as are Sts Peter and Paul (Pl. 65). A series of crosses are further seen in a number of the trilobed panels framing the Gate of the Two Baptisms (Pl. 38), as well as the central niche of the *bet ṣlotā* (Pls 47-48). Finally, the polychrome decoration of the stuccoed dome in the Chapel of the Virgin displays a rich variety of crosses (Pl. 52).

The architectural reliefs on the façade of the church, in particular, which were executed by Abu Salim and Abraham, clearly revolve around the theme of the Triumph of the Cross. This is made explicit in the Syriac inscriptions (AE.01.16) engraved next to the large cross on a mound depicted in the central niche of the *bet ṣlotā* (Pl. 48), which convey the meaning and importance attached to this symbol by the Syrian Orthodox monastic community. These inscriptions refer to the cross as follows (in Harrak's English translation): 'Look toward it (= the Cross) and have hope in it. (This is) the Victorious Cross. Look toward it and have in it. (It is) the sign of peace and mark of victory'. The central section of the inscription is a

[230] Konya, İnce Minare Müzesi, inv. nos 883-884: Gierlichs 1996, 134-135, 136, Pls 68.1-68.2; Ettinghausen/Grabar/Jenkins-Madina 2001, 257, Figs 391, 427.

quotation from Ps. 34:6 according to the Leiden Peshitta Edition (i.e., Hebrew Masoretic Text), which has an obvious reference to the salvific power of the cross.[231]

Albeit perhaps a later addition, a similar statement is made by the Syriac inscription surrounding a small cross, which is incised next to the Gate of St Peter and St Paul: 'The cross was victorious, and it will be victorious'.[232] In addition to expressing the hope that Christianity will triumph over its enemies, the Syriac inscriptions in the central niche of the outside oratory, with their explicit and repeated assertions of victory, emphasize the apotropaic power of the symbol of the cross.[233] In this respect, they are more or less comparable with the cross framed by the *nomina sacra* (IC XC NIKA), a particular text-image combination which was used symbolically, throughout Christendom, to mark the borders between Christian and non-Christian communities.[234]

As *the* Christian apotropaic symbol, the ubiquitous use of the cross at Deir Mar Behnam may have been intended to safeguard the monastery from Muslim appropriation or destruction. Indeed, considering that we are dealing with a Christian community living under Islamic rule, it makes sense to suggest that the various crosses at Deir Mar Behnam, besides having a general protective function as is common throughout Christendom, were intended to express pro-Christian, anti-Muslim sentiments. The anti-Muslim reading of the decoration programme is substantiated by a number of Syrian Orthodox polemical works in which the symbol of the cross is explicitly pinpointed as an anti-Muslim identity marker. One good example is the polemical work of the seventh-century Syrian writer Pseudo-Methodius, who, as Gerrit Reinink has shown, 'uses the cross as the sign of a victorious Christianity in the face of Islam'. Presumably developed in Miaphysite circles, this text, of which the oldest surviving manuscript dates from the fourteenth century, apparently has a long tradition in the Syrian Orthodox Church.[235]

Of primary significance in this matter, however, especially considering the geographical and temporal correspondence with the architectural reliefs at Deir Mar Behnam, is Jacob bar Shakko's 1231 *Book of Treasures* (*Ktābā d-simātā*), a massive theological and monastic handbook that was probably written for the novices of Deir Mar Mattai. Containing a number of sections on the Islam, the *Book of Treasures*, as argued by Teule, was a Syrian Orthodox attempt at demarcation, in which Bar Shakko tries to establish boundaries between the Syrian Orthodox and the Muslims, whom he clearly defines as 'the others'. Besides a number of relatively neutral remarks, Bar Shakko makes some negative comments about Islam, emphasizing that the religion of the Christians, by which he means exclusively that of his own community, has more truth than all other confessions. At the end of the second memro of the *Book of Treasures*, Bar Shakko explains why Christians pray towards the East, and why they venerate the Holy Cross. What is of particular interest to the present study is that Bar Shakko, within the context of a polemic against the Muslims, calls the cross 'the sign of

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[231] The same quotation occurs in a thirteenth-century Syrian Orthodox lectionary in Paris (BnF 355, fol 1r: Leroy 1964, Pl. 518) and a Gospel book in Homs (Library of the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate: Leroy 1964, Pl. 8.39). For examples from the East Syrian context, more specifically in Northern China, see Borbone 2006. I would like to thank Prof. Van Rompay for this reference.

