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

Snelders, B.

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8. Inscriptions: Language and Dating Systems

8.1 Introduction

One of the most conspicuous features of the monumental sculptural decoration at Deir Mar Behnam is the large number of inscriptions in general, and Syriac inscriptions (*Estrangelo*) in particular.¹ Since most of these inscriptions are integral to the decoration programme, they merit close attention. Just as with the iconography and style, much information can be obtained about how Syrian Orthodox Christians viewed themselves and about how they interacted with other communities, by examining the languages used in the inscriptions featured on their works of art. As mentioned earlier in this study, Syrian Orthodox authors such as Michael the Syrian, Dionysius bar Salibi, and Jacob bar Shakko commonly considered the Syriac language a key factor in marking their identity (see Section 1.3.4).

The aim of the present chapter is to assess whether Syriac was also used as a marker of Syrian Orthodox identity in the case of contemporary art and architecture, focusing mainly on the inscriptions accompanying saints and scenes in monumental decoration. Although the limited amount of data does not allow for a statistical analysis, some light can nevertheless be thrown on the subject by comparing the linguistic situations of several Syrian Orthodox strongholds both with each other and with other Christian confessions in the region. Our discussion starts with a survey of the linguistic practices reflected in the inscriptions in the wall paintings at two Syrian Orthodox centres in Egypt and Syria: Deir al-Surian and Deir Mar Musa. After a brief overview of the language choices made in miniatures featured in illustrated Syrian Orthodox manuscripts, the larger question of whether language played a role in establishing and enhancing Syrian Orthodox identity at Deir Mar Behnam and the Church of Mar Ahudemmeh in Mosul will be addressed. In the final section of this chapter, attention will be paid to the dating systems used in the inscriptions, particularly with an eye to establishing whether they were employed to emphasize communal distinctiveness.

Before turning to these matters, however, it should be pointed out that the question of the possible role of languages in inscriptions in marking communal identity would properly require a broad methodological approach, which would examine not only inscriptions accompanying saints and scenes in churches with monumental decoration, but also independent inscriptions, inscriptions in undecorated churches, liturgical practice, manuscripts (both decorated and undecorated), and vernacular and written communication. A comprehensive approach of this kind clearly falls beyond the scope of the present study, and much work remains to be done by epigraphists and linguists. The following examination should therefore be considered preliminary.

8.2 Language

8.2.1 Deir al-Surian and Deir Mar Musa

The marked emphasis on Syriac in the thirteenth-century inscriptions at Deir al-Surian was already discussed in Chapter 3, in connection with the Syriac inscriptions found on the liturgical fan made for that monastery in 1202/03 (see Section 3.5.2). Suffice it to mention here that the Syriac language was used to highlight the important position of the Syrian Orthodox community in this particular context, namely in a monastery which they shared with

¹ On the inscriptions at Deir Mar Behnam, see Harrak 2009, cat. nos AE.01-AE.02.

a Coptic community of monks. In short, language appears to have played an important role as a marker of Syrian Orthodox identity at Deir al-Surian, where it was juxtaposed with Coptic and Greek inscriptions. As we have seen, the Syrian Orthodox and the Coptic Orthodox communities were symbolically linked by the visual pairing of the patriarchs of Antioch and Alexandria. At Deir Mar Behnam, however, there is no such inter-communal context; it therefore remains to be investigated whether the strong emphasis on the Syriac language there should be explained in similar terms of distinctions between different groups of Christians. As the first step in this investigation, let us turn to the linguistic situation at Deir Mar Musa, which is situated in the Qalamun region in Syria, some 80 km northeast of Damascus.

Despite the fact that Deir Mar Musa never had a mixed community and probably always belonged to the Syrian Orthodox Church, at least until it was finally taken over by the Syrian Catholics in the early nineteenth century,² the monastery witnessed a significant change in language focus in the period between the eleventh and thirteenth century. Whereas the names of saints and descriptions of scenes in the wall paintings of Layer 1 from around 1060 were commonly written in Greek, the only exception being that of the Archangel Michael in the image of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, on Layer 3 from 1208/09 Syriac (*Estrangelo*) had become the main language (see Table 1).³ Although Arabic was applied on all layers as well, including Layer 2 from 1095, it was limited to inscriptions with either a commemorative or dedicative content, including the names of artists, donors, dates, and so on.⁴

Considering that language is commonly seen as a central element in the construction and expression of a communal identity, the prevalence of Greek in an eleventh-century Syrian Orthodox context is highly remarkable. Greek had been an important language in the West Syrian Church in the earliest stages of its development, but already by the seventh century, once the Arab conquest of the Middle East had cut off the West Syrians' direct contacts with most of the Greek-speaking world and relieved the community from the pressure of the Chalcedonian authorities, Syriac quickly became the sole liturgical language. In this period, many Syrian Orthodox Christians seem to have associated Greek with the 'enemy', both in doctrinal and political terms.⁵

Moreover, concurrently with the spread of Arabic as a vernacular language among the faithful of the community, the use of Greek rapidly declined and eventually became the privilege of a small learned elite.⁶ Until the middle of the tenth century, the Syrian Orthodox patriarchs, for example, continued to write their synodical letters – which were addressed to their Coptic counterparts – in Greek. The diminishing position of Greek even among the ecclesiastical elite is clear, however, from the fact that from that time onwards these official letters were directly composed in Arabic, the new up-and-coming *lingua franca*.⁷ To be sure, it would take until at least the second half of the thirteenth century before Arabic was accepted as a liturgical and ecclesiastical language in the Syrian Orthodox Church (see below).

Given that Greek had become extremely uncommon among the Syrian Orthodox even by the mid-tenth century, one might perhaps be tempted to link the prevalence of the language in the first layer of paintings at Deir Mar Musa to the reappearance of the Byzantines in Syria and Mesopotamia in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Indeed, it has been assumed that the Byzantine revival in the Middle East aroused a new interest in Greek, not only among the

² Cruikshank Dodd 2001, 22; Immerzeel 2009, 57.

³ Immerzeel 2009, 67. On the Syriac and Arabic inscriptions at Deir Mar Musa, see ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2007.

⁴ Cruikshank Dodd 2001, 12-19; ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2007, 154-182.

⁵ Ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2009, 48.

⁶ Van Rompay 2000c, § 36.

⁷ Teule 2010.

