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

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7. Sculptural Decoration in a Parish Context: The Church of Mar Ahudemmeh in Mosul and the Church of Mart Shmuni in Qaraqosh

7.1 Introduction

In addition to Deir Mar Behnam, numerous churches located in Mosul and its vicinity have preserved monumental sculptural decoration that can be dated to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Unfortunately, few of these churches are fit for our research purposes, because much of their medieval decoration has survived only in a very fragmented state. There are multiple reasons for the poor preservation of the monumental church decoration, ranging from natural causes and bad maintenance of church property, to the loss of buildings as a result of urban renewal. Some churches, especially those located in more remote areas, were eventually abandoned and left to crumble; others were occupied by Muslims, stripped of their Christian decorations, and turned into mosques. Most churches still extant today, have suffered not only the inevitable ravages of time, but also damage that was inflicted intentionally, either during popular revolts or the various military attacks that Mosul experienced throughout its history.¹

As far as intentionally inflicted damage is concerned, one good example is 1261, when Mosul came under Mongol attack (p. x). At the time, Mosul's Christian population suffered devastating persecution at the hands of a group of *mamluk* rebels, who seem to have suspected them of Mongol sympathies.² Similarly, many churches were heavily damaged, or fully destroyed, when the Persian Nadir Shah Tahmasp invaded the region in 1743 (p. x). After Nadir Shah's one-month siege of Mosul had been successfully repulsed by the governor of the city, Husein Pasha al-Jalili, the Ottomans left the rule of the Mosul district to successive members of the Jalili dynasty, the founder of which is said to have been a Christian from Diyarbakır who had moved to Mosul in the seventeenth century.³ In the aftermath of the siege, which was devastating for the city despite being ultimately unsuccessful, Sultan Mahmud I allowed the resisting Christian population to rebuild their ruined churches.⁴ During the large-scale reconstruction and building activities that ensued in the Mosul area, the craftsmen responsible employed whatever usable material they could gather from the debris, combining it with new stonework, executed in what is known as the Jalili style. The decoration for this style was clearly based on thirteenth-century models such as those encountered at Deir Mar Behnam.

In most churches where medieval embellishments survive, it is thus difficult to establish their original location with any degree of certainty. Exemplary in this respect are two stone slabs carved with mounted saints that were reused on the Jalili-style iconostasis in the Syrian Catholic (formerly Syrian Orthodox) Old Tahira Church or Church of the Virgin in Mosul.⁵ The iconostasis, which was made in 1745, is located between two pilasters on the south side of the nave. It incorporates an image of the Virgin and Child Enthroned, which was apparently modelled on the one recently discovered in the same church that we have dated to the thirteenth century (Pl. 14; see Section 3.3.2). Given the general apotropaic qualities associated with mounted saints, one wonders whether these two cavalymen were originally part of a structure giving access to the sanctuary or perhaps another room in the church.

¹ Fiey 1959, 31-37.

² Patton 1991, 78; Fiey 1959, 47.

³ Hathaway/Barbir 2008, 94-95.

⁴ Fiey 1959, 57-58; Mérigoux 1983, 73-79; *idem* 2005, 431-433; Khoury 2002, 193.

⁵ Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, III, 295-297, Pls CIII (plan), CIV-CV; Fiey 1959, 138-140, Figs 8-9 (St George and Mar Behnam?); Leroy 1964, 66-67; Harrak 2009, inscr. no. AA.08.6.

A similar uncertainty about their original location is the case for a particular type of bundled columns with characteristically lyre-shaped capitals, commonly dated to the thirteenth century, which have survived in a number of churches in Mosul, including two belonging to the East Syrians and one to the Syrian Orthodox. In the East Syrian Church of Mar Esa'ia, a column of this kind with a lyre-shaped capital currently functions as a threshold in the courtyard,⁶ and in the East Syrian Church of Mar Giworgis (St George) a similar capital is encountered surmounting a column in the gallery in front of the church. In the Syrian Orthodox Church of Mar Ahudemmeh, one of these capitals was embedded in the wall next to the doorway leading into the sanctuary.⁷ In the early twentieth century, several other specimens were seen at the church by Sarre and Herzfeld, more specifically in the stairway which leads from the street to the courtyard.⁸ Such capitals are also encountered in the Mosque al-Nuri (1170-1172), but, according to Tabbaa, they are not part of either the original mosque that was built by Nur al-Din Zangi in the late twelfth century or the renovations executed by Badr al-Din Lu'lu', but rather spoils from destroyed local Christian churches that were incorporated into the building in the 1860s.⁹

Another example of a re-used element is a stone relief carved with a lion's head at the East Syrian Church of Sim'un al-Safa (Simeon the Elect), which, until the destruction of the church in the second half of the twentieth century, functioned as the lower step of a flight of steps in the courtyard.¹⁰ Originally, it would have served as the lintel of a doorway. In the former East Syrian Church of Mar Giworgis, which is presently abandoned but last occupied by the Chaldeans, a blocked doorway can be found that once formed the women's entrance to the church. The lintel of this doorway, which has clearly been tampered with, consists of seven joggled voussoirs and also incorporates a Syriac inscription (*Estrangelo*) in relief that may be dated to the thirteenth century.¹¹ Finally, at some Christian sites, such as the Syrian Orthodox Church of Mar Tuma (St Thomas), pieces of stuccowork datable to the thirteenth century are found,¹² but even though they are presumably part of the original decoration of these churches, it cannot entirely be excluded that they were incorporated at a later date.

In view of the displacement of the surviving material, and the general lack of more or less fully-preserved programmes in the parish context matching that of Deir Mar Behnam, the focus in this chapter will be limited to the sculptured Royal Gates at the Church of Mar Ahudemmeh in Mosul and the Church of Mart Shmuni in Qaraqosh, of which both the original appearance and position within the churches in question are essentially clear. Before turning to the decoration of these two Royal Gates, however, attention will be paid to the architecture of Syrian Orthodox churches in the Mosul area. A analysis of the disposition of Northern Mesopotamian church architecture in general, and the specifics of the churches in the Mosul area in particular, is clearly beyond the scope of the present study; I shall limit myself to a few introductory comments.¹³ These comments are followed by a brief overview

⁶ Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, II, 293-295, Figs 280 (Mar Giworgis), 282 (Church of Mar Ahudemmeh); Fiey 1959, 110-111, Fig. 5.

⁷ Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, II, 293, Fig. 280.

⁸ Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, II, 295, Fig. 282.

⁹ Tabbaa 2001, 346, Fig. 6; C. Hillenbrand 1999, Pl. 4.6.

¹⁰ Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, II, 292-293, Fig. 279; Bell 1911, 258 (photograph); Fiey 1959, 116-117.

¹¹ Harrak 2009, inscr. no. AA.11.1. Fiey (1959, 118) on the other hand, correctly argues that the style of the gate itself is more closely related to that of the late seventeenth century, pointing out stylistic parallels with the carving of a marble niche in the Shrine of St George in the Church of Esa'ia, which according to its Syriac inscription dates from 1694 (Fiey 1959, 107-108, Fig. 3). For a photograph of the doorway at the Church of Mar Giworgis taken in the early twentieth century, see Bell 1911, 249.

¹² Gertrude Bell Archive, no. L221.

¹³ For a general introduction to the churches of Mesopotamia, see Monneret de Villard 1940; Sader 1983, 37-49. On the churches of Mosul, see Fiey 1959; Habbi 1980; Mérigoux 1983; *idem* 2005; Harrak 2009, cat. nos AA.01-AA.17.

of the symbolic meaning of liturgical space in the Syrian Orthodox tradition, as this may provide us with an interpretative key to unlock the possible purpose and meaning of the two decoration programmes. Particular attention is paid to the entrance to the sanctuary, because it is precisely this location which has been given artistic prominence in the two churches under discussion.

7.1.1 The Architecture of Syrian Orthodox Churches in the Mosul Area

In his standard work on Christian Mosul, Fiey presents a reconstruction of the traditional 'Syro-Jacobite' church plan, based both on archaeological and written sources.¹⁴ According to his reconstruction, the typical ground plan of a Syrian Orthodox church is rectangular, oriented west-east, and consists of three main parts: a tripartite eastern section reserved for the clergy, consisting of a sanctuary flanked by two side-rooms; a platform situated directly in front of the sanctuary (*qestromā*), which was reserved for the choir and deacons; and a nave, sometimes with two aisles, reserved for the lay people. When it comes to the liturgical furnishings, the sanctuary contains a free-standing altar sometimes covered by a ciborium. Two lecterns for readings are placed on the raised choir area which extends into the nave, while a third special lectern known as 'golgotha', reserved for the Gospel Book, is placed just in front of the entrance to the sanctuary. An elevated platform (*bēmā*), used for readings, sermons, and blessings, is situated in the centre of the nave. Finally, according to Fiey, a baptismal font is located at the front of the nave, on the south side.

Fiey himself was aware that his reconstruction is highly idealized, since it seldom corresponds to the actual arrangement of liturgical space as encountered in extant Syrian Orthodox churches.¹⁵ Indeed, scholars working on Christian architecture in the Middle East have stressed that, besides the variations that can sometimes be seen between the architectural arrangements of East Syrian and West Syrian churches,¹⁶ multiple variations can be found, for instance, even within the corpus of Syrian Orthodox churches. These intra-community variations in church architecture can often be explained by regional differences.¹⁷ Accounting for the importance of differentiating between religious denominations and geographical areas when discussing architectural matters, it nonetheless appears that there was at least one important feature shared by virtually all churches within the Mosul area, whether East Syrian or West Syrian: an east wall separating the nave from the sanctuary. Often it was pierced by three entrances, of which the central one, the Royal Gate, is commonly the largest and most lavishly decorated.

In the scholarly literature devoted to the churches of Tur ʿAbdin, the origin and development of the east wall has often been connected with changes in liturgical practice. Generally, these churches are distinguished into two different groups according to their ground plan: churches with a transverse nave (i.e., with the greatest length from north to south) and a wall between the nave and the sanctuary ('monastic churches'), and those with a longitudinal nave (i.e., with the greatest length from east to west) and an open sanctuary ('parish churches'). The difference between the two arrangements is usually explained as resulting from liturgical practice, the performance of the Eucharistic liturgy being more important in parish churches.¹⁸ Palmer, however, has rightly remarked that the occurrence of

¹⁴ Fiey 1959, 85-102, Pl. III. Cf. Sader 1983, 37-49; Rabo 2001; Mérioux 2005, 437-440.

¹⁵ Fiey 1959, 75, 98.

¹⁶ Differences between the ground plans of East Syrian and West Syrian monastic churches in Tur ʿAbdin, for example, are explained as resulting from denominational differences in the performance of the liturgy (Bell/Mundell Mango 1982, ix; Palmer 1990, 135 n. 133, with further references).

¹⁷ Taft 1968, 337-359; Cassis 2002a, § 4-6.

¹⁸ Bell/Mundell Mango 1982, vii-xi; Sader 1983, 46-48. Cf. Palmer 1990, 135-137, with further references.

the dividing wall might not always be liturgically significant, as practical considerations also played an important role in usage. He points out that the east wall is a necessary structural feature where one has a transversal barrel-vault covering the nave. Besides, the distinction does not seem to have been so clear cut in the case of the churches in the Mosul area, given that typical 'monastic plans' are encountered in parish churches, and vice versa.¹⁹ Moreover, the 'closed sanctuary' is not restricted to any particular type of church. The monastic church at Deir Mar Behnam, the parish church of Mart Shmuni in Qaraqosh, and the Church of Mar Ahudemme in Mosul, for instance, are all provided with a wall dividing the nave from the sanctuary.

As a rule, liturgy plays an important role in reinforcing communal identity. In light of the fact that church buildings formed the space where the liturgy was performed, one might perhaps expect the Syrian Orthodox to have employed church architecture to shape communal distinctiveness and to express their own communal identity. This line of enquiry would require a broad and detailed study of the written sources in addition to comprehensive architectural research. When it comes to distinguishing Syrian Orthodox church architecture, suffice it to mention here that Syrian Orthodox authors, in their liturgical commentaries, occasionally appear to have highlighted both differences and similarities with other Christian groups in terms of their liturgical arrangements.²⁰

Caution is called for, however, in dealing with such sources, because important discrepancies can often be found between the written sources, on the one hand, and the actual archaeological remains, on the other.²¹ Moreover, without additional information, it usually proves very difficult to ascribe anonymous Mesopotamian churches a specific denomination on the basis of their architecture or liturgical disposition. Churches often changed hands between different denominations, and in many cases it remains unclear which particular Christian group was originally responsible for their construction or refurbishment.