[232] Harrak 2009, inscr. no. AE.01.13.

[233] The cross as a potent symbol of Christian victory recurs in the frontispiece of an illuminated East Syrian manuscript dating from around the turn of the twelfth century (Harvard College Library, Ms. Syr. 4 , fol. 1r), which shows a cross surrounded by Syriac inscriptions. These inscriptions include the following phrases '[…] will destroy our enemies', 'Glory to Christendom', and 'This will vanquish' (Nees 1980-1981, 126-127, 134, Fig. 5; Hunt 2000b, 42).

[234] Peers 2007, 48, with further references.

[235] Reinink 1992, 171-174. Cf. Bolman (2002, 75), who refers to this text in relation to the image of the cross flanked by two censing angels painted at Deir Anba Antonius in 1232/33.

Christianity'.[236] Similarly, the symbol of the cross epitomised Christianity for Muslim viewers, who sometimes interpreted it as a symbol of misfortune.[237]

The triumphal message conveyed by the crosses at Deir Mar Behnam is enhanced, in particular, by the depiction of the two angels flanking a *crux gemmata* on the southern entrance to the church and the two equestrian saints on the Royal Gate. As we have seen above, mounted saints were considered the ultimate combatants against the enemies of Christianity. From early Christian times, martyr saints such as Mar Behnam and St George, who had died in defence of the Christian faith, were seen as symbols of Christian victory. As the defeaters of the enemies of Christianity *par excellence*, they were potent symbols that could be used mark the boundaries with other communities by underlining the continuous struggle between Good ('us') and Evil ('them').

In Deir Mar Behnam's decoration programme, 'the others' are neither explicitly mentioned nor depicted. Notwithstanding the fact that the defeated enemies could thus have been any of the groups the Syrian Orthodox considered heretic, both Muslim and Christian alike, it may be argued that the personifications of Evil at the feet of the horses of the mounted saints in this particular context were intended, first and foremost, to symbolize Islam. A similar anti-Muslim reading has been proposed for the equestrian saints in the medieval wall paintings in Lebanon and Syria,[238] as well as the popular iconographic theme of St George rescuing a Christian youth from captivity, which in these murals is assumed to have succinctly expressed the hope for liberation from Islamic dominance.[239] As for the monks of Deir Mar Behnam apparently opting for veiled rather than explicit visual language, it is perhaps revealing to refer to Jacob bar Shakko's *Evident Truth*, a polemical work which was written as a response to the questions and objections of 'heretics'. As in the architectural reliefs at Deir Mar Behnam, these 'heretics' are not mentioned openly by name, but it is clear that they are essentially meant to represent the Muslims.[240]

Along with the equestrian saints, the image on the southern entrance to the church of the two chalices holding firm against threatening dragons (Pls 54-56) may perhaps also be assumed to have symbolized the triumph of Christianity over its enemies in general, and the triumph of Christianity over Islam in particular. To be sure, the dragons, as a potent symbol of Evil, were generally applicable to any other community, such as, for instance, the East Syrians and the Greek Orthodox, but in view of the fact that we are dealing with a Christian community under Islamic rule, there is yet again every reason to suppose that the Muslims were the most obvious 'other' for the Syrian Orthodox patrons. Finally, the apotropaic and triumphal symbolism is enhanced by the pairs of lions, which are commonly considered the invincible champions of Good over Evil.