Melkites, but also among the Syrian Orthodox.⁸ Greek was commonly reinstated as the administrative, legal, and commercial language in territories conquered by the Byzantines. Consequently, a good command of Greek would indeed have been indispensable for those Melkite and Syrian Orthodox Christians who became officials in the Byzantine administration of the new frontier areas.⁹ This does not hold true, however, for the Syrian Orthodox living in the Damascus area. Despite Byzantine attempts to gain control over Damascus in 975, the city and its vicinity remained firmly in the hands of the Muslims. What is more, current research shows that the Syrian Orthodox interest in Greek should certainly not be overestimated. Besides officials working on behalf of the Byzantine administration, only a few Syrian Orthodox scholars, and perhaps a few higher ecclesiastics that were involved in maintaining official contacts with the Byzantine authorities, may be assumed to have been familiar with the Greek language. On the whole, the knowledge of Greek seems to have been very limited.¹⁰

Although probable in the case of their co-religionists who were yet again living under Byzantine rule, such as those settled in the Melitene area (see Section 8.2.2), it is less likely that the Syrian Orthodox monks of Deir Mar Musa felt either the need or the wish to acculturate linguistically to the neighbouring Byzantine conquerors. On the other hand, the fact that the Damascus area remained under Muslim rule should not necessarily be taken to imply that Christians living in the Qalamun were not directly affected or influenced by the return of the Byzantines in the Middle East. At Melkite Deir Mar Ya^cqub near Qara, for instance, which is situated a mere 10 km to the northwest of Deir Mar Musa, the Byzantinizing style and iconography of the early eleventh-century wall paintings in the nave of the lower church (Layer 1), which are unique in the region, may be directly linked with the re-establishment of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch during the Byzantine occupation of Northern Syria (969-1084). At the time, the Patriarchate of Antioch was able to lay claim to Melkite institutions in and around Qara, even though they were situated beyond the borders of the Empire.¹¹

Returning to the Greek inscriptions at Deir Mar Musa, one may speculate about them being the result of Melkite influence or pressure, especially considering that the Melkites were traditionally the dominant Christian community in the Qalamun, and must have felt strengthened by the Byzantine Orthodox resurgence in the Antiochene region. Another, perhaps even more tentative explanation would be to regard the preference for Greek inscriptions as resulting simply from the linguistic background of the painter responsible. Whatever the case may be, the reasons behind their prominence in these eleventh-century Syrian Orthodox wall paintings must remain speculative for the time being. Similarly, the substitution of Greek by Syriac at Deir Mar Musa has still not been sufficiently explained. Was it merely the accidental result of unconscious behaviour or fashion, or does it reflect a heightened awareness in the monastic community of its own linguistic tradition? To rephrase the question, can the linguistic data from Deir Mar Musa be effectively regarded as evidence of Syrian Orthodox identity formation?

Scholars have given different answers to this question. Cruikshank Dodd suggested that the language shift at the monastery was the direct result of a linguistic strategy implemented by

⁸ Baumstark 1922, 285, 290-291.

⁹ Benner 1989.

¹⁰ Teule 2010. The Greek inscriptions in the thirteenth-century wall paintings at Deir al-Surian are therefore equally remarkable in this context. According to Van Rompay (1999, § 45), ‘The conservative rules of the genre – as in the case of icons – may explain the persistence of Greek for many centuries, even when this language was no longer understood by the majority of the people’.

¹¹ Schmidt/Westphalen 2005, 21-22, 81-95. No inscriptions have come to light on the Layer 1 paintings, but Greek inscriptions are found on the earliest decoration in the upper apse, which, though painted by a different artist, may also be dated to the eleventh century (Layer ‘0’: Immerzeel 2007d, 82, Fig. 10; 2009, 70).

West Syrian ecclesiastical leaders in order to highlight the position of the Syrian Orthodox Church. Cruikshank Dodd referred to a passage in the *Chronicle* of Barhebraeus, which she interpreted as claiming that Bishop John of Qartmin had instructed the replacement of Greek with the Syriac language. Presuming that John died in 1201 (sic) and concluding that a language reform took place around the year 1200, she postulated that the Syriac language of the inscriptions could be used as a dating criterion, not only for the wall paintings found at Deir Mar Musa, but for all medieval murals from Lebanon and Syria. Cruikshank Dodd proposed that wall paintings with Greek inscriptions could generally be dated to the twelfth century and those with Syriac inscriptions to the thirteenth.¹²

This hypothesis was criticized by Immerzeel, who, by pointing out some intra- and extra-community differences in language usage, correctly argued that such clear cut distinctions cannot be made.¹³ He further stressed that it was highly unlikely that the Melkite and Maronite Churches would have changed their language policy simply on the recommendation of a Syrian Orthodox prelate. Even though Immerzeel's criticisms are sound, and his advice to always keep the specific denomination in mind when evaluating wall paintings and their inscriptions is important, the discussion eventually proved to be largely superfluous. Dorothea Weltecke has shown that Cruikshank Dodd's assumption was based on a complete misunderstanding of the relevant passage in Barhebraeus' chronicle. When properly translated, the text makes mention of the ordination of John of Qartmin in A.D. 988 (actually c. 998), thus two centuries prior to the language reform assumed by Cruikshank Dodd.¹⁴ Moreover, the supposed reform did not involve the switch from Greek to Syriac, but rather the reinstatement of *Estrangelo* at the expense of *Serto*, more specifically in Tur 'Abdin around the year 1000.¹⁵

Immerzeel has subsequently suggested broadening the scope of the language issue by viewing the specific linguistic context of Deir Mar Musa in a wider geographical and ecclesiastical perspective. Considering the capacity of Syriac as a potential marker of identity, he has pointed out that Syriac was not used exclusively by Syrian Orthodox Christians, but by East Syrians, Melkites, and Maronites as well.¹⁶ Seen from this perspective, one might perhaps conclude that the Syriac language as such cannot be used by the modern scholar to distinguish between the different ecclesiastical denominations mentioned.¹⁷ However, though this is essentially correct, the fact that Syriac was simultaneously employed by multiple Christian communities should not automatically be taken to imply that the language did not play a role in marking the religious and communal identity of any of these groups. On the contrary, as mentioned, Syrian Orthodox authors commonly considered Syriac as the marker of identity *par excellence*, despite the fact that it was also used by other Christian groups as well. Yet again, the fact that we are sometimes unable to draw sharp lines between different communities does not necessarily mean that these communities did not believe that such lines existed (see Section 1.3).

Moreover, the self-definition of the Syrian Orthodox community does not only involve differentiation from other Christian groups – an opposition which clearly played a major role at Deir al-Surian –, but also differentiation from non-Christians. Accordingly, the application of Syriac by Syrian Orthodox Christians at Deir Mar Musa cannot be evaluated accurately

¹² Cruikshank Dodd 2001, 17-18; *idem* 2004, 17-19.