7.1.2 The Symbolic Meaning of Liturgical Space in the Syrian Orthodox Tradition

As is common throughout Christianity, the Syrian Orthodox Church has a tradition of attributing symbolic meaning to a church building and its various sections. In Syrian Orthodox commentaries on the liturgy, for example, in which rites, prayers, and liturgical objects are given allegorical interpretations, symbolic meanings are also ascribed to the various sections and furnishings of the church. A systematic compilation and study of such Syrian Orthodox texts would shed light on the meanings attached to religious spaces and provide a valuable contribution to the scholarship in this field. For the time being, however, a preliminary survey of some of these sources will pave the way.²² Useful information can be found in the commentaries on the liturgy by Jacob of Edessa (d. 708), George, Bishop of the Arab tribes (d. 724), John of Dara (d. around 825), Moses bar Kepha (d. 903), and Dionysius bar Salibi (d. 1171), as well as a number of theological works such as the *Book of the Guide* by Yahya ibn Garir (d. around 1080), the *Book of Treasures* by Jacob bar Shakko (d. 1241), and the *Lamp of the Sanctuary* by Barhebraeus (d. 1286).

One of the most detailed interpretations of the church in the Syrian Orthodox tradition is found in the second chapter of the commentary on the Eucharist of John of Dara, which deals

¹⁹ Fiey 1959, 90-91.

²⁰ Taft 1968, 353, who points out that Yahya ibn Garir, in his *Book of the Guide* (Ch. 29: Khouri-Sarkis 1967, 322-331), occasionally even indicates explicitly how the Syrian Orthodox liturgical disposition differs from that of East Syrian churches.

²¹ Cassis 2002a.

²² A future comprehensive study on the meaning of the church in the Syrian Orthodox tradition could be modelled on van Loon's research on the symbolic meaning of church buildings in the Coptic tradition (van Loon 1999, 110-118).

with the symbolism of both the liturgical objects and the church arrangement. John explains why Syrian Orthodox churches are divided into three main sections, arguing that this is because ‘the tent of Israel was constructed by Moses with three parts, that is the holy of holies, which is the sanctuary, the place of the ministers, which is the nave, and the court which surrounded the nave and the holy of holies’.²³ Discussing the meaning of each of these three sections, John goes on to state that the Holy of Holies stands for the Church of the Seraphims, Cherubims, and Thrones; the *qestromā*, the Church of the Lordships, Dominions, and the Powers; and the nave, the Church of the Principalities and the Archangels and the court of the Holy Church.²⁴ In addition, John of Dara considers the sanctuary a symbol of Paradise, and the priests and the deacons around the altar a symbol of the celestial army which surrounds God.²⁵

Generally speaking, the Syrian Orthodox conceive the church building as an image of the Old Testament Tabernacle, the tent constructed by Moses to house the Law, as well as an image of the subsequent Temple of Jerusalem, the new Tabernacle, built by King Solomon as a permanent house of worship. The fact that the altar room in the liturgical commentaries is commonly referred to as the Holy of Holies is exemplary in this respect, but the typological link also returns at Deir Mar Behnam, where a thirteenth-century Syriac inscription (AE.01.31) designates its Royal Gate as the ‘gate of the Holy of Holies’. Notably, other contemporary inscriptions at the monastery contribute towards this symbolic association as well. Some of the inscriptions found at the southern entrance to the church and the small gate giving access to the sanctuary, for example, include passages from the Psalms that allude to the gates of the Temple, namely Ps 118:19-20 (‘Open for me the gate of righteousness so that I may enter through them and praise the Lord’) and Ps 24:9-10 (‘Lift up your heads, Gates! The eternal gates went so high that the King of Glory may enter. Who is this King of Glory? The mighty Lord, the King of Glory for ever and ever, amen’).²⁶

In keeping with the multivalent nature of symbols, the meanings attached to the different sections of a church building in the Syrian Orthodox tradition are manifold. In his study on Syrian Orthodox liturgical theology, Baby Varghese points out that with the exception of John of Dara, who follows the Alexandrian method of explaining the meaning of liturgical celebrations, Syrian Orthodox authors tend to adhere to the Antiochene mystagogical tradition, according to which symbols and rites are interpreted in relation to the saving work of Christ.²⁷ Just as the various parts of the liturgy are associated with different episodes from the life of Christ, the different sections of a church building and its furnishings are connected with the earthly places visited by Christ. During our discussion of the wall painting of the Baptism in the Church of Mar Giworgis in Qaraqosh, for instance, we already saw that the successive stages of the baptismal service were likened to the death and resurrection of Christ, while the baptismal font was equated with the tomb of Christ (see Sections 5.3.3 and 5.3.5).

Simultaneously, the church in its entirety is seen as an image of the Kingdom of Heaven, namely the divine order which includes the whole world, both Heaven and Earth. Within this framework, Syrian Orthodox commentators continuously emphasize the symbolism of the sanctuary as Heaven, and the nave as the World. Not only is it explicitly stated that the altar room symbolizes Heaven,²⁸ but the passing back and forth of the celebrants between the sanctuary and the nave is commonly likened to Christ’s descent from and ascension to Heaven. A good example is a passage from Moses bar Kepha’s commentary on the Myron:

²³ John of Dara, *Commentary on the Eucharist*, Ch. 2, § 2 (Sader 1970, 13; Varghese 1999, 29-30).

²⁴ John of Dara, *Commentary on the Eucharist*, Ch. 2, § 3 (Sader 1970, 13-14; Varghese 1999, 30-31).

²⁵ John of Dara, *Commentary on the Eucharist*, Ch. 2, § 9 (Sader 1970, 17; Varghese 1999, 35).

²⁶ Harrak 2009, inscr. nos AE. 01.7, AE.01.9, AE.01.27, AE.01.29, lines 1-3.

²⁷ Varghese 2004a, 17-19, 29-32; *idem* 2004b, 274, 287.

²⁸ Jacob of Edessa, *Commentary on the Eucharist*, unpublished (Varghese 2004a, 25; *idem* 2004b, 282).

‘The sanctuary represents the heaven and the nave the world. In the same way as the Myron leaves the sanctuary and goes around the nave and returns to the sanctuary, God the Word left heaven, came to the world, became incarnate and [became] man, and fulfilled the economy and returned and ascended to heaven to the place from where He descended’.²⁹

Also explicit in this respect is a passage from the liturgical commentary of Jacob of Edessa: ‘The incense is brought to the nave symbolising Christ who descended from heaven and (similarly) the deacon goes around. The priest takes the incense and goes around the whole church, symbolising God who descended and went around the world, and perfumed the whole creation with teaching of the Gospel and again ascended towards His Father’.³⁰ Just as the procession in the nave symbolizes the economy of Christ in the world,³¹ the *bēmā* in the centre of the nave represents Jerusalem, which is at the centre of the world, where Christ was crucified.³² The altar, located in the middle of the sanctuary, is interpreted as the Tree of Life situated in the centre of Paradise. In turn, entering the altar room is described as approaching the Tree of Life.³³ The most common symbolic point of reference for the altar in the commentaries, however, is the tomb of Christ.³⁴ On the other hand, in the liturgical texts themselves, the altar is usually referred to as either the ‘throne of God’ or the ‘heavenly throne’,³⁵ which underlines, yet again, the symbolic associations between the sanctuary and Heaven.

Along the same lines, the east wall separating the sanctuary from the nave served to mark the boundary between Heaven and Earth. Placed at the centre of this opaque screen, the Royal Gate conveniently focused the attention of the worshippers on the most holy section of the church, the place where, during the performance of the Eucharistic liturgy, Heaven and Earth came together. According to George, Bishop of the Arab tribes, and Jacob bar Shakko, the veils and curtains drawn across the entrance to the sanctuary were a symbol of the ‘screen which is between us and the hiddenness of the heavenly place’.³⁶ Although the heavenly realm was obscured from view, when the mysteries had been prepared by the priest, the curtains or the doors were opened and the faithful were able to get a glimpse of that heavenly place. At that moment, according to Dionysius bar Salibi, ‘the heavenly armies and the perfected spirits of the just’ came down to protect and honour the mysteries.³⁷ The theme of protection is also emphasized by Yahya ibn Garir, who mentions that the veils or the curtains of the sanctuary symbolize the cherubim who guarded the gate of Paradise.³⁸

In short, the Royal Gate was considered a ritually significant and symbolically charged architectural device within the Syrian Orthodox tradition. Although architectural features are essentially multivalent in terms of their symbolic meaning, the associative link tied between

²⁹ Moses bar Kepha, *Commentary on the Myron*, Ch. 13 (Varghese 2004a, 168; *idem* 2004b, 285). See also Moses bar Kepha, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, London, BL Add. 21210, fol. 151v (Connolly/Codrington 1913, 34; Varghese 2004a, 28); Dionysius bar Salibi, *Commentary on the Eucharist*, Ch. 6, § 12 (Varghese 1998, 34-35).

³⁰ Jacob of Edessa, *Commentary on the Eucharist*, Berlin, Sachau 218, fol. 180r (Varghese 2004a, 26; *idem* 2004b, 282-283).

³¹ Dionysius bar Salibi, *Commentary on the Eucharist*, Ch. 5, § 3 (Varghese 1998, 23).

³² Yahya ibn Garir, *Book of the Guide*, Ch. 29, § 11 (Khouri-Sarkis 1967, 325; Fiey 1969, 359).

³³ George, Bishop of the Arab tribes, *Exposition of the Mysteries*, London, BL Add. 12154, fols 186r, 187v (Connolly/Codrington 1913, 15, 17); Barhebraeus, *Lamp of the Sanctuary*, Ch. 2, § 3 (Kohlhaas 1959, 36).

³⁴ Moses bar Kepha, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, fol. 151v (Connolly/Codrington 1913, 34-35); Yahya ibn Garir, *Book of the Guide*, Ch. 29, § 9; Dionysius bar Salibi, *Commentary on the Eucharist*, Ch. 6, § 6 (Varghese 1998, 31).

³⁵ Varghese 2004a, 166-167.

³⁶ George, Bishop of the Arab tribes, *Exposition of the Mysteries*, fol. 187v (Connolly/Codrington 1913, 17); Jacob bar Shakko, *Book of Treasures*, Ch. 39 (Hindo 1943, 169).

³⁷ Dionysius bar Salibi, *Commentary on the Eucharist*, Ch. 9, § 4 (Varghese 1998, 54).

³⁸ Yahya ibn Garir, *Book of the Guide*, Ch. 29, § 26 (Khouri-Sarkis 1967, 329).

the entrance to the sanctuary and the Gate to Heaven seems to have been the strongest and most popular. Obviously, the Royal Gate was considered to have a protective function, which could be enhanced through the addition of certain visual imagery, such as the equestrian saints at Deir Mar Behnam (see Section 6.4.2).

7.2 The Church of Mar Ahudemneh in Mosul

The Church of Mar Ahudemneh, dedicated to the first ‘Great metropolitan of Takrit’, who was martyred in 575, is located in the southwest part of Old Mosul, in the city quarter called *al-Qantara* (Arabic for ‘arched way’).³⁹ Locally, the Church of Mar Ahudemneh is also known as the Church of Mar Hudeni, and the Old Church of the Takritans, the latter because it is assumed that it is one of the churches in Mosul that were either founded or occupied by Syrian Orthodox refugees from Takrit.⁴⁰ The influx of Syrian Orthodox Christians from the south is recorded from the early ninth century onwards, but intensified rapidly after 1089, when the destruction of churches in Takrit ushered in a period of extreme hardship for the city’s Christian population (p. x).

According to the historical sources, there was a ‘Church of the Takritans’ in Mosul as early as 818, but considering that at least two other churches – the Church of Mar Zena and the Church of Mar Tadros – are known to bear this name it is impossible to ascertain whether this record actually refers to the Church of Mar Ahudemneh.⁴¹ Alternatively, Jean-Marie Mérieux suggested that the Church of Mar Ahudemneh in Mosul was built in the eleventh century to replace the Church of Mar Ahudemneh in Takrit, which was looted and largely destroyed in 1089.⁴²

Archaeological and architectural investigations are needed to establish the history of the Church of Mar Ahudemneh, but the great age of the church is attested by its current position of some six or seven meters below street level. Furthermore, the Royal Gate shows close similarities with architectural reliefs encountered in monuments built or reconstructed during the reign of Badr al-Din Lu’lu’, and may therefore be dated to around the mid-thirteenth century.⁴³ The oldest secure historical record dates from around 1627, when the Church of Mar Ahudemneh is mentioned in the colophon of a manuscript. After a mosque was built over certain parts of the church in 1763, the church is known to have been renovated successively in 1896 and 1950.⁴⁴ Finally, during restoration activities performed in 1971, the church was heavily reconstructed. The Royal Gate in its entirety was transferred from its original location to a hall that was built over the church. This proved to be a lucky turn of events, because the old church was submerged when the Mosul dam was built in the 1980s.⁴⁵

7.3 Style and Iconography of the Royal Gate at the Church of Mar Ahudemneh

³⁹ Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, II-III, 294-295, Fig. 281, Pls CV, CVI3, CVII; Fiey 1959, 141-147, Fig. 11, Pl. 9; Gierlichs 1996, 238-239; Harrak 2009, cat. no. AA.07. On Mar Ahudemneh, see Nau 1909, 15-51; Fiey 2004, 32.