B) A Genealogy of Syrian Orthodox Monasticism in the Mosul Area

One of the most striking features of Deir Mar Behnam's iconographic programme, besides the emphasis on the symbol of the cross, is the juxtaposition of monks and martyrs in the nave of the monastery's church. The carved programme of the nave starts in the eastern section, at the Royal Gate. The Royal Gate, the visual focal point of the church, is decorated with a pair of equestrian saints (Pls 37, 60). We have identified these mounted saints as the martyrs Mar Behnam and St George, the first a Persian aristocrat and the second a former soldier in the

[236] Teule 2009. Jacob bar Shakko, *Book of Treasures*, Ch. 29: 'Quand nous adorons la croix, ce n'est pas le signe ou l'argent ou le bois que nous adorons, mais, par les yeux de l'esprit, nous adorons le Christ qui est mort sur elle : par conséquence, l'adoration qui est digne de Dieu ... va à la coix qui est le symbole du christianisme' (Hindo 1943, 306). Cf. Yahya ibn Garir, *Book of the Guide*, Ch. 35 (Mouawad 1997, 399).
[237] C. Hillenbrand 1999, 304-307.
[238] Immerzeel 2009, 155-156.
[239] Grotowski 2003.
[240] Teule 2009.

Roman army. The pictorial programme continues on the Gate of the Two Baptisms, with two scenes from the life of Mar Behnam (Pls 38, 63-64), which surmount a collection of Miaphysite monastic saints (Pls 45-46).

As far as this thematic pairing is concerned, the decoration at Deir Mar Behnam is highly reminiscent of Coptic monastic painting, in which there is an exceptionally strong tradition of juxtaposing monks and (equestrian) martyrs in a single thematically coherent programme.[241] In origin, this practice is probably related to the remarkable emphasis on commemorating monastic predecessors in Coptic wall and icon painting, which, in turn, is often assumed to have been the continuation of the centuries-old convention in Egypt of painting funerary portraits.[242] The rationale behind the pairing of monks and martyrs has been sufficiently explained already by Bolman. The following interpretation of the interior church decoration at Deir Mar Behnam is influenced by Bolman's analysis of the wall paintings in the nave of the church at Deir Anba Antonius, which were executed in 1232/33 by a team of artists under the direction of a certain Theodore.[243] In the nave of the Church of Anba Antonius, a rich collection of founding fathers of Coptic monasticism at the eastern end is paralleled by a large heavenly cavalry of equestrian saints on the western section. In terms of layout, the carved programme of the nave at Deir Mar Behnam is similar to that painted at Deir Anba Antonius, albeit on a much less monumental and extensive scale.

As Bolman argues, the concept of mimesis and assimilation is central to the understanding of the visual pairing of monks and martyrs. From the very beginning of Christianity, it had been suggested that the main means to reach salvation and eternal life, the ultimate goal for every Christian, was to imitate Christ and other holy exemplars. According to tradition, there were two different possibilities for the pious Christian to assimilate to Christ, the most straightforward being to die for the faith; in other words, to become a martyr. The martyr was considered the most perfect imitator of Christ. Martyrdom guaranteed the remission of sins, and direct admittance to heaven, where the martyr ranked alongside the angels. The martyr's death was conceived of as a second baptism, not in water, but in blood (p. x). Not everyone was called to die for his or her Christian faith, however. Although martyrdom was thus reserved only for the happy few, there was a second path guaranteeing successful progress to salvation: the monastic life. Within this binary framework, the monks were commonly described as the spiritual successors of the martyrs; and like martyrs, monks were seen as soldiers of Christ.[244]

Bearing these concepts in mind, the programme of the nave in the church at Deir Mar Behnam can be seen as a spiritual genealogy of Syrian Orthodox monasticism. As mentioned above, the pictorial programme of the nave starts with the equestrian saints Mar Behnam and St George, who are both known to have walked the difficult path of spiritual and physical suffering that leads directly to salvation. The programme continues on the Gate of the Two Baptisms with their spiritual successors, the monks. Like the martyrs, the monks are 'known for developing a way of life that leads to salvation. They are also described as the soldiers of Christ, and like the martyrs they perform miracles and defend the faith in the face of non-Christians and heretics'.[245] Following in the footsteps of his monastic forerunner St John the Baptist, the anchorite Mar Mattai baptizes Mar Behnam, who, as a most perfect imitator of Christ, subsequently receives his second baptism, the one in blood (Pls 63-64). Syrian Orthodox hagiographical sources, such as the legend of Mar Behnam, present Mar Mattai as