¹³ Immerzeel 2004a, 19-20, referring, amongst others, to the bilingual (Greek and Syriac) inscriptions in the thirteenth-century wall paintings in the Melkite Church of Mar Sarkis in Qara. Cf. Table 1 below.

¹⁴ Weltecke 2006, 115 n. 106: 'Mōr Athanasius ordained the famous Mōr John bishop of the monastery of Qartmin in the year [A.G.] 1299 [i.e., A.D. 988], who was the one who renewed the script *Estrangelo* in the Tūr 'Abdīn, which had been out of use for hundred years'. Cf. Palmer 1986, 53.

¹⁵ Palmer 1986, 53-58; 1990, 221.

¹⁶ Immerzeel 2009, 25, 172-174.

¹⁷ Immerzeel 2009, 25; Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 19.

merely by contrasting it with the linguistic practices encountered in other Christian groups. More persuasive in this respect is Cruikshank Dodd's suggestion that the Syriac inscriptions at the monastery were used to affirm the (Christian) identity of the Syrian Orthodox Church, by distancing Christians from the surrounding Muslim community.¹⁸ Indeed, there is some circumstantial evidence to suggest that the Syriac inscriptions at Deir Mar Musa, in addition to conveniently highlighting and reflecting the Syrian Orthodox linguistic and liturgical tradition, represent a conscious and deliberate decision intended to stress communal distinctiveness between Christians and Muslims.

In this respect, it should first be observed that the language difference between the three successive layers of wall painting in itself already shows that the consistent use of Syriac in the murals of Layer 3 does not result from the unreflective replication of an older local tradition of writing the inscriptions in Syriac – as we have seen, the inscriptions in Layer 1 are predominantly Greek. More important, however, is the remarkable link between inscription language and content that was observed above. While the commemorative and dedicative inscriptions were commonly written in Arabic, the contemporary 'religious' inscriptions, more specifically captions and descriptions placed next to saints and scenes, were written in either Greek (Layer 1) or Syriac (Layer 3).

Such evidence not only suggests that the choice between different language alternatives was an active one; it simultaneously indicates that distinctions were made between various languages in terms of their symbolic value. At Deir Mar Musa, Greek and Syriac were apparently considered more appropriate for communicating religious messages than Arabic, which was the common vernacular language of both Muslims *and* Christians – who, notably, sometimes also continued to use a form of Aramaic as a spoken language in addition to Arabic. Although Greek and Syriac both conveniently highlight the language difference between these two religious groups, Syriac has the added advantage of stressing a certain local non-Byzantine element. All this goes some way to explaining the marked preference for Syriac on Layer 3 at Deir Mar Musa, especially in view of the fact that the community's immediate Melkite neighbours in Qara used bilingual Greek and Syriac inscriptions at the time (see below; Table 1).

The language issue, thus, is far more complex than is suggested by the observation that Syriac was practised simultaneously by a variety of Christian communities. In fact, taking into account the specific ecclesiastical denominations of the churches in which the inscriptions are featured, a more nuanced picture can be drawn of the distribution of the various languages. Despite some overlap between the confessions that use Syriac in their inscriptions, we shall see that there are also considerable differences between them in terms of language uniformity. Table 1 provides an overview of the different languages encountered in medieval wall paintings in Lebanon and Syria, focusing exclusively on those inscriptions mentioning the names of saints and scenes.¹⁹ Excluded from the chart are dedicative and commemorative inscriptions, which are commonly written in Arabic, as well as the few abbreviated Greek formulas in programmes in which Syriac inscriptions clearly predominate.²⁰

In the chart, the paintings with accompanying inscriptions are classified by regions: in the case of Lebanon, from Tripoli in the North to the Jbeil area in the South; and in the case of

¹⁸ Cruikshank Dodd 2001, 17-18.

¹⁹ Table 1 has been constructed on the basis of the following data collections: Cruikshank Dodd 2001 and 2004; Immerzeel 2004a and 2009; ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2007.

²⁰ Excluded are the IC XC next to a small cross in the Church of Mar Tadros in Bahdeidat; MHPΘY near the Virgin Enthroned in the Church of Mar Saba in Eddé al-Batrun; IC XC NHKA flanking a small cross in the Cave Church of Saydet-Naya in Kfar Schleiman; IC XC next to the cross in the apse in the Church of Deir Salib in Hadchit; IC XC O EMANOHA next to the Christ-child in the Melkite Church of Mart Barbara in Bargun; and, finally, the abbreviation for *Saint* in Greek in Layer 3 at Deir Mar Musa.

Syria, from Saydnaya in the South to Qara and Humeira in the North and North-West. The rationale behind this subdivision is that it can perhaps elucidate geographical distinctions in the preference for a certain language. In addition, a classification is made according to ecclesiastical denomination, so as to identify possible inter- and intra-community differences.²¹ The style of the relevant paintings has been included in order to detect whether there is a relation between the stylistic training of the artist responsible and the language employed. Finally, some rows of the table are shaded in order to accentuate those sites where the inscription language is entirely limited to Syriac.

Location	Denomination	Date	Language	Style
<i>Lebanon</i>				
Qalamun: Mart Marina, Layer 1	Melkite	12 th c.?	G	B?
Idem, Layer 2	Melkite/Latin	13 th c.?	L	B
Deddé: Mar Mtanios	Melkite	13 th c.	G	S?
Enfé: Saydet ar-Rih	Melkite?	12 th -13 th c.	G	B?
Amiun: Mar Fauqa, Layer 1	Melkite	Late 12 th -13 th c.	G	B (C)
Idem, Layer 2	Melkite	13 th c.	G	B
Qusba: Kannisset as-Saydet	Melkite	13 th c.	G	B?
Qusba: Deir Mar Mitri	Melkite	12 th c.	G	B
Qusba: Deir Saydet Hamatur	Melkite	13 th c.	G	B
Kaftun: Sergius and Bacchus, Artist 1	Melkite?	13 th c.	G/S	B
Kaftun: Sergius and Bacchus, Artist 2	Melkite?	13 th c.	G/S	B?
Raskida: Mar Girgis	Melkite	12 th -13 th c.	G	B?
Kfar Hilda: Saydet Kharayeb	Melkite	13 th c.	G	B
Hamat: Mar Girgis	Melkite	13 th c.	G	?
Kfar Qahil: Deir Mar Elias	Melkite	13 th c.	G	S?
Bziza: Mar Elias	Melkite	13 th c.	G	?
Bahdeidat: Mar Tadros	Syrian Orthodox or Maronite	13 th c.	S	S
Ma ^c ad: Mar Charbel, Layer 1	Maronite	Late 12 th -13 th c.	S	S
Idem, Layer 2	Maronite	13 th c.	S/G	S
Eddé al-Batrun: Mar Saba, 1 st campaign	Maronite	Late 12 th -13 th c.	S	B
Eddé al-Batrun: Mar Saba, 2 nd campaign	Maronite	13 th c.	G	S
Hadchit: Saydet ad-Darr	Maronite	Late 12 th -13 th c.	G	S
Kfar Shleiman	Maronite	13 th c.	G	S
Hadchit: Deir Salib	Maronite	Late 12 th -13 th c.	S/G	B
<i>Syria</i>				
Saydnaya: St John the Baptist	Melkite	12 th -13 th c.	G	B?
Saydnaya: St Sophia	Melkite	12 th -13 th c.	G	B?
Ma ^c arat Saydnaya: Mar Elias	Melkite	Late 12 th -13 th c.	G	B (C)
Nebk: Deir Mar Musa, Layer 1	Syrian Orthodox	c. 1060	G/S	?
Idem, Layer 2	Syrian Orthodox	1095	G	B/S
Idem, Layer 3	Syrian Orthodox	1208/09	S	S
Qara: Sts Sergius and Bacchus	Melkite	13 th c.	G/S	S
Qara: Deir Mar Ya ^c qub, Layer '0'	Melkite	11 th c.	G	S