⁴⁰ Fiey 1959, 25, 142; Harrak 2009, cat. no. AA.07.

⁴¹ Fiey 1959, 25-31.

⁴² Mérieux 2005, 428.

⁴³ Fiey 1959, 142; Leroy 1964, 67; Gierlichs 1996, 238-239; Snelders/Jeudy 2006, 135; Harrak 2009, cat. no. AA.07.

⁴⁴ Fiey 1959, 142-143.

⁴⁵ Harrak 2009, cat. no. AA.07.

In terms of layout and typology, the Royal Gate at the Church of Mar Ahudemme (Fig. 9)⁴⁶ closely resembles the one at Deir Mar Behnam (Pl. 37), which was discussed in the previous chapter. The structure of the opening is again formed by a shallow arch with a lintel underneath, which displays two stalactite decorations on its lower side, and two consoles on the sides, minimizing the lintel span. Together with the horizontal line of the lintel, the consoles and stalactites form three shoulder arches. Another close parallel for this type of gate is 'doorway B' at the Mausoleum of Imam ʿAwn al-Din in Mosul, which was built by Badr al-Din Lu'lu' in A.H. 646 (A.D. 1248/49).⁴⁷

As for the decoration of the Royal Gate at the Church of Mar Ahudemme, two seated lions with dragon-headed tails occupy the corners of the arch. In addition, a frieze with an Arabic inscription carved in relief frames the three sides of both the arch and the lintel. A second Arabic inscription is featured in the uppermost frieze, which, together with a palmette frieze underneath, functions as a cornice. In their present condition, the Arabic inscriptions are highlighted in black, which was probably done in order to enhance their legibility, a practice familiar from other churches in Mosul and the vicinity, including the Church of Mart Shmuni in Qaraqosh (see below). The sculptured inscriptions were probably painted shortly after the Royal Gate had been transferred from its original location.⁴⁸ This also holds true for the two new crosses which were added on either side of the uppermost Arabic inscription and the palmette frieze (Fig. 9). Underneath this palmette frieze, there is a frontal lion's head, sculpted almost in the round. We will return to the Arabic inscriptions in Section 7.3.4.

Even more striking, from an iconographic point of view, are the scenes represented on the horizontal lintel of the Royal Gate. The lintel is decorated symmetrically with two enthroned figures each juxtaposed with a horseman, placed on either side of an almost entirely effaced cross, of which only the upper contours have remained visible (Fig. 10).⁴⁹ The two horsemen occupy the corners and are represented facing each other, the rider on the left holding a falcon on each wrist, while the one on the right carries a falcon on his left hand and has a second one on his shoulder (Fig. 11). This rider has a nimbus and appears to be carrying an object in his raised right hand. Both horsemen are dressed with a long coat and a belt, and have pointed caps on their heads. On the ground, underneath the horse on the right, stands a chalice-like vessel.

The enthroned figure on the right is portrayed sitting on a platform throne, supported by two addorsed lions with their tails ending in a frontal lion's head (Fig. 12). The figure is dressed in a coat, the hem of which is diagonally crossed at the chest, and wears some sort of cap, from underneath which dangle two pigtails.⁵⁰ In his left hand, the figure holds a *mandīl*, a small napkin that was used during banqueting.⁵¹ The throne has a high rectangular backrest with two posts on the sides. At the upper side of the throne two bowls of fruit (?) can be seen. The depiction of the enthroned figure is repeated on the left, though with some minor changes in the ordering of the iconographic details: the left-hand figure is represented holding the cup in his left hand and the *mandīl* in his right. Furthermore, instead of resting on addorsed lions, the throne is supported by two confronted lions on either side of a frontal lion's head.

In terms of style, the Royal Gate fits neatly into the common repertoire of thirteenth-century Mosul and related areas. The human figures, with their broad faces, oriental-looking

⁴⁶ Fiey 1959, Fig. 11; Snelders/Jeudy 2006, Pl. 20.

⁴⁷ Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, II, 266-267, Fig. 262; Tabbaa 2001, 64-66, Fig. 23.

⁴⁸ In the photograph published by Fiey, the Arabic inscriptions are still plain, whereas in the colour photograph published by Habbi in 1980, they are enhanced with black.

⁴⁹ Fiey (1959, 142) suggests that the church might have been pillaged by Muslims at some point, during which the cross could have easily been obliterated.

⁵⁰ Reitlinger 1951, 19.

⁵¹ On the use and depictions of *manādīl*, see Vorderstrasse 2005b, 68.

eyes, small noses and mouths,⁵² are closely related to those seen on the Gate of the Two Baptisms at Deir Mar Behnam and the throne niche from Sinjar, for instance, as well as the unglazed barbotine ware *habbs* fashioned in Reitlinger's Style II and III (see Section 6.3.2). On the basis of the formal characteristics of the Arabic inscriptions, Herzfeld argues that these architectural reliefs were certainly made during the reign of Badr al-Din Lu'lu'.⁵³

The most remarkable feature of the Royal Gate at the Church of Mar Ahudemme, iconographically speaking, is the absence of distinctively Christian elements in its decoration, apart from the now lost cross on the keystone. As has already been observed in previous publications, the motifs represented on the lintel of the Royal Gate are firmly grounded in the Islamic pictorial tradition, more specifically the set of subjects known as the Princely Cycle.⁵⁴ A comparison between the imagery represented on the lintel with examples found in Islamic contexts shows that they belong to the stock repertoire of Islamic decoration as found in Northern Mesopotamia and elsewhere. At first sight, the mounted falconers and the enthroned figures holding cups in the Church of Mar Ahudemme thus appear only to mirror contemporary Islamic iconography reflecting the pastimes of the royal court, and do not seem to have an explicit meaning within their Christian context.

The question arises as to why these specific motifs were chosen, and how this pictorial programme should be explained. The obvious analogies with Islamic art lead Gierlichs to dismiss the decoration as a mere coincidence, viewing the enthroned figures and the falconers simply as decorative ornamentation which was not meant to convey any deeper religious meaning.⁵⁵ He argues that the craftsmen responsible randomly chose a number of motifs from the common pictorial repertoire of the time. This viewpoint is too simplistic, however. It does not take into account the possible involvement of the initiators and the commissioners of the work, arguably either the ecclesiastical leaders of the church or even a wealthy Christian urban notable from Mosul. Since these patrons provided the finances for the decoration, they would probably have had some influence on the creation of the work and the choice of the themes.

Although of course it is impossible to determine the exact amount of input the commissioners of the work may have had into the iconographic programme, it may be assumed that the images meant something to them, especially considering that the mounted falconers, the enthroned figures holding drinking vessels, and the lions were placed at the entrance to the sanctuary, that is, at a position of the greatest symbolic significance within a church setting. Traditionally, the altar room is compared to Heaven and the Heavenly Jerusalem. From this follows the architectural symbolism of the Royal Gate itself: as it gives access to the sanctuary, it symbolizes an entrance or gate to Heaven. The notion of a set of images devoid of any significant content would be in flagrant contrast with a position that is charged with religious symbolism. On the contrary, such a position imbues the imagery with meaning.

7.3.1 The Cross-Legged Seated Prince holding a Cup

Starting our iconographic analysis with the two enthroned figures, it is well known that, as the central motif of the Princely Cycle, the image of a cross-legged seated ruler or prince holding a cup is one of the most frequently depicted subjects in Islamic art.⁵⁶ Probably derived from Sassanian models, the seated cupbearer became popular in Islamic art already during the early

⁵² Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, II, 294-295; III, Pl. CV.

⁵³ Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, II, 294-295; cf. Gierlichs 1996, 238-239.

⁵⁴ Roux 1982, 89-90, Fig. 7; von Gladiss 1983, 240-241.

⁵⁵ Gierlichs 1996, 239.

⁵⁶ Gelfer-Jørgensen 1986, 29-96; Vorderstrasse 2005b, 62-69.

Abbasid period. Considering that the two enthroned figures on the Royal Gate are paired with mounted falconers, it is perhaps interesting to observe that representations of the man holding a cup are often coupled with hunting scenes.⁵⁷ An early example of this juxtaposition is found on a tenth-century medal from Iran, the obverse of which shows a prince seated on a lion throne and holding a goblet, while on the reverse he is represented as a mounted falconer. Dorothy Shepherd has argued that these kinds of medallions had talismanic values, as they were clearly intended to be worn.⁵⁸ It may therefore be assumed that the scenes depicted on them also conveyed an apotropaic meaning, which, in turn, may have foreshadowed their use on an entranceway (see Section 7.3.2).

A contemporary example from the Jazira showing the banquet and hunt motifs includes an inlaid candlestick from Siirt. In addition to a band of horsemen, two of which are falconers, this candlestick is decorated with three roundels, each containing an enthroned figure holding a goblet.⁵⁹ Other striking iconographic parallels can be found on a number of *habbs*, each with several depictions of a cross-legged sitting man holding a drinking vessel.⁶⁰ One good example is a specimen preserved at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.⁶¹ Note especially the correspondence with the characteristic headgear (*sharbush*), featuring two dangling pigtails, and the *mandīl* in the figure's left hand. As for the image of the seated ruler with two lions as symbols of power at his feet, close parallels are found in a Syro-Mesopotamian pen-case dated to 1220,⁶² a basin (c. 1275) made by Ali ibn Hamud al-Mawsili,⁶³ an inlaid brass tray assumed to have been made in the late thirteenth century by Mosul craftsmen taken to the Il-Khanid court in Tabriz,⁶⁴ and a contemporary inlaid metalwork tray attributed to Iraq.⁶⁵ These are but a few of the comparable images; the analogies between the enthroned figures on the Royal Gate and those seen on Islamic works of art are abundantly clear.

It should be stressed that the figure of the frontally seated ruler holding a drinking vessel is also featured in distinctly Christian contexts, perhaps the most famous example being the painted wooden ceilings that were ordered by King Roger II of Sicily (1130-1154) for the Cappella Palatina at Palermo. On these ceilings, the image of the ruler, seated cross-legged on a platform, dressed in a kaftan and wearing a three-pointed crown, is depicted no fewer than seven times.⁶⁶ A similar image of a seated king holding a cup is found earlier in the sculptures on the façade of the Armenian Church of the Holy Cross on Aght'amar in Lake Van, the tenth-century palace church built by King Gagik Artsruni of Vasparukan (915-921).⁶⁷ The obvious parallels with the princely imagery of Islamic court art in these two churches have traditionally been explained as a result of their palatine function; in keeping with the royal patronage of the churches, the royal figures have usually been seen as generic portrayals of

⁵⁷ On the pairing of banquet and hunt scenes, see Shepherd 1974.

⁵⁸ Shepherd 1974, 84, Figs 5-6.

⁵⁹ Allan 1999, cat. no. 8, 62-65, plate on 63.

⁶⁰ Reitlinger 1951, 18-19, Fig. 19; Otto-Dorn 1982, 157-158, Fig. 11.

⁶¹ London, Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. no. 340; Sourdél/Sourdél 1968, 385, Fig. 154; Otto-Dorn 1982, 157-158, Fig. 11.

⁶² Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 13174; Baer 1983, 264, Fig. 215; *idem* 1989, Pl. 104.

⁶³ Tehran, Iran Bastan Museum, accession number is not known; Shepherd 1974, 90-91, Fig. 15; Baer 1983, 262, Fig. 213.

⁶⁴ London, British Museum, inv. no. oa 18.78.12-30.706; Ward 1993, 87-88, Fig. 66.

⁶⁵ St Petersburg, Hermitage, inv. no. IR-1455; Catalogue Amsterdam 1999, no. 123.

⁶⁶ Grube 2005, Pls VIII, XLIV, LIV, Ills 24.2-3, 25.1-3, 25.6.

⁶⁷ Jones 1994, 108, Fig. 5. The motif of the cross-legged sitting man holding a cup is also depicted in the decorated frame of a frontispiece to a late thirteenth-century Crusader manuscript of the *Histoire Universelle* from Acre, where it is featured together with six other cross-legged sitting men who are playing instruments (London, BL Add. 15268, fol. 1v; Buchthal 1957, 85-86; Hoffman 2004, 138, Figs 12-13).