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[241] The earliest examples of the pairing of monks and martyrs can be found in several chapels at the site of the Monastery of Apa Apollo in Bawit, which date from around the seventh century (Bolman 2001).
[242] Auth 2005, 19-36.
[243] Bolman 2002, 40-54.
[244] Bolman 2001, 43; *idem* 2002, 40-54.
[245] Bolman 2002, 53.

the father of Syrian Orthodox monasticism in the Mosul area, as Deir Mar Mattai and Deir Mar Behnam were built to commemorate Mar Behnam's martyrdom.

Among the collection of Miaphysite monastic saints represented below the two baptisms of Mar Behnam is Mar Daniel, one of the disciples of Mattai who is credited with founding a monastery in the Mosul area, after Mattai had settled there. Seen against this framework of spiritual kinship, it is conceivable that the fellow anonymous monks were perceived as Mar Zakkai and Mar Abraham, two other followers of Mar Mattai who, according to local Syrian Orthodox tradition, had founded satellite monasteries. The group also includes another champion of Syrian Orthodox monasticism, Mar Bar Sahde, the abbot of Mar Mattai, who refused to embrace Dyophysitism and was therefore martyred at the hands of the East Syrian Barsauma of Nisibis. The pictorial programme, thus, establishes a monastic genealogy, in which several monasteries – Deir Mar Mattai, Deir Mar Behnam, and Deir Mar Daniel – are linked by their common ancestor, Mar Mattai. Along with the legends of Mar Behnam and Mar Mattai, the iconographic programme at Deir Mar Behnam was arguably intended to stress the unity of thirteenth-century Syrian Orthodox Christendom in the Mosul area, in the face of the internal and external (both East Syrian and Muslim) threats posed to the Church at the time.

Just as the monks and martyrs depicted in the nave of the church at Deir Anba Antonius were meant to express a primary message about the importance of Coptic monasticism,[246] the monks and martyrs depicted in the nave at Deir Mar Behnam were intended to convey the importance and essential unity of Syrian Orthodox monasticism. As we have seen above, Mar Mattai, Mar Behnam, Mar Daniel, and Mar Bar Sahde were the focus of particular veneration in the Mosul area. These saints were all supposed to have contributed significantly to the genesis and development of Syrian Orthodox monasticism in the territory of the former Persian Empire in general, and the Mosul area in particular. Syrian Orthodox authors such as Yahya ibn Garir, Dionysius bar Salibi, and Jacob bar Shakko, for instance, commonly highlighted the didactic and spiritual function of the images of saints, arguing that they offered potent models for their community to emulate (see Section 1.3.3).

Seen in these terms, the images of the monks and martyrs at Deir Mar Behnam were meant to inspire and instruct those who wanted to imitate the lives of these saints in order to reach salvation and eternal bliss. The monks at Deir Mar Behnam were invited to imitate their monastic predecessors so as to progress along the road that leads to the Kingdom of Heaven, and to imitate the martyrs in order to become soldiers of Christ. Moreover, the process of mimesis established a link between the thirteenth-century monastic community living at Deir Mar Behnam and their monastic predecessors, the martyrs and deceased monks that had already been admitted into the heavenly congregation.

In addition to shaping monastic community, it may be argued that the pictorial programme of the nave was instrumental in shaping and enhancing Syrian Orthodox communal identity. Along with the Syrian Orthodox hagiographical texts, the representations of the martyrs and the monks' own monastic predecessors reminded both the community itself and the faithful visiting the church of the champions of Syrian Orthodox Miaphysitism, with whom they were supposed to identify. Especially during the annual commemoration of Mar Behnam on December 10, the legend of Mar Behnam would have been read to a large audience, which, in addition to the monastic community, probably included numerous pilgrims and other believers visiting one of the most important pilgrimage sites to the east of the river Tigris.