²¹ It should be observed that in a number of cases it is virtually impossible to ascertain the denomination, due to either completely lacking or contradictory historical evidence (Immerzeel 2004a, 25-26; *idem* 2009, 10).

Idem, Layer 2	Melkite	13 th c.	G/S	S
Humeira: Crac des Chevaliers, 'Room of 120 Meters'	Frankish	12 th -13 th c.	L	S
Humeira: Crac des Chevaliers, external chapel	Frankish?	13 th c.	L	S

Language: A = Arabic; G = Greek; L = Latin; S = Syriac
Style: B = Byzantine tradition; S = 'Syrian'; (C) = Cypriot

Table 1. Overview of Inscription Languages in Wall Paintings in Lebanon and Syria

Looking at the distribution of Greek and Syriac inscriptions in medieval wall paintings from Lebanon and Syria as summarized in Table 1, several patterns and correlations can be distinguished. Focusing first on the relationship between language and ecclesiastical denomination, it becomes clear that the Melkite Church had a strong preference for the Greek language, which they applied in all their churches and on virtually all layers of painting encountered in those churches. The only exception is Layer 2 in the Cave Chapel of Mart Marina near Qalamun, on which only Latin inscriptions are featured. This deviation can be explained from the Frankish involvement at the site in the thirteenth century.²² It should be observed, however, that when the church was repainted several of the saints and scenes of Layer 1 remained fully visible, including their Greek inscriptions. Latin inscriptions were added to these Greek ones during the refurbishment.

Throughout the eighteen Melkite churches, seventeen layers of painting of the total of twenty-one have retained exclusively Greek inscriptions. As yet, we have not come across Melkite churches with only Syriac inscriptions in their painted decoration.²³ The prominent position accorded to Greek in the Melkite context is significant, but perhaps not entirely surprising. Obviously, the Greek language provided the Melkites with a convenient symbol that associated them with the Greek Orthodox of Byzantium, whose faith they shared. Although Syriac and Arabic had already become the most frequently used ecclesiastical and vernacular languages among the Melkites by the ninth century, they continued to employ Greek for liturgical and literary purposes. Especially the Byzantine re-occupation of Northern Syria between 969 and 1084, and the re-establishment of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch referred to above, gave a new impetus towards the use of Greek.²⁴ The revival of Greek among the Melkite communities of Lebanon and Syria was short-lived, however.

Towards the end of the twelfth century, the linguistic situation among the faithful forced the great Byzantine canon lawyer and absentee Patriarch of Antioch Theodore IV Balsamon (d. after 1195) to allow the use of the local languages of the non-Greek-speaking population in the liturgy of the Melkites.²⁵ In this period, the Melkite Church witnessed a gradual shift from Greek to Syriac as a liturgical language, although both languages continued to be used side by side throughout the twelfth and thirteenth century, often even literally at the same

²² Immerzeel 2009, 82-86.

²³ Admittedly, during renovation activities conducted in 1999 at the Melkite Monastery of Our Lady in Saydnaya, a Syriac inscription was found, but the nuns of the convent had it removed immediately after its discovery, because they associated the language with the Syrian Orthodox (Immerzeel 2007a, 79; *idem* 2009, 47).

²⁴ On language usage among the Melkites, see Cannuyer 1986.

²⁵ In response to the question 'Is it without danger that orthodox Syrians and Armenians, but also faithful of other countries, say the office in their own language, or are they in any case obliged to officiate with books written in Greek', Balsamon is said to have answered: 'Those who are in every point orthodox, if they are totally foreign to the Greek language, can celebrate the liturgy in their own language, using habitual responses to the holy prayers, without modification and transcribed from *kontakia* beautifully written in Greek.' (quoted from Griffith 1997, 29-30).

site.²⁶ It perhaps comes as no surprise, therefore, that precisely in this period the first bilingual Greek and Syriac inscriptions start to appear in the monumental wall paintings in Melkite churches.²⁷ On the other hand, it should be noted that apart from the Church of Sts Sergius and Bacchus in Kaftun, the instances are limited to the Qalamun in Western Syria, especially in and around Qara (i.e., Church of Sts Sergius and Bacchus; Deir Mar Ya^cqub). Syriac gained importance as a liturgical language, but Greek evidently remained the dominant language in Melkite monumental decoration. In this context, it might be significant that the Melkites gradually replaced the traditional Antiochene rite by the liturgical rite of Constantinople in the aftermath of the Byzantine re-conquest,²⁸ but whether there is a direct connection between the two phenomena remains to be seen.

Turning to the singular linguistic position of the Church of Sts Sergius and Bacchus in Kaftun in Lebanon, it should be mentioned that the denomination of this site is unclear, as both Melkites and Maronites have laid claim to adjacent Deir Saydet Kaftun, currently a Greek Orthodox monastery, which is situated a mere fifty metres from this church.²⁹ Despite the contradictions in the contemporary written sources, Immerzeel is inclined to favour the Melkite attribution, arguing that the church's location in a traditional Melkite area, and some Byzantine elements in the decoration programme, speak strongly against a Maronite derivation.³⁰ When it comes to the painted decoration, it might be observed that the wall paintings were executed by two artists, apparently working side by side to produce a single programme. Notably, the inscriptions seem to have been applied according to a well defined hierarchical system in terms of language use. Whereas the explanatory inscriptions on the walls of the nave are written in Syriac, and those in the soffits of the arches at the entrance to the church in bilingual Syriac and Greek inscriptions, the inscriptions in the conch and on the triumphal arch are all in Greek. As such, Greek dominates the altar area, which is the most important and sacred place in the church, the Holy of Holies. The special prominence thus accorded to Greek, might therefore perhaps be seen as yet another indication in favour of the Melkite attribution. On the other hand, next to nothing remains of the wall paintings in the lower section of the apse, and one cannot entirely exclude the possibility that the saints which may be presumed to have decorated this section were accompanied by bilingual Syriac and Greek inscriptions.