King Roger II and King Gagik that were used to convey messages of royal power and authority.

In case of the Church of Mar Ahudemmeh, the occurrence of such royal imagery cannot be explained as due to a courtly context. Their depiction should rather be seen within the framework of the diffusion of courtly themes into the art of the medieval Islamic bourgeoisie, a process which is attested from at least the eleventh century onwards.⁶⁸ In Islamic art, the proliferation of human figures in general, and royal themes in particular, reached a peak in the period between approximately 1150 and 1250. But whereas iconographic motifs, such as the seated prince holding a cup, and mounted riders, had previously been confined largely to the royal sphere, they were now widely employed outside the royal context, both in monumental and minor art.⁶⁹

It is conceivable that the choice of culturally popular patterns reflecting the favourite pastimes of the royal court is indicative of the social background of the commissioner of the work, arguably one or more rich members of the urban Christian elite. It was common practice for wealthy lay members of the Christian community, both men and women, to generate and sponsor the building or refurbishment of churches and monasteries, either individually or as part of a cooperative venture (see Section 2.5). In emulating the stereotyped representations of the enthroned ruler with a cup, the Christian elite, like their fellow wealthy Muslim citizens, tried to underline their high social status. Moreover, if one assumes that there is indeed a direct correlation between the function and architectural symbolism of the Royal Gate, traditionally seen as the Gate to Heaven (see Section 7.1.2), and the symbolism of its decoration, Christians visiting the church may have considered the scenes as symbolic representations of Paradise.⁷⁰

Indeed, as Mirjam Gelfer-Jørgensen, in her profound iconographic analysis of the scenes of the Princely Cycle, in which she focuses mainly on the motif of the seated cupbearer, has argued, in Islamic contexts, too, these images cannot be merely interpreted as decorative ornamentation. She argues that they are rather renderings of Paradise based on the earthly pleasures.⁷¹ Along similar lines, Pancaroğlu postulates that such enthronement scenes often display a common visualization of the king's intermediate position between heaven and earth, in which the image of the princely figure functions as a point of contact between the celestial and terrestrial domains of creation: 'This distinctly intermediary position allowed the royal image to serve as a lens through which the both temporal and heavenly designs of the universe could be visualized. ... Both a gateway to higher planes of creation and a summation of temporal pursuits, the image of the king became a conduit through which the design of God's creation was visualized to come full circle'.⁷²

It may finally be noted that in East Syrian sources, such as the *Explanation of the Offices of the Church* by Pseudo-George of Arbela (ninth century), the *qestromā*, the area directly in front of the sanctuary, which connects the altar area with the nave, is seen as a symbol of the earthly Paradise which rises to Heaven.⁷³ Although one should be wary of relating East Syrian sources directly to a Syrian Orthodox context, it may nevertheless be assumed that the Syrian Orthodox, who, as we have seen above, associated the altar room with the heavenly world and the nave with the earthly world, correspondingly associated the *qestromā* with Paradise. The early thirteenth-century decoration of the templon screen at Deir Mar Musa (Layer 3) in Syria is perhaps revealing in this matter. Placed directly opposite a large rendering of the Last

⁶⁸ Shoshan 1991, esp. 76-82; Jeudy 2006, 249-252; *idem* 2009.

⁶⁹ Pancaroğlu 2000, 14-36.

⁷⁰ Snelders/Jeudy 2006, 137-138.

⁷¹ Gelfer-Jørgensen 1986, 29-96. Shepherd (1974) comes to the same conclusion, while differing in the details.

⁷² Pancaroğlu 2000, 244-245.

⁷³ Connolly 1913, I, 90-93.

Judgement, the Wise and Foolish Virgins, as symbols of the Blessed and the Damned, are featured on either side of the entrance to the sanctuary, thus emphasizing its symbolism as the Gate to Heaven.

As far as its liturgical disposition and symbolic meaning are concerned, the *qestromā* is somewhat comparable with the *khurus*, that unique intermediate space between the altar room and the nave reserved for the clergy in Coptic churches: according to contemporary sources, the *khurus* symbolizes the Holy Place in front of the Holy of Holies where the priests dwell, and, at the same time, Paradise, the place where the souls of the righteous await the Last Judgement to ascend into Heaven.⁷⁴ In keeping with this architectural symbolism, the *khurus* at Deir Anba Antonius (1232/33) is embellished with themes that appropriately evoke a vision of Paradise, more specifically the Three Men in the Fiery Furnace, and the Three Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Seated on the laps of the patriarchs are the souls of the blessed, but as with the souls of the blessed in their lap, but also a pair of mounted warrior saints, who, spearing enemies of the church, function as sanctuary guardians.⁷⁵ This combination of themes enhancing paradisiacal connotations and protective subjects brings us to the two equestrian figures on the Royal Gate at the Church of Mar Ahudemmeḥ.

7.3.2 Mounted Falconers

In terms of their symmetrical position on a Royal Gate, the pair of mounted falconers is highly reminiscent of the two confronted equestrian saints depicted on the Royal Gate at Deir Mar Behnam (Pls 37, 60), which are closely related to these depictions, both topographically and temporally. But whereas the cavalrymen at Deir Mar Behnam are clearly distinguished as Christian mounted saints, the equestrian figures at the Church of Mar Ahudemmeḥ, which do not carry any Christian attributes at all, are highly ambiguous. The Eastern Christian tradition of placing paired equestrian saints at entrances, where their protective connotations are most fully exploited, provides the key for the interpretation of the mounted falconers at the Church of Mar Ahudemmeḥ. Worshippers visiting the church would have been familiar with the tradition of placing mounted saints above or next to a doorway leading either into the church or the sanctuary, which was already a widespread phenomenon in the East from the Early Christian period onwards (see Section 6.4.2A). It may be suggested that the mounted falconers were most probably considered fashionable variants of the genuine Christian mounted warrior saints, and were chosen for the equestrian image they convey.

The Royal Gate at the Church of Mar Ahudemmeḥ is not unique in placing a pair of mounted falconers at the entrance to the sanctuary. This particular combination of iconography and disposition is also encountered on an eleventh-century wooden sanctuary screen from the Church of Sitt Barbara in Old Cairo.⁷⁶ The decoration of this sanctuary screen consists of numerous details familiar from the Fatimid iconographic repertoire, including a variety of confronted animals, hunting scenes, scenes of animal combat, and, significantly, two pairs of mounted figures. Two of these mounted figures are framed within medallions and placed on the spandrels of the doorway, while the others are carved in the two uppermost panels of the actual doors. The four horsemen are all wearing turbans. The two pairs are turned towards one another.

There has been a considerable amount of discussion about the original purpose of this screen, because in terms of both style and iconography it shows a distinct overlap with contemporary Islamic woodwork. According to some scholars, the screen simply looks too

⁷⁴ Van Loon 1999, 109-124; Bolman 2002, 39, 57.

⁷⁵ Van Loon 1999, 175, 177-180, 191-192, Pls 118, 120-122; *idem* 2003; Bolman 2002, 57-62, Figs 4.24-4.25, 7.19, 7.31.

⁷⁶ Cairo, Coptic Museum, inv. no. 778: Snelders/Jeudy 2006, 116-119, Pls 9-11; Jeudy 2007, 125-129, Figs 6-10.

Islamic to be Coptic. Bolman, for instance, has recently suggested the possibility of a non-Christian origin for the screen, hypothesizing that it may initially have been intended for an Islamic palatial context.⁷⁷ Jeudy, on the other hand, maintains that the screen was designed specifically for a Christian place of worship, pointing out that its general shape conforms to what would become the standard typological design for Coptic iconostases in the period from the twelfth to the fourteenth century.⁷⁸

Jeudy finds an additional argument in favour of Coptic origin, if not necessarily Coptic production, in the choice of themes represented on the screen, which are largely limited to hunting and combat scenes. The only exception is a panel which, according to Jeudy, depicts two musicians. She considers the primacy of hunt and combat scenes as a conscious choice made by the commissioner in order to refrain from representing 'immoral' motifs within a Christian religious context. In this way, she implicitly suggests that princely figures holding cups and drinking wine are unsuitable subjects to decorate a sanctuary screen.⁷⁹ However, the figure to the right of a musician playing a lute, which Jeudy identifies as a man playing the tambourine, may well depict a frontally seated prince holding a drinking vessel in front of his chest with his right hand. If correct, this should certainly not be taken to imply that the screen was originally made to function in an Islamic context. As we have seen above, wine drinkers are a not uncommon motif in the decoration of distinctively Christian buildings.

Whatever the correct reading for this scene, the fact that subjects such as seated cupbearers, musicians, and hunters were used interchangeably among Christians and Muslims in the urban context actually makes it impossible to ascribe the screen to a particular religious community on the basis of its iconography. Indeed, Christians and Muslims, for example, shared their appreciation of the horseman, such as the image of the mounted dragon-slayer. Illustrative of the flexibility of the symbolism of this motif and its appropriation in the Islamic context is an account of a statue of a dragon-slayer in Constantinople, related by the mid-twelfth century Persian writer Muhammad Tusi. In his *Wonders of Creation*, Tusi refers to three talismanic statues in Constantinople, which are supposedly the portraits of the Prophet Mohammed and two of his closest companions: Bilal, the first official muazzin, and Ali, Mohammed's son-in-law and the fourth caliph. According to Tusi's description of the statues, Ali was portrayed as a horseman killing a dragon with his spear. The equestrian dragon-slayer described by Tusi, as pointed out by Pancaroğlu, was meant to symbolize 'the divinely preordained victory of Islam in the world'.⁸⁰

Visual testimonies of the adoption of the motif of the dragon-slayer in Islamic contexts include copper coins minted during the reign of Nasir al-Din Muhammad, ruler of the Danishmendids in northeast Anatolia (1162-1170), which show a beardless rider attacking a dragon.⁸¹ In all likelihood, this imagery was inspired by representations of St George killing the dragon, and may perhaps ultimately be traced back to the coppers of Roger of Salerno, the Crusader ruler of the Principality of Antioch (1112-1119).⁸² A relief on the caravanserai of al-Khan near Sinjar displays two standing dragon-slayers in its spandrels.⁸³ As with Roger's coinage, we are dealing with a political statement. An Arabic inscription states that the building was erected at the orders of Mosul's ruler Badr al-Din Lu'lu', and aligns him with the hero Rustam, who himself was a dragon-killer in the Persian tradition (p. x).⁸⁴ Similarly

⁷⁷ Bolman 2006, 93.

⁷⁸ Jeudy 2006, 103-104; *idem* 2007, 125-129.

⁷⁹ Jeudy 2006, 104-105.

⁸⁰ Pancaroğlu 2004, 155-156.

⁸¹ Pancaroğlu 2004, p. 156-157, Fig. 6; Whelan 2006, 66-68, Figs 29-30.

⁸² Whelan 2006, 68; Immerzeel 2009, 151, Fig. 18; Immerzeel/Jeudy/Snelders, forthcoming.

⁸³ Al-Janabi 1982, 253, Fig. 51; Gierlichs 1996, cat. no. 65, Ill. on p. 224.

⁸⁴ Gierlichs 1996, 124-125, 224-225.

paired standing dragon-slayers also appeared on the spandrels of the Mosul Gate in 'Amadiya, which was also erected by Badr al-Din Lu'lu'.⁸⁵

When it comes to the incorporation of the mounted dragon-slayer on Jaziran and Syrian metalwork, reference should be made to a thirteenth-century silver dagger excavated in Israel.⁸⁶ The scabbard is decorated with a variety of animal motifs and an Arabic inscription, which has not yet been translated; the central figure is a horseman carrying a round shield embellished with a cross, and brandishing a lance topped with a pennant. As the warrior takes aim to spear a coiling dragon, a hand appears from the sky in blessing. The central figure's beardless head with curly hair suggests a relation with St George, and the other iconographic details associate the image with equestrian saints holding shields and being blessed by the Hand of God, as seen on wall paintings from Greater Syria.⁸⁷

As for the origin of the dagger, David Williams and Bashir Mohamed attribute it to a Muslim artist from either Palestine or Syria, mainly on the basis of the Arabic inscription and the place where the object was found.⁸⁸ Alternatively, Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, pointing out parallels with a thirteenth-century candlestick from Siirt, suggests that it was made for a Christian client by a Muslim craftsman from Anatolia.⁸⁹ Julia Gonnella, finally, synthesizing these points of view, posits that the dagger was made by a Muslim craftsman in Palestine, Syria, or Anatolia, and speculates that it may have been intended as a precious gift from an Ayyubid ruler to a high-ranking Crusader.⁹⁰ Although the dagger was indeed probably made for a Christian patron of high rank, especially considering that the saint depicted rides under the sign of the cross, the style of the object cannot be considered indicative of the religious background of the craftsman, as was already pointed out while discussing the liturgical fan from Deir al-Surian (see Section 3.4). Obviously, this also holds true for the language of the inscription, as Arabic was used by both Muslims and Christians alike.