Indeed, it is important to bear in mind that the monastery's nave would have been filled not only with the local Syrian Orthodox community, but also with numerous 'outsiders', such as pilgrims paying homage to the church's patron saint, perhaps even Muslims who frequented

[246] Bolman 2002, 40.

the site as part of their *ziyara* culture. During the reading of the saint's life, each of these groups would have been reminded of the role of Mar Mattai and his disciples in shaping monasticism in the Mosul area as early as the fourth century, prior to the Islamic conquest. Reinforcing this particular view of history for the listeners and viewers from outside, on the one hand, and revalidating collective memory of the Syrian Orthodox community, on the other, the visual programme may be considered to have been a useful tool in shaping and enhancing Syrian Orthodox communal identity.

Strikingly, the concept of monastic genealogy in the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian was used in connection with Deir Mar Mattai to further a dual historiographical strategy: on the one hand it was meant to assert the Syrian Orthodox origin of Deir Mar Mattai, and, on the other, it was intended to suggest Miaphysite continuation at the monastery (p. x). A similar function may also be postulated for the visual monastic genealogy at Deir Mar Behnam. Seen against the background of both the intra-community friction and extra-community pressure as sketched earlier in this study, the prominence of the Baptism of Mar Behnam by Mar Mattai may perhaps be seen as a thirteenth-century visual assertion of Mattai's significance as the founding father of Syrian Orthodox monasticism in the Mosul area. If this view is correct, the iconographic programme can be understood as a visual equivalent of the textual accounts of the lives of Mar Behnam, Mar Mattai, Mar Daniel, Mar Abraham, and Mar Zakkai, which emphasized the role of Mar Mattai and his disciples in shaping monasticism in the Mosul area in the fourth century.

The depiction of the Baptism of Mar Behnam and the inclusion of monastic saints that are specifically associated with Deir Mar Mattai served as an artistic strategy to legitimate the special status of the monastery, whilst simultaneously underlining the role of Deir Mar Behnam as its traditional satellite. In addition to countering Takritan claims, the decoration programme thus stresses the unity of Syrian Orthodox Christendom in the Mosul region in the face of both the Christian (i.e., East Syrian) and non-Christian (i.e., Muslim) world. In stressing their common ancestry, the images of the Baptisms of Mar Behnam and the collection of Miaphysite saints were used to shape communal identity and to strengthen Syrian Orthodox claims within a territory which they shared with the East Syrian Church. Significant in this respect is the inclusion of Mar Bar Sahde. The depiction of this former abbot of Deir Mar Mattai, who died at the hands of the East Syrian heretic Barsauma of Nisibis, would certainly have expressed anti-East Syrian connotations.

6.6 Conclusion

Like the illustrations of the two thirteenth-century Syrian Orthodox lectionaries discussed in Chapter 4, except for the rich collection of Syriac inscriptions preserved on the walls of its church and mausoleum, Deir Mar Behnam's decoration programme has until now been studied primarily from the perspective of medieval Islamic art. This is not entirely surprising, given that the programme is indeed closely tied into regional artistic developments, both in terms of style and iconography. Stylistically speaking, the monastery's sculptured reliefs and stuccoed domes are entirely interchangeable with those encountered in Islamic contexts in Mosul and the vicinity, especially with monuments that were either founded or renovated by Badr al-Din Lu'lu' in the 1240s. Most of the monumental decoration of Deir Mar Behnam's monastic church was executed in the same period, probably through the involvement of monks from Deir Mar Mattai, with which the monastery appears to have maintained close administrative and economic ties. It has been suggested above that this monastic link is also reflected in Deir Mar Behnam's pictorial programme.