While Greek was clearly the preferred inscription language among the Melkites throughout the period under consideration, the Syrian Orthodox Church, on the contrary, seems to have gravitated towards Syriac in the thirteenth century. The prominence of Syriac (i.e., Layer 3 at Deir Mar Musa, substantiated below with evidence from Deir Mar Behnam and the corpus of illuminated Syrian Orthodox manuscripts, as well as the liturgical fan and wall paintings from Deir al-Surian discussed in Chapter 3) was not exclusive to the Syrian Orthodox, however. As can be seen in Table 1, the sole application of Syriac is also encountered in painted churches of the Maronite denomination. However, the Maronite

²⁶ Cannuyer 1986, 115; Brock 1990.

²⁷ Schmidt/Westphalen 2005, 29-31, 40-41.

²⁸ Cannuyer 1986, 113-114, 115.

²⁹ Immerzeel 2009, 98-99, with further references. Immerzeel suggests that the short distance between Deir Saydet Kaftun and the Church of Sts Sergius and Bacchus may point towards them having been part of one and the same monastic complex. On the inscriptions at the Church of Sts Sergius and Bacchus, see the contribution of Jean-Baptiste Yon in Chmielewski/Waliszewski 2007, 322-323. It should be noted that the Church of Sts Sergius and Bacchus also features a fragmented Arabic inscription running along the walls, which was probably included the name of the patriarch of Antioch, as part of it can be translated as '[Antak]kia and the entire East' (Hélou/Immerzeel 2007; Immerzeel 2009, 97; Hélou 2009, 13, Fig. 8). Strikingly, trilingual Arabic (Ps 114:3-4), Syriac (Isahia 1:16,55 and 12:3), and Greek (names of saints and title of scene) inscriptions are also encountered on the back of the thirteenth-century icon preserved at Deir Saydet Kaftun, which shows the Baptism of Christ (Immerzeel 2009, 126, Pl. 106).

³⁰ Immerzeel 2009, 173; ter Haar Romeny *et. al.* 2009, 32.

Church appears largely to have adopted the middle ground regarding the preference for either Greek or Syriac in their wall paintings. Of the seven layers of murals that have been preserved in five Maronite churches, two display bilingual inscriptions, two Syriac, and three Greek.³¹

On the other hand, this summary categorization does not do justice to the more complex linguistic situation in the Maronite churches. It should be observed, for instance, that in the case of Layer 2 in the Church of Mar Charbel in Ma^cad, all the names of the saints and scenes are in Syriac. The only exception is the image of St James, which may actually have been an *ex-voto*.³² In the case of the second decoration campaign at the Church of Mar Saba in Eddé al-Batrun, the Greek language is limited to a few letters near the head of a horse, although admittedly few of the murals in this church have survived.³³ In other words, the linguistic scale in the Maronite context actually seems to tip towards Syriac at the expense of Greek. Cogently, the thirteenth-century programme with Syriac inscriptions at the Church of Mar Tadros in Bahdeidat, which is situated in predominantly Maronite territory, would have been highly suitable for both Maronites and Syrian Orthodox communities (see Section 2.6B). Seen from this perspective, the exclusive use of Greek at Saydet ad-Darr and Kfar Shleiman is all the more remarkable.

All in all, the data I have studied seems to suggest that, in the thirteenth century, Syriac inscriptions enjoyed a higher degree of popularity in the Syrian Orthodox Church than in the two other denominations in the equation, the Melkites and the Maronites. It should be observed, however, that churches with medieval wall paintings that are thought to have been affiliated with the Syrian Orthodox Church are very limited in number, to say the least. Moreover, Deir Mar Musa is the only site in this area which can presently be ascribed with certainty to the Syrian Orthodox Church, as the exact denomination of the Church of Mar Tadros in Bahdeidat at the moment of decoration is still a point of discussion. One should therefore hesitate to impose rigid distinctions on the linguistic data. To be sure, a church cannot be identified as being of the Syrian Orthodox pedigree on the basis only of Syriac inscriptions. Nevertheless, the body of evidence presented above not only shows that the three different denominations used Syriac in their inscriptions, but also reveals differences in linguistic policy between these Churches, such as the preference for Greek in Melkite contexts as opposed to Syriac in Syrian Orthodox contexts. Moreover, the evidence points toward the existence of differences in the choice of languages in the inscriptions, even within a given religious group.

Finally, in relating the inscription languages to the geographical area in which they are encountered, another pattern emerges. If one focuses exclusively on Lebanon, a concentration of Greek can be detected in the North, and Syriac in the South. Significantly, this distribution pattern shows a remarkable overlap with the stylistic clusters discerned, an observation which has previously also been made by Immerzeel.³⁴ He has pointed out that artists working in the Byzantine stylistic tradition mainly worked in the northern area for Melkite patrons, whereas artists painting in a more 'Syrian' style worked in Maronite churches in the region of Batrun. Exceptions aside (e.g., Eddé al-Batrun; Church of Mar Saba, first campaign), it can still be argued that Melkite patrons were generally more eager to hire the services of artists trained in the Byzantine stylistic tradition and to have their wall paintings furnished with Greek inscriptions, whereas Maronite and the few known Syrian Orthodox customers seem to have

³¹ The first and second decoration campaign at the Church of Mar Saba in Eddé al-Batrun, although properly speaking not separate layers, are counted as such because of the time lap of some fifty years between the execution of each series.

³² Immerzeel 2009, 106.

³³ Immerzeel 2004a, 26; *idem* 2009, 108-111.

³⁴ Immerzeel 2004a, 26, Fig. 2; ter Haar Romeny *et. al.* 2009, 32.

favoured artists working in a more local Syrian style, and preferred Syriac in their inscriptions rather than Greek. We will return to this matter in Chapter 9.