As a convenient expression of triumphal rulership, the image of the dragon-slayer was also incorporated within the wider framework of princely iconography. On the aforementioned candlestick from Siirt, for example, three horsemen are depicted: one holding a falcon, a second fighting a lion, and the third slaying a snake-like dragon with a spear.⁹¹ A similar assembly of horsemen – two huntsmen, a polo player, and a dragon-slayer – is seen on the inlaid brass basin known as the 'Baptistère de St Louis'.⁹² The origin of this basin, which was made by the Muslim craftsman Muhammad ibn al-Zayn, has been much debated since it was first published by David Storm Rice in 1951. Retaining Rice's attribution of the object to Mamluk Egypt, Doris Behrens-Abouseif ascribes it to the sponsorship of Sultan Baybars (1260-1277), as opposed to the patronage of Amir Salim during the reign of Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad (1290-1310), as suggested earlier by Rice.⁹³

Rachel Ward, on the other hand, argues that it was not made in Egypt, but in Syria, more specifically in Damascus. She considers it to be part of a series of metal vessels produced around the middle of the fourteenth century for export to Europe. Assuming that the basin was intended for a Christian client, Ward suggests that the image of the mounted dragon-slayer is inspired by representations of St George.⁹⁴ The bearded appearance of the horseman,

⁸⁵ Al-Janabi 1982, 253, Pl. 175; Gierlichs 1995, Pls 17-22; 1996, cat. no. 66, Pl. 56.

⁸⁶ Vaduz, Furusiyya Arts Foundation: Catalogue Paris 2002, no. 57; Catalogue New York 2004, no. 257.

⁸⁷ Immerzeel 2009, 152-154, Fig. 19; Immerzeel/Jeudy/Snelders, forthcoming. On the motif on the Hand of God in the depiction of equestrian saints, see Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 73-74.

⁸⁸ Catalogue Paris 2002, 118.

⁸⁹ Catalogue New York 2004, 430.

⁹⁰ Gonnella 2005, 440-441.

⁹¹ Allan 1999, cat. no. 7.

⁹² Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. no. L.P. 16.

⁹³ Behrens-Abouseif 1989, esp. 4-5, Pls I-II, Figs 1-4.

⁹⁴ Ward 1999, 117-118, Fig. 1.

however, rather inclines one to believe that the image ultimately originates in an image of St Theodore, who is commonly typified by a pointed beard, as can be seen in the wall paintings at Deir Mar Musa to the north of Damascus.⁹⁵

The thematic association between the falconer and the dragon-slayer, emphasized by the shared equestrian motif, is even more fully exploited on the Anatolian steel mirror referred to above, which is decorated with an image of a mounted falconer trampling a snake-like dragon that coils at the feet of his horse.⁹⁶ It is highly likely that the choice of this particular combination of motifs was governed by the general theme of victory common to the pursuits of both dragon-slaying and hunting.⁹⁷ A similar manner of reasoning probably underlay the occurrence of mounted falconers in distinctly Christian contexts. On the Royal Gate at the Church of Mar Ahudemmeh and the wooden screen at Sitt Barbara, the mounted falconers have taken the place of the customary equestrian warrior saints. As suggested above, the falconers were most probably considered a fashionable variant of the equestrian saint.⁹⁸

Christians participated fully in the visual culture of their times, and the mounted falconers were simply a variant of the tradition of placing apotropaic riders at the entrance of the sanctuary.⁹⁹ If the above hypothesis is correct, the two anonymous riders were thus probably considered members of the 'heavenly army', which, according to Syrian Orthodox writers such as Moses bar Kepha and Dionysius bar Salibi, came down to protect and honour the mysteries during the performance of the Eucharistic liturgy (p. x). In this way, they fulfil a similar function to just as Mar Behnam and St George at Deir Mar Behnam.

7.3.3 Lion's Head and Dragon-Tailed Lions

A similar apotropaic function may also be assumed for the centrally placed lion's head, as well as for the two seated lions placed in the corners of the gate, which are each provided with dragon's head terminating from their tails. Both animal motifs were discussed already in Section 6.4.1. Suffice it to mention here that the combined image of the dragon-tailed lion was introduced into Islamic inlaid metalwork in the twelfth century, but apparently enjoyed a certain popularity in local church decoration in the thirteenth century. In addition to the pair of dragon-tailed lions at the Church of Mar Ahudemmeh, the motif can be found at church entrances at Deir Mar Behnam, and two churches at Jazirat ibn 'Umar. Besides expressing common apotropaic connotations, the pair of lions at the Church of Mar Ahudemmeh, more specifically the threatening attitudes of the dragons towards the lions, may have contributed towards the triumphal message, which is simultaneously conveyed by the two mounted falconers.

7.3.4 Arabic Inscriptions

Bearing in mind the multiple levels of meaning that may simultaneously be expressed by symbols, another clue as to the meaning of the iconographic programme of the Royal Gate

⁹⁵ Immerzeel 2009, 154; Immerzeel/Jeudy/Snelders, forthcoming.

⁹⁶ Istanbul, Topkapi Sarayı Müzesi, inv. no. 2/1792: Catalogue New York 1997, no. 282; Roxburgh 2005, cat. no. 72, Pl. on p. 123. A similar combination occurs on a *min' ai* tile from Iran, dating from the twelfth or thirteenth century: Washington, D.C., The Freer Gallery of Art, acc. no. 11.319 (Grube/Johns 2005, Fig. 78.7).

⁹⁷ Pancaroğlu 2004, 159.

⁹⁸ Snelders /Jeudy 2006, 119, 138-139; Jeudy 2007, 126-129.

⁹⁹ A similar prophylactic function may be proposed for the pairs of mounted falconers found on the front of a number of painted ivory caskets that were produced in Sicily or Southern Italy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. On these pieces, the falconers are appropriately placed on either side of the lock hinge, preventing any evil spirit from entering these boxes. See, for example, Trento, Museo Diocesano (Gabrieli/Scerrato 1979, Figs 608-610); Veroli, Tesoro della Cattedrale di San Andrea (Gabrieli /Scerrato 1979, Figs 485-488).

may be found, finally, in the two Arabic inscriptions that surmount and frame the gate. These inscriptions, which are both written in *Thuluth*, read as follows (in Harrak's English translation): 'O Lord King who honoured the princes of the East through your goodness, the gate to your dwelling is still opened with honour and light'. And: 'A gate plated not with iron but with boundless nobleness. The red colour of its ornamentation keeps you away of the trap of the jealous. In the prime of (its) being, it will still open ... for support!'.¹⁰⁰

It has not yet proved possible to trace the origin of the texts featured in these inscriptions. Nonetheless, assuming that there was an intended relationship between the text of the inscriptions and the images on the Royal Gate, it is conceivable that the enthroned figures and the mounted saints were identified with the Lord King (i.e., Christ) and the princes of the East, respectively. If this view is correct, Christ is depicted two times, which in itself is not uncommon, as he is also featured twice in certain established Christian iconographic themes. A good example is the Communion of the Apostles, which in the Syrian Orthodox context is featured in a Gospel lectionary (c. 1250) written by Bishop Dioscorus Theodorus of Hisn Ziyad (Kharput).¹⁰¹

Likewise, the Turkish-style vestments of the four princely figures need not impede such an identification. Although in contemporary Syrian Orthodox manuscript illustration, such as the lectionary made for Deir Mar Mattai (Vat. Syr. 559; 1220 or 1260) and the related specimen BL Add. 7170 (c. 1220), Christ is commonly dressed in the classical vestments, royal figures are sometimes portrayed more or less in keeping with the local fashionable standards of the ruling Islamic elite. Illustrative in this respect are the three Magi in the Nativity, and Constantine and Helena holding the True Cross (Pls 21-22; see Section 4.7D). The princes of the East are perhaps meant to represent the Wise Men or Magi, who are often depicted on horseback: in a late twelfth or early thirteenth-century Syrian Orthodox manuscript,¹⁰² for instance, and on the Freer Canteen (Pl. 9), where one of the horsemen seems to be wearing a *sharbush*, the characteristic headdress of local Islamic rulers.¹⁰³

Significantly, the inscription states that it is the Lord King who honours the princes of the East, rather than the other way round, which would then have clearly referred to the Magi paying homage to the newly-born Christ-child. In light of the symbolic link between the location, liturgical practice, and iconographic subject in mind, it may be argued that this honouring by the Lord King was meant to refer to Christ offering the gift of the remission of sins to the Syrian Orthodox community partaking in the Eucharistic rite at the church. The homage of the Lord King brings to mind a passage from Dionysius bar Salibi's *Commentary on the Eucharist*, more specifically one dealing with the sounding board (*nāqošā*), a liturgical instrument used to announce prayer:

The noqusho is sounded at the beginning of a prayer or a service to gather together the perfect for prayer and the warriors for combat against the adversary. At its (sound), the Christians gather together to the church, the haven of salvation. The noqusho is sounded, so that we hear its sound we may understand that, by means of a tree we have transgressed the commandment and we have been expelled from the Paradise, and that by means of the tree of the cross, we had redemption from sin and the transgression of the Law. Therefore, when we hear its sound, we sign ourselves with cross and say glorifying God: Allow us to glorify You, as well as Lord open my lips (Ps. 51:17). Again as the trumpet gathers together the army of the king to exalt and praise him, the noqusho gathers us together for the glorification of Christ, our King. Again, as the

¹⁰⁰ Harrak 2009, cat. no. AA.07.1.

¹⁰¹ Leroy 1964, 374-375, Pl. 131.1.

¹⁰² Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Ms. 28 (Sach. 220), fol.8v; Leroy 1964, 342, Pl. 115.3.

¹⁰³ Schneider 1973, 139; Baer 1989, 25-26, Pl. 78.

*trumpet or the herald gathers together the army of the king to give them (some) gifts, the noqusho also gathers us together before Christ, our King and He gives us the gifts of remission of sins, and answers to our supplications. As the trumpet or the herald gathers together the armies of the king for a combat and a fight against the enemies, the noqusho (is sounded) to gather us together for the combat and the fight against Satan, the enemy of our human race.*¹⁰⁴

Like the baptismal rite (see Section 6.4.1C), the performance of the Eucharistic liturgy in the Syrian Orthodox tradition was apparently seen in terms of a fight against Satan, during which the community was called together to combat the enemies of Christianity. In addition to the earthly warriors assembled in the nave, the congregation, the heavenly army of Christ came down to share in the fight and to protect and honour the mysteries. As argued above, this protective function was performed by the two mounted falconers, who may thus be assumed to have simultaneously symbolized the princes of the East mentioned in the accompanying inscription.

7.4 The Church of Mart Shmuni in Qaraqosh

Perched upon an artificial mound, approximately 10 m above ground level, the Church of Mart Shmuni is located in the south-western side of Qaraqosh.¹⁰⁵ At present, little can be said about the architectural history of the church. It has been assumed that the building dates back to the seventh or eighth century, but this has not been established on the basis of any archaeological or written evidence. The oldest known external source referring to the Church of Mart Shmuni dates from 1728, when a manuscript was copied there.¹⁰⁶ Apart from the eighth-century funerary inscription, all other inscriptions encountered at the church date from between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁰⁷ The interest in the Church of Mart Shmuni for the present study lies in its sculptured Royal Gate, the original construction of which dates from the thirteenth century, as will become clear from the following.

Situated in the centre of the wall separating the sanctuary from the nave, the Royal Gate at the Church of Mart Shmuni consists of a rectangular opening framed on its three sides by a frieze carved with both figural and floral decorative patterns (Pl. 66). While the horizontal section of the frieze is decorated with a running 'Seljuk rinceaux', the sides display a series of arched panels connected with each other by simple loops. The panels are filled with either single human figures or symmetrical arabesque designs. Such panels are also seen framing two small niches situated on either side of the Royal Gate. The persons depicted in the panels are each carrying what appears to be a *mandīl* in one hand, while the other hand is raised in front of their chest. Beardless and oriental-looking, they wear Turkish coats (*al-aqbiya al-turkiyya*), which are cinched at the waist by a band, and decorated with *tiraz* armbands. In addition, they wear boots, and, on their heads, *kalawta* caps from underneath which pigtails seem to dangle (Pl. 67).