On the basis of the stylistic similarities with contemporary Islamic art, it may be concluded that the craftsmen responsible for Deir Mar Behnam's monumental decoration, such as the sculptors Abu Salim and Abraham, and the stucco workers ʿIsa al-Nattafah and Michael, worked for Christian and Muslim patrons alike. Further stylistic and technological research, focusing both Christian and Islamic monuments in conjunction, would be needed to corroborate this assumption. Nonetheless, it is clear that nothing in the style of Deir Mar Behnam's art can be properly called 'Christian', let alone 'Syrian Orthodox'. This conclusion does not hold true, however, for some of the iconographic elements of the monastic decoration programme. One of the most conspicuous features of Deir Mar Behnam's extensive collection of architectural reliefs is the juxtaposition of motifs familiar from secular Islamic works of art, including a rich variety of decorative patterns and animal motifs, with distinctively Christian themes, such as crosses and figures of saints, martyrs, and monks.

Although the decoration of Deir Mar Behnam thus represents an amalgamation of Christian and non-Christian symbols, the Christian component is dominant. Obviously, the distinctively Christian elements were intended to mark off the monastic space as Christian. Moreover, they effectively Christianize those themes without distinctively Christian attributes. The images of saints such as Mar Mattai and Mar Behnam, on the other hand, can be considered markers of a specifically Syrian Orthodox identity. In an intricate process of artistic interaction, Deir Mar Behnam's community selected iconographic elements from both the local Christian and Islamic artistic traditions, and in combining them defined a position of its own.

It should be observed, however, that there are few elements in the decoration which can be conceived of as either typically or exclusively Syrian Orthodox: without knowledge of the denominational background of the monastery, it would prove very difficult to distinguish its art from that of other Christian denominations. Conspicuous in this respect are the depictions of the two scenes from the life of Mar Behnam, the designs of which are based on traditional Christological imagery. Without the accompanying explanatory inscription, it would have been impossible to identify these scenes as the two baptisms of Mar Behnam. Nevertheless, the remarkable overlap with contemporary Islamic art and the relatively limited number of specifically Syrian Orthodox saints should not be taken to imply that the monumental sculptural decoration at Deir Mar Behnam did not play a decisive role in expressing Syrian Orthodox communal identity. On the contrary, when perceived in its proper context, and taking contemporary written sources into account, it may be argued that this was actually one of the main intentions of the monastic patrons in juxtaposing a variety of individual themes in a single thematically coherent programme.

In assessing the rationale behind Deir Mar Behnam's pictorial programme, the hagiographical functions of the foundation legend of Mar Behnam was taken as a starting point. Arguably developed in monastic circles connected with Deir Mar Mattai, the legend of Mar Behnam was written down in the second half of the twelfth century, probably at the time of the reconstruction activities carried out at Deir Mar Behnam in 1164. Although essentially two very different types of discourse, these hagiographical and artistic works, especially when combined during the annual commemoration of the monastery's patron saint, both contributed to the Syrian Orthodox sense of belonging. In passing on the same mythical narrative of descent, the pictorial programme partakes in the tradition invented for the Syrian Orthodox community of the Mosul area. Reminding the viewers of the important monastic figures of the past with whom they were supposed to identify, and reinforcing a particular view of the history of the Mosul area, the pictorial programme of Deir Mar Behnam, along with the legend of its patron saint, was a useful tool with which the monastic authorities sought to bind their community together. The juxtaposition of monks and martyrs in the nave of the church establishes a spiritual genealogy of Syrian Orthodox monasticism in the Mosul area.

The combination of art-historical and written sources suggests that, in addition to demarcating the boundaries with the surrounding Muslim and East Syrian communities, the decoration programme was intended to underline the monastic relationship between Deir Mar Behnam and Deir Mar Mattai. Seen from this perspective, it is conceivable that the decoration programme was yet another attempt to strengthen the position of Deir Mar Mattai in the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Syrian Orthodox Church. Besides, the marked Syrian Orthodox and monastic emphasis of the programme is appropriate in this church, dedicated to Mar Behnam and situated in one of the most famous monasteries and important pilgrimage sites in Northern Mesopotamia. It remains to be seen whether Syrian Orthodox communal identity was replicated in the monumental sculptural decoration of parish churches. This is the topic of the following chapter.