8.2.2 Illustrated Syrian Orthodox Manuscripts

Before drawing any general conclusions as to whether Syriac inscriptions can be used as evidence of Syrian Orthodox identity formation at Deir Mar Behnam, the discussion will be broadened to include a brief survey of the inscription languages as found in illustrated Syrian Orthodox manuscripts dating from the eleventh to the fourteenth century, as compiled by Leroy in his 1964 catalogue. A preliminary observation to be made is that the main texts of all these manuscripts are written in Syriac. To my knowledge, there are no illustrated Syrian Orthodox manuscripts written in Greek (or in Arabic, for that matter),³⁵ which in view of the above is not surprising. Yet, as will be clear from the following, Greek inscriptions are occasionally encountered in miniatures featured in Syrian Orthodox manuscripts.

Table 2 provides an overview of the languages used in the inscriptions from the miniatures featured in the manuscripts in question, which date from the early eleventh century to around 1300. These manuscripts are classified by date in an attempt to assess whether there was a preference for a certain language in a certain period.

Location	Date	Language
Ma ^ʿ arrat Saydnaya, Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate, Ms. 12/15	11 th c.	S
Mosul, Syriac Catholic Church of Mar Tuma	1014	S
Ma ^ʿ arrat Saydnaya, Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate, Ms. 12/8	1055	S/G
Vatican Library, Barberini Orient. 118	c. 1092	S/G
Cambridge, University Library, Ms. 0o.1. 1,2	12 th c.	S/G/Arm.
Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Ms. 28 (Sachau 220)	12 th /13 th c.	S/G
Paris, Pozzi Collection	12 th /13 th c.	S
Manchester, John Rylands Library, Ms. Syr. 66	12 th /13 th c.	S*
London, BL Or. 3372	12 th /13 th c.	S
London, BL Add. 7169	12 th /13 th c.	S
New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. 774	12 th /13 th c.	S
Paris, BnF syr. 355	13 th c.	S
London, Private Collection, Sam Fogg (formerly Kevorkian)	13 th c.	S
Vatican Library, Syr. 559	1220/1260	S
London, BL Add. 7170	1216-1220	S
Ma ^ʿ arrat Saydnaya, Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate, Ms. 12/3	1222	S
Mardin, Syrian Orthodox Bishopric ('Hah Lectionary')	1226	S
Mardin, Church of the Forty Martyrs ('Dioscorus Theodorus')	c. 1250	S*
Mardin, Syrian Orthodox Bishopric	1272	S/G
Qaraqosh, formerly at the Church of Mar Giworgis	13 th /14 th c.	Arm.

Language: Arm. = Armenian; G = Greek; S = Syriac; S* = Syriac, later additions

Table 2. Overview Inscription Languages in Illustrated Syrian Orthodox Manuscripts (11th-14th C.)

³⁵ One example of a Christian manuscript from the Syro-Mesopotamian region written in Arabic is a thirteenth-century manuscript of the romance of Barlaam and Joasaph (Deir al-Balamand, Ms. 147 (6): Smine 1993), which may be assumed to have been produced for Melkite usage. The captions of the miniatures are all in Arabic, while there are also some Syriac inscriptions comprising commentaries on the text, but these appear to be later additions.

As can be seen from Table 2, the development of the choice of languages for the inscriptions accompanying miniatures in Syrian Orthodox manuscripts dating from between the eleventh and early fourteenth centuries more or less conforms to the language shift encountered in wall paintings at Deir Mar Musa, at least in the sense that there is a clear tendency towards favouring Syriac over other languages, especially Greek. It should be noted, however, that Syriac was already the key language in the manuscripts dating from the eleventh century, in contrast to Layer 1 at Deir Mar Musa. Perhaps the only exception to the rule is the Gospel Book made in Melitene in 1055, now at the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate in Ma^carrat Saydnaya (Ms. 12/8), which was donated to Deir Mar Barsauma by Lazarus the son of Joseph of Kayšum. The four full-page miniatures in the manuscript, which, notably, are painted in a Byzantine style, are each provided with saints' names in bilingual Greek and Syriac inscriptions (Pl. 5).³⁶ Moreover, the open scrolls held by the Virgin and St John the Baptist in two of these miniatures are each inscribed with texts written in both Greek and Syriac.

Significantly, this equal balancing of the two languages is not encountered in any of the other illustrated Syrian Orthodox manuscripts with Greek inscriptions. The only miniature from Vat. Syr. Barb. or. 118 (c. 1092), for example, which shows Christ between Moses and St Peter, displays just one Greek legend (‘ΠΙΕΤΡΟΥ’) among several Syriac inscriptions.³⁷ Similarly, Berlin Ms. 28 (Sach. 220) has a large collection of Syriac inscriptions referring to the names of saints and scenes, whereas the inscriptions in Greek, besides the name of St George, are limited to the abbreviations IC XC beside Jesus in the Washing of the Christ-child and the Baptism of Christ, and MP ΘΥ beside Mary in the image of the Virgin and Child.³⁸

In the manuscripts dating from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a more or less equal standing of the two inscription languages is encountered only in a lectionary written by Dioscorus Theodorus (A.D. 1272), who donated it to the church of the Monastery of the Mother of God near Hisn Ziyad.³⁹ It should be noted, however, that in this manuscript, too, Syriac clearly takes precedence over Greek in the inscriptions. Although saints and scenes are identified by Syriac and Greek inscriptions in conjunction, the texts on the scrolls held by the evangelists, for example, are only in Syriac.⁴⁰ Moreover, the Greek legends are written in white, while those in Syriac are written in gold.⁴¹ This hierarchy in language is strikingly absent from the 1055 Deir Mar Barsauma manuscript, in which the explanatory inscriptions, Syriac and Greek alike, are all featured in gold.⁴²

A particularly rich collection of inscriptions is encountered in the manuscript dating from around 1190, known as the Buchanan Bible (Cambridge, University Library Oo. 1. 1,2); it contains Syriac, Greek, and even Armenian inscriptions. Among the numerous inscriptions encountered in the forty surviving miniatures, only three are in Greek, and five are in Armenian. Featured in a very limited group of miniatures, the Greek and Armenian inscriptions are consistently featured in conjunction with Syriac inscriptions.⁴³ An Armenian inscription is also encountered in a manuscript formerly at the Church of Mar Giworgis in Qaraqosh, where it is featured on the book held by Christ, which, notably, is also decorated

³⁶ Leroy 1964, 225-233, Pls 51-53.1; Zibawi 1995, 57-58, Pls 1-3; Doumato 2001, 32, Fig. 1.

³⁷ Leroy 1964, 236-237, Pl. 55.1.

³⁸ Leroy 1964, 342, 343, 344, Pls 115.2, 16.1, 117.1, 117.4.

³⁹ Leroy 1964, 383-389, Pls 137-140.