The lintel of the Royal Gate is made up of three rectangular panels of different sizes containing, from left to right, successively: a carved Syriac inscription (*Estrangelo* and *Serto*)

¹⁰⁴ Dionysius bar Salibi, *Commentary on the Eucharist*, Ch. 4, § 3 (Varghese 1998, 14-15). Cf. 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, 25-26); Barhebraeus, *Lamp of the Sanctuary*, Ch. 2, § 3 (Kohlhaas 1959, 35).

¹⁰⁵ On the Church of Mart Shmuni, see Fiey 1965, II, 449-451; Qasha 1982, 51, with ground plan.

¹⁰⁶ Fiey 1965, II, 451.

¹⁰⁷ Harrak 2009, cat. no. AD.06.

stating that the ‘Church of Mart Shmuni and her sons’ was renovated in ‘the year 2002 of the Greeks’ (i.e., A.D. 1691/92);¹⁰⁸ a large plant motif; and a cross-legged seated figure with two lions (Pl. 68). This beardless figure is dressed in a long Turkish coat, the hem of which is diagonally crossed at the chest, and wears a three-pointed crown, from underneath which two pigtails dangle. In both hands, the figure holds a chain which terminates in a ring with a pin that is hanging around the neck of the lions.

Today, the surfaces of the series of standing figures in the trilobed niches, the lions, and the seated figure on the lintel are all painted. The face of the seated figure, for example, is painted white, with the eyes, eye-brows, nose, and mouth emphasized in black. The letters of the Syriac inscription recording the renovation activities in 1691/92 are also painted in black, obviously to enhance legibility. These layers of paint were applied during modern renovations.¹⁰⁹

7.5 Style and Iconography of the Royal Gate at the Church of Mart Shmuni

7.5.1 Style and Original Appearance of the Royal Gate

Stylistic analysis of the Royal Gate’s architectural reliefs is hampered by the fact that the human figures and the lions, as well as the Syriac inscription, are all painted. The faces are painted white, with the features accentuated in a dark colour. Nevertheless, it is clear that the single standing figures, shown frontally but with their feet turned towards the central opening, belong to the same general stylistic tradition as those seen on the throne niche from Sinjar and the Gate of the Two Baptisms at Deir Mar Behnam (Pl. 38). In addition, their oriental-looking facial features, characterized by broad faces with almond-shaped or slit eyes, small noses and mouths, are greatly reminiscent of the princely figures depicted on *habbs* executed in Reitlinger’s Style II and III, in particular (see Section 6.3.2).

Further, the two lions controlled by the royal figure are mirrored in those of the pair of lions decorating the small gate leading into the sanctuary at Deir Mar Behnam (Pl. 59). The similarities are especially evident in the treatment of the lions’ faces and paws, as well as they way in which the manes are indicated. The stylistic analogies with the two lions guarding the small gate at Deir Mar Behnam are found in the typical rendering of the eyes, and the two lines extending from the top centre of the head and continuing to form the eye-brows, as well as the lines extending from underneath the eyes that form the upper part of the two jowls. The row of parallel lines from the back of the neck extending towards the lions’ backs, and the claws consisting of three consecutively receding toes are also comparable. Other similarities are found in the shape of the ears and the nose, as well as the way in which the jaws curve.

On the basis of these close stylistic similarities, it may be postulated that the craftsmen responsible for the execution of the royal figure controlling the two lions were the same ones who executed the two lions surmounting the small gate at Deir Mar Behnam. Further stylistic and technological research *in situ* on the architectural reliefs of the two monuments is needed to corroborate this assumption. Nonetheless, the style of the figural reliefs clearly indicates

¹⁰⁸ Harrak 2009, inscr. no. AD.06.1. A commemorative Syriac inscription (*Estrangelo* and *Serto*) carved in relief on a stone plaque, which is placed in the small niche to the left of the Royal Gate, probably also dates from 1691/92 (Harrak 2009, inscr. no. AD.06.4).

¹⁰⁹ This practice can also be observed in the case of the eighteenth-century Syriac and Garshuni inscriptions at the Chaldean (formerly East Syrian) Church of al-Tahra in Mosul (Harrak 2009, cat. no. AA.02; Diwersi/Wand 2001, Pl. 351), and the thirteenth-century Arabic inscriptions at the Syrian Orthodox Church of Mar Ahudemme (Harrak 2009, cat. no. AA.07.1; Habbi 1980, without page indication).

that the Royal Gate at the Church of Mart Shmuni was made in the thirteenth century, a hypothesis which, as we will see shortly, finds further substantiation in the iconography.

Although the Royal Gate retains much of its medieval characteristics, the juxtaposition of thirteenth-century figural reliefs with a seventeenth-century Syriac inscription suggests that it has been tampered with, perhaps during the renovations of 1691/92 recorded in the inscription in question. Several other features contribute to the composite character of the Royal Gate, in particular the current arrangement of the trilobed or keyhole-shaped panels framing the entrance. As we have seen in the previous chapter, such panels are a characteristic feature of monumental sculptural decoration in the Mosul area (see Section 6.3.2), where they are encountered in both Christian and Islamic contexts, including the Gate of the Two Baptisms at Deir Mar Behnam (Pl. 38) and the throne niche from Sinjar, respectively.

Unlike these two monuments, the interior decoration of the trilobed panels at the Church of Mart Shmuni does not present a neat series in which single human figures continuously alternate with symmetrical arabesque designs. A sequence of this kind is retained on the left-hand side, where four figures are placed at regular intervals, but, strikingly, they do not correspond with those on the jamb on the right, which in its present state contains three instead of four figures. Moreover, the figures in the two lowest compartments are even displayed vertically adjacent to one another, thus without an ornamental compartment placed between them, which would have been customary.

What is more, closer inspection shows that some parts of the construction are not correctly aligned. For example, the top of the left jamb starts with a trilobed niche filled with an arabesque design, which, in keeping with local compositional standards, is followed by a niche displaying a single human figure. In turn, the latter is appropriately followed by an 'arabesque niche', but there the pattern suddenly stops and proceeds with a 'figural niche', which remarkably displays only the lower part of a standing human figure. The same phenomenon is encountered on the opposite side, where the top-most figure is succeeded by an arabesque-filled niche, which is suddenly interrupted by the lower part of a figure-filled niche. Besides the seven persons directly flanking the entrance to the sanctuary, five additional figures appear in the trilobed panels framing the two small niches on either side of the Royal Gate, three on the left and two on the right. These were apparently originally part of the same sequence. More such discrepancies can be pointed out: it seems clear that the Royal Gate was shattered at some point, either due to natural causes or intentionally inflicted damage, after which the surviving pieces of sculptural work were reassembled, without fully taking their original order into account.

When it comes to the original appearance of the Royal Gate at the Church of Mart Shmuni, it is most likely that it resembled the throne niche from Sinjar and the Gate of two Baptisms at Deir Mar Behnam, at least in terms of general layout and composition. Working on this hypothesis, it may be presumed that the Royal Gate was framed on its three sides by a running series of arched panels linked together by simple loops, which were alternately decorated with single human figures and symmetrical arabesque designs (Fig. 13). The 'figural niches' would have numbered at least twelve such specimens, including the seven presently flanking the entrance, and the five additional ones framing the small niches on either side of the gate, three on the left and two on the right.

The royal figure between two lions, currently situated just right of centre, was probably placed at the axis of the lintel, especially given that symmetry was the governing principle in Northern Mesopotamian architectural decoration during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.¹¹⁰ If it occupied the centre of the lintel, the image would not only have underlined the symmetry of the overall design, but would also immediately have drawn the viewer's

¹¹⁰ Whelan 2006, 31.

attention, making this the visual as well as thematic focal point of the decoration programme. Finally, the horizontal section of the frieze decorated with 'Seljuk rinceaux' perhaps functioned as a cornice, like the palmette friezes that performed this function at Deir Mar Behnam (Pls 33-34, 37-38) and the Mausoleum of Imam 'Awn al-Din.¹¹¹

7.5.2 Cult and Iconography of Mart Shmuni and Her Sons

Now that the original appearance of the Royal Gate has been reconstructed with reasonable certainty, let us turn to its iconographic programme. Before surveying the individual motifs, however, first a few introductory remarks will be made about the cult and iconographic tradition of the church's patron saints, who are identified by the seventeenth-century Syriac inscription on the lintel as 'Mart Shmuni and her sons'.

Mart Shmuni was the mother of seven sons, who, according to the Old Testament Book of Maccabees, were martyred because of their refusal to submit to pagan religious practices. Together with their mother and their teacher, the Priest Eleazar, the brothers were executed by the Seleucid King Antiochus IV Epiphanes in Antioch around 160 B.C.¹¹² The name Shmuni is restricted to the Syriac tradition; in Latin and Greek sources she is referred to as Salomona or Salomone, respectively.¹¹³ Though Shmuni and the Maccabean brothers were in fact Jewish, their cult became very popular throughout Christianity. Since they suffered for their faith in the face of oppression, they were considered a fitting prototype for Christian martyrs and compared with the likes of St Stephen the proto-martyr.

After a church had been erected in Antioch to contain their earthly remains, some of their relics were transferred to Constantinople and Rome, where their cult is attested in visual terms by a panel painted in the Church of Sta. Maria Antiqua on the Forum Romanum, presumably around the middle of the seventh century by artists originating from the Greek East.¹¹⁴ Rather than representing the act of martyrdom itself, the painting shows a frontally standing Salomone (identified by a Greek inscription), with a halo and wearing a *maphorion*, with her sons and their tutor Eleazar grouped around her. Whereas in medieval Western and Byzantine manuscripts the focus seems to have been mainly on narrative illustrations of the story of the Maccabees' martyrdom, in Eastern Christian art the hieratic icon-like type recurs in a late twelfth-century Syrian Orthodox manuscript known as the Buchanan Bible.¹¹⁵ In this Bible, the frontispiece to the Fourth Book of Maccabees similarly depicts a frontally standing Shmuni surrounded by Eleazar and her seven sons, some of whom are carrying martyrs' crosses.

Comparable icon-like representations are also encountered in three more or less contemporary wall paintings in churches in the Qadisha Valley in Lebanon, all apparently of the Maronite denomination.¹¹⁶ In these cases, the image is limited to Shmuni and one single

¹¹¹ Sarre/Herzfeld 1911-1920, III, Pls V left, VIII right; Uluçam 1989, Figs 303-304; C. Hillenbrand 1999, Pl. 4.25; Wirth 1991, Fig. 13, Pl. 71b.

¹¹² 2 Maccabees 7:1-41; 4 Maccabees. On the legend and cult of Shmuni and her sons in the Syriac tradition, see Witakowski 1994. Cf. Rutgers 1998; Rouwhorst 2004.

¹¹³ Witakowski 1994, 155-157.

¹¹⁴ Kitzinger 1995, 113-114, Pl. VII.

¹¹⁵ Cambridge, University Library, 001/002, fol. 226r: Leroy 1952, 116-117; *idem* 1964, 247-248; Hunt 2000b, 68-69, Fig. 12. Witakowski (1994, 165, figure on p. 160) refers to an illustration of the martyrdom of the Maccabean brothers and their mother before Antiochus in a Syrian Orthodox Gospel from Beth Zabday (Idil in South-eastern Turkey), dating from 1851, which is erroneously ascribed to the twelfth century. The Beth Zabday manuscript has not yet been published, but for some colour photographs, see Oberkampff 2007, 20, 39-40, 55, 64, 67.

¹¹⁶ The Cave Chapel of Saydet ad-Darr in Hadchit (Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 78-79, Pls XXXV, 11.6-7, 11.10; Immerzeel 2009, 117-118); Deir Salib near Hadchit (Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 78-79, Pls XLIV, 12.16., 12.17; Immerzeel 2009, 118-119, Pl. 102); Chapel of Mart Shmuni near Hadchit (Cruikshank Dodd 1983; *idem* 2004,

child, who functions as a sort of *pars pro toto* for his brothers. While these three murals bear out the popularity of the saints in the Qadisha Valley, Mart Shmuni and her sons seem to have enjoyed considerable popularity in Northern Iraq in general, and the Mosul area in particular. According to a list compiled by Fiey, the region around Mosul numbers no fewer than fifteen churches dedicated to Mart Shmuni and her sons, spread over fourteen villages – Qaraqosh even boasting two, including the one under discussion.¹¹⁷ The widespread popularity of this cult within the Syrian Orthodox Church, is attested not only by the relatively great number of churches dedicated to Shmuni and her sons, but also by written sources such as liturgical calendars, menologia, and diptychs. In Syrian Orthodox liturgical calendars, the references to Shmuni, her sons, and Eleazar are commonly found on August 1, the only exception being the so-called *Calendar of Jacob of Edessa*, written in Qaraqosh in 1688, which features their commemoration on October 15.¹¹⁸

Returning to the figural reliefs decorating the Royal Gate at the Church of Mart Shmuni in Qaraqosh, it may now be argued that those responsible for its reconstruction grasped the opportunity to adapt the original appearance of the gate to the legend of the church's patron saints. Although the Royal Gate was originally framed by a relatively large number of standing figures, the craftsmen repositioned the figural reliefs in such a way that only *seven* of them now directly frame the entrance. Obviously, this was done in order to enhance the association with the *seven* Maccabean brothers and their mother. The craftsmen succeeded in their attempts, because scholars such as Bell and Fiey, for instance, have commonly assumed that the person between two lions represented a female, thereby suggesting that the iconographic programme of the Royal Gate was meant to represent Mart Shmuni surrounded by her sons.¹¹⁹ However, this symbolic link would have been far less obvious, arguably even non-existent, in the original decoration programme as suggested above. Moreover, the royal figure dominating the lions represents a male ruler, as was recognized also by Leroy.¹²⁰

According to Leroy, the image of the cross-legged seated prince dominating two lions on the lintel of the Royal Gate comprises a typical Christian image: he argues that it represents Daniel in the Lion's Den.¹²¹ This identification is problematic for several reasons. The fact that the image of Daniel's struggle with the lion was uncommon in the iconographic repertoire of the region and period already makes this interpretation implausible, all the more so considering that there are no indications that the church was ever dedicated to the Prophet Daniel. But Leroy's interpretation is debatable, especially, because it does not take into account the series of human figures in the trilobed niches, who are an essential part of the Royal Gate's iconographic programme.

Although it remains to be seen what kind of symbolic meanings the Syrian Orthodox might have attached to the imagery, the important initial observation to be made here is that the subjects depicted on the Royal Gate are not grounded in the Christian iconographic tradition. On the contrary, as will be illustrated in the following, their origins lie in contemporary Islamic art, more specifically the image of a ruler surrounded by his ceremonial *mamluks*, military attendants who, in the Seljuk successor states, were appointed to serve in the immediate entourage of the prince.¹²²

7.5.3 The Cross-Legged Seated Prince Dominating Lions

263-264; Immerzeel 2009, 119-120). The wall paintings in the Chapel of Mart Shmuni have been deliberately destroyed since Cruikshank Dodd's 1983 publication.

¹¹⁷ Fiey 1965, II, 870; Witakowski 1994, 165.

¹¹⁸ Brock 1970b, 417; Witakowski 1994, 165.

¹¹⁹ Bell 1911, 264, Fig. 175; Fiey 1965, II, 449-450.

¹²⁰ Leroy 1964, 70.

¹²¹ Leroy 1964, 70 n. 7.

¹²² On this iconographic topic, see Whelan 1988.

When it comes to the possible iconographic models for the royal figure dominating two lions, a close parallel is found in the famous image of the cross-legged seated ruler that once decorated the apex of the Talisman Gate (1221/22) in Baghdad.¹²³ Like the person on the Royal Gate, this princely figure is beardless, dressed in a coat of which the hem is diagonally crossed at the chest, and wears a crown from underneath which two pigtails dangle. The only difference is found in the fact that, instead of holding two lions on a chain, the royal figure on the Talisman Gate dominates two dragons by firmly grabbing them by their tongues. This image was probably meant to symbolize the Abbasid Caliph al-Nasir (1180-1225) triumphing over his enemies (p. x).

A similar political message may be postulated for another closely related iconographic type, namely the two standing men each holding a lion on a leash, which is symmetrically depicted on either side of the arch of the Harran Gate in the city of al-Ruha (Urfa), built by the Ayyubid prince al-Malik al-Muzzafar Shihab al-Din Ghazi (c. 1220-1240).¹²⁴ When it comes to subduing lions, the most striking analogy, however, is found in a severely damaged relief of a cross-legged seated figure holding two lions on a leash, which originally surmounted the gate of Khan al-Darur (c. 1228/29) near Harran.¹²⁵ As an earlier example, we may refer, finally, to the image of a cross-legged seated man grabbing two lions by the neck, which is included among the rich collection of courtly themes painted on the wooden ceiling of the Cappella Palatina (c. 1130-1154) in Palermo, Sicily.¹²⁶

7.5.4 Military Attendants

In terms of vestments, attributes, and facial features, the beardless figures represented in the trilobed niches framing the entrance to the sanctuary are greatly reminiscent of the long-haired youths attending a Turkish ruler holding a wine goblet and a napkin in the informal court scene depicted in the frontispiece to the *Kitab al-Diryaq* in Vienna, which is commonly presumed to have been made in Mosul during the first quarter of the thirteenth century.¹²⁷ Like the figures on the Royal Gate, the attendants are oriental-looking and dressed in Turkish coats, cinched at the waist by a band and decorated with *tiraz* armbands, military boots, and *kalawta* caps. In line with their function, the military attendants are shown carrying a wider variety of attributes indicative of their office, including, besides such napkins, swords, polo sticks, a spear, a hunting falcon, a wine vessel, a waterfowl, and a live goose.

The iconographic theme of a ruler surrounded or flanked symmetrically by a number of military attendants enjoyed considerable popularity in Northern Mesopotamia during the first half of the thirteenth century, especially, when it appeared in virtually all sorts of artistic media, including manuscript illustration, metalwork, and pottery. In addition to the Vienna *Kitab al-Diryaq*, representations of military attendants holding attributes can be found in, amongst other works of art: the frontispieces to the volumes 4 and 17 of the dispersed *Kitab al-Aghani* (c. 1217-1219), which are commonly assumed to have been made for Badr al-Din

¹²³ 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, Pl. 66.1-2; Catalogue Berlin 2006, Pl. 12.

¹²⁴ Gierlichs 1996, cat. no. 64, Pl. 55; Whelan 2006, 444-447, Figs 429-430.

¹²⁵ Urfa, Archaeological Museum, inv. no. 54; Gierlichs 1996, cat no. 91, Pl. 63.1.

¹²⁶ Grube 2005, Pl. XVI, Fig. 71.1.

¹²⁷ Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Ms. A.F. 10, fol. 1r; Ettinghausen 1962, 92, Pl. on 91; Whelan 1988, 221, Fig. 1; Pancaroğlu 2001, Fig. 10; 166-167; Kerner 2004, 223-228, Pl. 77.

Lu'lu',¹²⁸ a ewer made by Ahmad al-Dhaki al-Mawsili in 1223, a ewer made by his apprentice 'Umar ibn Hajji Jaldak in 1226,¹²⁹ and a number of large unglazed jars (*habbs*).¹³⁰

The closest parallel by far, however, is found in monumental sculptural decoration: the throne niche from Sinjar.¹³¹ In this niche, which was presumably part of an Ayyubid palace, the trilobed panels flanking the niche depict eight youths in Turkish military dress, each carrying an appropriate item of rank, including (clockwise from the bottom left) an arrow or a short spear, a polo stick, an unidentifiable object, a bow and arrow, a bow, a drinking vessel and *mandīl*, a baton, and a sword. Whereas the central figure in this composition was clearly intended to be the living prince seated upon his throne in the niche,¹³² the point of focus in case of the Royal Gate at the Church of Mart Shmuni was reserved for the royal figure seated between two lions.

In sum, the iconographic programme of the Royal Gate at the Church of Mart Shmuni belongs to the wider framework of scenes depicting the seated ruler surrounded or symmetrically flanked by his personal and military attendants, which was a popular subject in Northern Mesopotamia during the first half of the thirteenth century, especially. The cross-legged seated ruler depicted on the lintel is not grounded in Christian art; rather this figure belongs to wide variety of scenes depicting man dominating over wild animals or fantastic beasts ('dominance imagery'), which enjoyed a considerable popularity among the Islamic rulers of the region at the time.

7.5.5 The Royal Gate: Re-use, Specific Commission, or Stock Made?

In view of the lack of genuine Christian symbols and the artistic overlap with contemporary Islamic art in terms of both style and iconography, it is tempting to conclude that the Royal Gate at the Church of Mart Shmuni, like the closely-related throne niche from Sinjar, originally functioned in an Islamic palatial context. But our discussion of the iconographic programme of the Royal Gate at the Church of Mar Ahudemme has already made clear that a strong correspondence with Islamic art should not necessarily be taken to imply that a work of art originally functioned in an Islamic context, as, for instance, has often been assumed in case of the wooden sanctuary screen at Sitt Barbara in Old Cairo (p. x). Notwithstanding the fact that the image of a ruler surrounded by mamluk attendants was initially developed as a symbol of sovereignty to underscore the power of Islamic rulers in the Great Seljuk successor states, the subject was by no means limited to the realm of the court. As we have seen above, the image of the cross-legged seated prince holding a drinking vessel and the mounted falconer were popularized in Northern Mesopotamia in the period between approximately 1150 and 1250, when such courtly themes were not only adopted by the Muslim bourgeoisie, but also attracted the attention of Christian clients. This appears also to hold true for the iconographic theme under discussion.

¹²⁸ Vol. IV: Cairo, National Library, Ms. 579 (Rice 1953c, 129, Fig. 17). Vol. XVII: Istanbul, National Library, Feyzullah Efendi, no. 1566 (Rice 1953c, 134, Fig. 18; Ettinghausen 1962, 63-64, plate on 65; Stillman 2000, Pl. 23; Roxburgh 2005, Pl. 54).

¹²⁹ Cleveland, Museum of Art, inv. no. 1956.11 (Rice 1957, 288, Fig. 3; Whelan 1988, 223, Fig. 13); New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 91.1.586 (Rice 1957, 317-319; Whelan 1988, 223, Figs 14-16).

¹³⁰ Baghdad, Iraqi Museum, inv. nos A.M. 5706 and A.M. 7150 (Reitlinger 1951, 18-21, Figs 17-20); London, Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. no. 340 (Sourdel/Sourdel 1968, 385, Fig. 154; Otto-Dorn 1982, 157-158, Fig. 11); Berlin, Museum für Islamische Kunst SPK, inv. no. I. 5619 (Helmecke 2005, 447, Pl. 48).

¹³¹ 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.

¹³² Whelan 1988, 222; *idem* 2006, 411.

In her detailed study on the iconographic theme of the ruler surrounded or flanked symmetrically by a number of mamluk attendants, Whelan has argued that by the second quarter of the thirteenth century, at around the time when the military role of such mamluk attendants was actually suspended, the image lost its direct princely connotations and came to have broader appeal as part of a varied array of decoration programmes considered appropriate for luxury objects.¹³³ In addition to the ewers and *habbs* referred to above, these objects also include a silver-inlaid candlestick made by Da'ud ibn Salama al-Mawsili in 1248. The candlestick features, on its neck, a series of mamluk attendants carrying objects, and on its body, four large roundels containing scenes grounded in Christian art: the Washing of the Child, the Baptism of Christ, the Miracle at Cana, and the Presentation in the Temple.¹³⁴ These kinds of luxury objects were in fashion among both Muslim and Christian elites, who apparently shared the same fashionable tastes, which were dictated by their social position rather than their respective religious backgrounds (see Section 2.7.1).

In other words, there is no reason to exclude the possibility that, rather than being an Islamic work of art re-used in a Christian context, the Royal Gate at the Church of Mart Shmuni was made at the specific request of either one or more Syrian Orthodox Christians, arguably in an attempt to emphasize their high social position by emulating iconographic subjects that were popular among the elite. On the other hand, one could equally envisage a situation in which the gate was bought from stock. Here we need to bear in mind that the gate was produced precisely during a period of unprecedented economic and cultural boom. It does not seem far-fetched to assume that workshops, besides carrying out orders, were also continuously building up stock in order to meet the high demands of the flourishing market. Arguably, they produced more or less finished products, decorated with themes that appealed to a broad public. Incidentally, such a production process is commonly postulated in the case of luxury objects such as the silver-inlaid metalwork vessels decorated with Christian scenes and motifs from the Princely Cycle side by side. By consciously omitting certain themes that would certainly have put off any possible Muslim buyers, such as the Crucifixion and the Ascension of Christ, the craftsmen safeguarded their works' intrinsic appeal for a rich variety of customers (see Section 2.7.1).