⁴⁰ Leroy 1964, Pl. 137.

⁴¹ Leroy 1964, 384.

⁴² Leroy 1964, 384.

⁴³ Armenian: fol. 179v (Habbakuk); fol. 255r (Luke), fol. 265v (John), fol. 273v (Paul); fol. 306r (St James): Leroy 1964, 244, 248, 249, Pls 64.1-64.2. Greek: fol. 179v (Habbakuk); fol. 265v (John); 273v (Paul): 1964, 244, 248, 249, Pls 64.1.

with a type of cross familiar from Armenian art.⁴⁴ Does this point towards the artist being an Armenian, or at least the use of an Armenian model? According to Leroy and Hunt, the occurrence of Armenian inscriptions in the Buchanan Bible does not necessarily imply that the artist responsible for the illustrations was actually Armenian, arguing that the spelling mistakes betray the hand of a Syrian copying an unfamiliar language. Likewise, they explain the occurrence of Greek inscriptions as resulting from copying Byzantine models, whether directly or via Armenian intermediaries.⁴⁵

Although it is conceivable that certain inscriptions in the illuminated Syrian Orthodox manuscripts under discussion may indeed have been the by-product of artists copying models, especially when it comes to short Greek abbreviations besides the figures of Christ and the Virgin, for instance, it seems highly unlikely that the Greek inscriptions in the eleventh-century manuscript from Deir Mar Barsauma, in which they are featured on an equal footing with those in Syriac, result from the unreflective behaviour on the part of a copying artist. On the contrary, these Greek legends written in gold are simply accorded too much weight. Perhaps more probably than in the case of the eleventh-century wall paintings containing Greek inscriptions at Deir Mar Musa, it is conceivable that the occurrence of the Greek inscriptions was directly related to the Byzantine revival in the Middle East during the tenth and eleventh century, especially if we take the origin of the manuscript into account: Byzantine Melitene.

It is well known that the Syrian Orthodox actively participated in the Byzantine resettlement of Syria and Mesopotamia, especially in the former Muslim-controlled area of Melitene, which was conquered in 934 and would remain in the hands of the Byzantines until 1101.⁴⁶ The practice of installing Syrian Orthodox officials in the Byzantine administration of the new frontier areas was already referred to above. When we consider the occurrence of bilingual Syriac and Greek inscriptions in connection with the Melitene origin and date of the manuscript, it is perhaps no coincidence that the few Syrian Orthodox Christians known to have had a good command of both the Syriac and Greek language at the time of the Syrian Renaissance include Bishop Ignatius of Melitene (d. around 1095), who was not only heavily involved in various negotiations with the Byzantine authorities but also responsible for the introduction of Byzantine literary material and culture in the Syrian Orthodox tradition,⁴⁷ and his successor, Sa'id bar Sabuni (d. 1095).⁴⁸

Like Ignatius of Melitene, those involved in the production of the 1055 Deir Mar Barsauma manuscript may have been convinced that the Syrian Orthodox Church at large would yet again form part of the Christian Empire of Byzantium. Seen from this perspective, it is conceivable that the combination of Syriac and Greek inscriptions was a conscious attempt to express the wish to become an established member of Byzantine society, while maintaining elements of one's own tradition and identity. This would also explain why the occurrence of Greek inscriptions in Syrian Orthodox manuscripts is essentially limited to the late eleventh and early twelfth century, since after that time the Syrian heartlands were firmly back in the hands of the Muslims. In addition to such Syrian Orthodox ecclesiastical and political concerns, there may have been more private considerations at work in this assumed attempt to acculturate to the Byzantine conquerors.

⁴⁴ Leroy 1964, 390-396, Pls 142-144.

⁴⁵ Leroy 1964; Hunt 2000b.

⁴⁶ Dagron 1976; Palmer 1986.

⁴⁷ Jan van Ginkel discussed this topic at the Fifth North American Syriac Symposium (Toronto 2007), in a paper entitled 'Ignatius of Melitene (ca. d. 1095), another Byzantine Syrian-Orthodox Historiographer'. For a short abstract, see <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol.1No2/HV10No2VthSyriacSymposiumAbstracts.pdf> (pp. 17-18).

⁴⁸ On Ignatius of Melitene and his successor Sa'id bar Sabuni, see Baumstark 1922, 291, 292-293; Barsoum 2003, 418-421. Cf. Teule 2010.

By the early eleventh century, many Syrian Orthodox Christians of Melitene had been able to acquire considerable wealth, especially merchants who were involved in long-distance trade throughout Mesopotamia and the Levant. The Syrian Orthodox Church also profited from this prosperity, because the *nouveaux riches* contributed greatly towards the construction and renovation of numerous churches and monasteries in both the Melitene and Tur ʿAbdin regions, simultaneously equipping them with liturgical furnishings and manuscripts. Moreover, the economic growth made it possible for John of Qartmin to revive the *Estrangelo* tradition around the year 1000, as was mentioned earlier in this chapter, and also allowed the Syrian Orthodox to consider illustrating their manuscripts.⁴⁹

In his study on the literary and cultural effects of the Byzantine resettlement of Melitene on the Syrian Orthodox Church, Palmer presents Lazarus as a fitting representative of one of the families of *nouveaux riches* who found scope for ostentation in the conventional style of the monastic elite. Although presenting himself as ‘the most unworldly of monks’, Lazarus, as Palmer points out, ‘displays his wealth by commissioning a *de luxe* Gospel-book, as a donation to his monastery, which contains several notices, wasteful of space and lavishly coloured or gilded, proclaiming his name, his parentage and his native city’. Discussing the exceptionally rich character of the manuscript, Palmer further highlights the fact that one whole side of a parchment folio (328v) is filled with seventeen words executed in gold by a scribe named Simeon (as we have seen in Section 4.4.2, the rest of the manuscript was written by a certain Peter, deacon of Melitene), stating with some emphasis that Lazarus ‘bought, purchased, and produced this page’.⁵⁰

In short, acquiring prestige was a major aim for Lazarus in commissioning this richly decorated manuscript, which must have constituted something of a novelty in those days, especially considering that Syrian Orthodox manuscript illumination, which appears to have died down in the eighth century, had only just been revived. Evidently, Lazarus was a high-profile figure and it is perhaps therefore not far-fetched to assume that he belonged to the small Syrian Orthodox elite who, in addition to Syriac, were also relatively well versed in Greek. The production of this manuscript provided Lazarus with the means to show off his linguistic skills, which would of course have added greatly to his prestige. Another possibility is that Lazarus made a conscious choice to include both Syriac and Greek inscriptions in an attempt to affiliate himself with the upper echelons of the Syrian Orthodox ecclesiastical elite, more specifically those in the retinue of the Patriarch, who were in direct contact with the Byzantine authorities.