In terms of iconography, the Royal Gate at the Church of Mart Shmuni would not have been out of place in an Islamic context. The same holds true for the Royal Gate at the Church of Mar Ahudemme, aside from the now lost cross on the keystone. But such religious identity markers could have easily been omitted depending on the wishes of the customer, especially if they were limited to sections that would have been relatively easy to replace, such as a keystone. Although a detailed stylistic and technological study is needed in order to establish how the production of sculpture work was actually organized in the Mosul area during the period under consideration,¹³⁵ some preliminary light can be shed on the matter by comparing two thirteenth-century gates at Deir Mar Behnam.

A comparison between the unfinished gate giving access to the Chapel of the Virgin¹³⁶ and the closely-related, but completed gate leading to the burial room (Pl. 41) suggests that in manufacturing such gates, the craftsmen first cut into shape the blocks to make up the entire structure, leaving enough surplus material to allow for sculptural relief decoration, which was executed in a subsequent production phase. Such surfaces to be decorated are clearly visible

¹³³ Whelan 1988, 225.

¹³⁴ Paris, Musée des Arts décoratifs, inv. no. 4414: Whelan 1988, 224, Figs 17-19; Baer 1989, 17, Pls 53-54; Catalogue Paris 2001, no. 99.

¹³⁵ Such a future study, which requires *in situ* examinations and should take both Christian and Islamic monuments into account, could be modelled on Immerzeel's research on the production of Early Christian sarcophagi (Immerzeel 2003).

¹³⁶ Preusser 1911, Pl. 7.

in the case of the unfinished gate. Whereas here the spandrels and the keystone are left plain, those on the finished specimen are provided with intricate arabesque designs and a cross, respectively. Even at a late stage of the production process, it would have been possible to customize the product.

It was already argued above that images such as the cross-legged seated man holding a goblet and the mounted falconers appeal to Christian viewers as well as Muslims, depending on the context in which they are featured. Cogently, the specific meanings of the cross-legged seated man dominating lions and the military attendants at the Church of Mart Shmuni derive from their contextual location and not their representation per se, which is in accordance with the iconographic standards of the thirteenth century. Assuming that the Royal Gate was intended to function as such from the start, whether it was the result of a specific commission or bought from stock, the following section aims to shed light on the meaning of its decoration programme, taking the function and symbolic meaning of the Royal Gate as a point of departure.

7.5.6 The Turkish Ruler and his Military Attendants: Symbols of Christ and his Heavenly Army?

As we have seen in Section 7.1.2, the Royal Gate was a liturgically significant and symbolically charged architectural feature in the Syrian Orthodox tradition. As an opening in the opaque visual screen between the nave and the sanctuary, it symbolized the gate between the earthly and heavenly worlds, and had a protective function. In assessing the meaning of the decoration programme of the Royal Gate at the Church of Mart Shmuni, it is important to bear in mind that the protective function of the east wall and the Royal Gate was commonly enhanced through the addition of certain iconographic themes, such as the equestrian military saints at Deir Mar Behnam (Pls 37, 60). Considering the traditional practice of depicting protective themes at the entrance to the sanctuary, including mounted falconers as fashionable variants of genuine mounted warrior saints (Figs 9-10), it is conceivable that Christians visiting the church associated the anonymous military attendants with the soldiers of Christ's heavenly army, especially since the figures are represented in places where standing military saints are customary. An early representative of this kind of arrangement is encountered at Deir al-Surian, where a pair of warrior saints, holding swords as appropriate items of rank, are painted on the half-columns flanking the entrance to the sanctuary.¹³⁷

The sanctuary guardians at Deir al-Surian were probably painted in the eighth century, but in Greater Syria comparable instances can also be found dating from the thirteenth century. In the Melkite Church of Sts Sergius and Bacchus in Kaftun, for instance, four military saints are painted on the soffits of the two western-most arches, thus functioning as guardians of the entrance to the church.¹³⁸ Whereas the two warrior saints at Deir al-Surian were carrying swords, the present figures hold spears and shields as appropriate items of rank. Four similar military saints are also painted at the Melkite Kannisset as-Saydet (Church of Our Lady) in Qusba, two on either side of the apse.¹³⁹ It is important to emphasize here that, in the Middle East, the variant of the standing as opposed to mounted military saint, though popular in Byzantine art in particular, was by no means limited to Melkite contexts. Besides the examples from Deir al-Surian,¹⁴⁰ a standing St George is encountered in the Syrian Orthodox

¹³⁷ Innemée 1998, § 3.4, Fig. 2; Innemée/Van Rompay 1998, 172, Fig. 4; Snelders/Jeudy 2006, 111-112, Pl. 8.

¹³⁸ Immerzeel 2009, 97-98, Fig. 13, Pl. 61.

¹³⁹ Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 202-206, Pls XIX, XX, 5.1-5.4; Immerzeel 2009, 93.

¹⁴⁰ In addition to the images of Sts Sergius and Bacchus painted on either side of the entrance to the sanctuary, standing warrior saints are also to be seen at Deir al-Surian on the tenth-century wooden chest that was probably intended to be placed in a small niche situated in the nave of the Church of al-Adra (see Section 3.5.1).

Gospel Book donated to Deir Mar Barsauma in 1055,¹⁴¹ as well as in a Syrian Orthodox book of sermons dating from the late twelfth or early thirteenth century.¹⁴²

As a matter of course, the standing military attendants flanking the entrance to the altar room in the Church of Mart Shmuni should be seen in the light of the artistic syncretism in Northern Mesopotamia during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a matter to which we shall return in more detail in Chapter 9. In this distinctively Christian context, the military figures arguably lost their direct associations with the mamluk attendants serving rulers in the Great Seljuk successor states, and took over the protective values attributed to standing warrior saints. Along similar lines, the princely figure surrounded by the military attendants may have expressed connotations with Christ. Based in the medieval iconographic repertoire of the Islamic ruler, such representations of men subduing wild animals or fantastic beasts served to express messages about the power and splendour of the sovereign. Just as the mamluk attendants are gathered together to praise the Ayyubid ruler on the throne niche from Sinjar, both heavenly and earthly followers of Christ are assembled at the Church of Mart Shmuni to praise their King, Christ.

It was already noted above that Syrian Orthodox authors, such as Jacob of Edessa, Moses bar Kepha, and Dionysius bar Salibi, commonly considered the performance of the Eucharistic liturgy in terms of a military battle with Satan. Paraphrasing their argument, one might say that just as the armies of earthly rulers assemble for battle against their enemies, the soldiers of Christ are gathered together at the entrance to the sanctuary for the fight against Satan which is said to take place during the performance of the Eucharistic liturgy. Along similar lines, the image of the cross-legged seated ruler subduing two lions may perhaps have been seen as a symbol of Christ, surrounded by his heavenly army. Whatever the case may be, the prince dominating over two lions, like the genuinely Christian equestrian saints on the Royal Gate at Deir Mar Behnam and the mounted falconers at the Church of Mar Ahudemme, may be assumed to have expressed the message of the triumph of Good ('the Syrian Orthodox') over Evil ('the others').

Whether there was any more specific topical significance behind this imagery in the Christian context remains a matter of speculation, but one could equally envisage an interpretation in which the attendants carrying ceremonial napkins were considered to partake in the performance of the liturgy in the sanctuary, like the officiating bishops carrying liturgical scrolls or deacons carrying liturgical fans, which are common subjects in sanctuary decoration in Byzantium,¹⁴³ but also found their way into some painted programmes in Greater Syria.¹⁴⁴ In this respect, it might be noted that, as in other denominations, veils played an important role in the Syrian Orthodox liturgy: amongst other symbolic functions, they were used by the officiating priest to cover and reveal the chalice and the paten during the Eucharistic celebration. This kind of veil is known as the *anaphora*.¹⁴⁵ Dionysius bar Salibi describes the symbolic meaning of the *anaphora* as follows: 'As the edict (with) a king, the anaphora is a lifting up towards the heavenly king. It is spread over the mysteries, because it

¹⁴¹ Ma^carrat Saydnaya, Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate, Ms. 12/8, fol. 351r: Leroy 1964, 226, Pl. 53.1; Zibawi 1995, Pl. 2.

¹⁴² Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Ms. 28 (Sach. 220), fol. 50r: Leroy 1964, Pl. 117.4.

¹⁴³ Gerstel 1999, 15-36.

¹⁴⁴ Officiating bishops carrying scrolls, for instance, are seen in the wall paintings at the Chapel of Mar Elias in Ma^carrat Saydnaya in Syria (Immerzeel 2005, 165-167, 173-174, Fig. 43, Pls 21, 22b, 23a, XVIb-XVIIa; *idem* 2009, 53-54, Fig. 5), and the church at the Jerusalem Gate at Ascalon in Palestine (Peers 2009), both probably dating from the late twelfth century c. 1153-1187.

¹⁴⁵ E.g., Moses bar Kepha, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, fols 155v-156v (Connolly/Codrington 1913, 44-45); Dionysius bar Salibi, *Commentary on the Eucharist*, Ch. 7, § 4 (Varghese 1998, 37).

symbolizes the hiddenness and the invisibility of the divinity that are hidden in the mysteries'.¹⁴⁶

Although the protective and triumphal interpretation seems the most likely, one cannot entirely rule out the possibility that the attendant figures carrying ceremonial napkins were consciously chosen because they would enhance the Eucharistic significance they assumed due to their position at the entrance to the sanctuary.

7.6 Conclusion

The architectural reliefs of the Royal Gates in the Church of Mar Ahudemme in Mosul and the Church of Mart Shmuni in Qaraqosh are firmly grounded in the local artistic tradition, both in terms of style and iconography. Nothing in their decoration can properly be deemed a typical Syrian Orthodox characteristic. What is more, the most striking feature in the iconographic programmes of these two gates is the general lack of distinctively Christian themes and attributes. Whereas the religious space at the Church of Mar Ahudemme is marked as Christian only by the inclusion of a cross on the keystone, even such minimal distinguishing features seem to have been lacking on the Royal Gate at the Church of Mart Shmuni. The use on both monuments of popular patterns shared with Islamic art highlights yet again the artistic symbioses between Christians and Muslims in the area at the time.

Christian elite patronage was in all probability the motivating force behind the decoration programme of the Royal Gate at the Church of Mar Ahudemme, a conclusion which may equally hold true for the gate in the Church of Mart Shmuni. Bent on acquiring prestige, rich and influential members of the Syrian Orthodox community, including merchants, scribes, physicians, and other lay professionals, commonly generated and sponsored building and refurbishment projects within the West Syrian Church, either individually or as part of cooperative ventures. It seems that the anonymous patrons of the two Royal Gates in question deliberately selected certain themes from the general iconographic pool of the period and place, and adapted them to their own needs. In using secular iconographic themes that enjoyed popularity among the local Muslim ruling and upper classes, Syrian Orthodox members of the intellectual elite apparently sought to underline their position as full members of Mosul's establishment and to differentiate themselves from the masses.

The fact that iconographic subjects familiar from Islamic art were used shows that no discrepancy was perceived between the non-Christian background of the models and their use within distinctively Christian contexts. In fact, the stereotyped representations of the cross-legged prince holding a drinking vessel, the cross-legged prince controlling two lions, the mounted falconers, and the military attendants do not contain any details of a particularly religious Islamic nature. Indeed, they are rather ambiguous images that can either be 'Islamicized' or 'Christianized' depending on the context in which they are represented and the religious background of the viewer in question. Wealthy Christians and Muslims shared local tastes in dress and items of display, ranging from fashionable turbans and *tiraz* bands to luxury objects such as inlaid metalwork vessels decorated with Christian and secular Islamic themes side by side. Similarly, the iconographic programmes of the Royal Gates at the churches of Mar Ahudemme and Mart Shmuni bear witness to the shared aesthetic and artistic taste among the elite, irrespective of their religious affiliation.

Rather than visually highlighting the specifically Syrian Orthodox tradition or demarcating the boundaries between the Syrian Orthodox and other communities, whether Muslim or Christian, those responsible for the decoration of the two Royal Gates in question were

¹⁴⁶ Dionysius bar Salibi, *Commentary on the Eucharist*, Ch. 9, § 4-5 (Varghese 1998, 54-55).

apparently bent on showing their affiliation with the powerful in the area. Although the gate in the Church of Mar Ahudemme was furnished with a cross as a Christian identity marker, the expression of an exclusively Syrian Orthodox communal identity does not seem to have played a role in the coming into being of these two decoration programmes. In this respect, the monumental sculptural decoration of these two parish churches differs markedly from that of contemporary Deir Mar Behnam, a matter to which we shall return in more detail in Chapter 9. What significance should be attached to the fact that the inscriptions at the Church of Mar Ahudemme are fashioned in Arabic, as opposed to Syriac, is a matter which will be discussed in the following chapter, in which the linguistic situation at Deir Mar Behnam is compared with those of other Syrian Orthodox sites.