Whatever the case may be, the important observation that emerges from the above is that Syriac was by far the preferred inscription language used in illustrated Syrian Orthodox manuscript. The unusual prominence of Greek in the manuscript donated to Deir Mar Barsauma can be explained from the unique historical circumstances in which it was produced.

8.2.3 Deir Mar Behnam and the Church of Mar Ahudemme

Compared to Deir al-Surian (Greek, Coptic, Syriac) and Deir Mar Musa (Greek, Syriac, Arabic), the linguistic situation at Deir Mar Behnam is less complex. Up until now, thirty-eight inscriptions dating from between 1164 and 1300 have been discovered at the monastery.⁵¹ Of these inscriptions, thirty-four (or 89%) were written in Syriac, thus by far

⁴⁹ Palmer 1986, 53-54; Benner 1989, 72-74.

⁵⁰ Palmer 1986, 54, n. 63, Pl. 1.

⁵¹ Syriac inscriptions at Deir Mar Behnam between 1164 and 1300 (from Harrak’s 2009 corpus): AE.01.5; AE.01.6; AE.01.7; AE.01.8; AE.01.9; AE.01.10; AE.01.11; AE.01.12; AE.01.14; AE.01.15; AE.01.16; AE.01.17; AE.01.19; AE.01.20; AE.01.21; AE.01.22; AE.01.23; AE.01.24; AE.01.25; AE.01.26; AE.01.27;

outnumbering the inscriptions in any other language. One commemorative inscription was composed in Uighur. As we have already seen earlier in this study, the origin of the Uighur inscription can easily be explained when placed in its proper historical context.⁵² Arabic inscriptions ($N=3$, or 8%) were occasionally applied as well. Significantly, these commonly comprise dedicatory inscriptions giving the names of artists and donors.⁵³ The only exception is the Arabic inscription carved in the uppermost frieze of the southern exterior gate, which includes a translation and adaptation of a Syriac prayer for Vespers.⁵⁴ As at Deir Mar Musa, the epigraphic data from Deir Mar Behnam therefore suggests that the preference for Syriac for the religious inscriptions was the result of an active and deliberate choice, rather than unconscious and unreflective behaviour. It remains to be examined what the considerations were behind this decision.

In the absence of an inter-communal context similar to the monastic situation at Deir al-Surian, the preference for the Syriac language should probably not be explained directly in terms of opposition between different Christian groups. Unfortunately, no epigraphic material dating from before the thirteenth century has survived at Deir Mar Behnam, except for the dedicatory inscription from 1164 (AE.01.34). It is therefore not possible to determine whether a language shift took place at the monastery comparable to the language development encountered at Deir Mar Musa, where Greek inscriptions predominate in the two earliest layers of painting and Syriac inscriptions in the most recent layer. Although it can thus not really be proven that the distinct preference for Syriac reflects a raised awareness of the Syrian Orthodox linguistic tradition within the monastic community, it can still be maintained that this emphasis was intended to stress communal distinctiveness, as will be argued in the following.

Another gap in our knowledge is caused by the fact that, irrespective of the languages in which they were written, only a limited number of inscriptions dating from the period under discussion have survived in other churches and monasteries in the Mosul area. Of the Syriac and Garshuni inscriptions that were recently compiled by Harrak, the largest number by far date from the eighteenth and nineteenth century; most of the inscriptions were executed during the rebuilding programmes in the distinct aftermath of the devastating invasion of the Persian Nadir Shah in 1743.⁵⁵ Due to the lack of reference material, it is impossible to study the language issue on a regional level in any comprehensive manner. Despite this want of contemporary epigraphic data, both locally and regionally, some preliminary but significant observations can still be made concerning the language practices at Deir Mar Behnam and in the Mosul area.

The surviving evidence indicates that the phenomena of extra-community uniformity within Christianity (i.e., different denominations using the same language) and intra-community difference in terms of Syriac language usage that were previously observed in the wall paintings of Lebanon and Syria are both also encountered in the sculptured decoration of the churches and monasteries in the Mosul area. Considering the first phenomenon, a couple of thirteenth-century inscriptions preserved at the Chaldean (formerly East Syrian) Church of Mar Gorgis (St George) in Mosul indicate not only that non-Syrian Orthodox churches in the region were equally provided with inscriptions written in Syriac, but also that these inscriptions were executed in the same script, *Estrangelo*.⁵⁶ This is not entirely surprising

AE.01.28; AE.01.29; AE.01.30; AE.01.31; AE.01.32; AE.01.33; AE.01.34; AE.01.39; AE.01.40; AE.01.46a-b; AF.02.1; AF.02.3; AF.02.5 (see Appendix B).

⁵² Cf. Harrak/Ruji 2004.

⁵³ Harrak 2009, cat. nos. AE.01.46c; AF.02.1, a, d.

⁵⁴ Harrak 2009, cat. no. AE.01.5. Cf. Appendix B.

⁵⁵ Harrak 2004, 105; *idem* 2009.

⁵⁶ Harrak 2009, inscr. nos AA.11.1-AA.11.2; Fiey 1959, 118.

given the fact that the East Syrians seem to have followed the *Estrangelo* tradition until around the middle of the thirteenth century, when they started to develop their own style of writing, known as East Syriac (see Section 1.3.4). This linguistic overlap warns us yet again not to distinguish between different ecclesiastical denominations simply on the basis of the particular language found in inscriptions.

The second phenomenon, intra-community difference in language usage, is exemplified by a comparison between Deir Mar Behnam and the Church of Mar Ahudemmeḥ in Mosul, both of the Syrian Orthodox denomination. Whereas the inscriptions at Deir Mar Behnam were commonly written in Syriac, the two monumental inscriptions in the Church of Mar Ahudemmeḥ, which frame the Royal Gate, are in Arabic. This dissimilarity cannot be explained in terms of a chronological difference, as the inscriptions in both churches were most probably made in the same general period, that is, roughly around the middle of the thirteenth century. Nor is there any apparent discrepancy in terms of content that could explain the language difference. As is the case with most Syriac inscriptions at Deir Mar Behnam, the Arabic inscriptions in the Church of Mar Ahudemmeḥ are of a distinctively religious nature, rather than having a dedicative or commemorative content (see Section 7.3.4). To explain the language difference between the inscriptions at Deir Mar Behnam and the ones in the Church of Mar Ahudemmeḥ, then, we have to consider the type of church in which they are featured, the character of the communities that produced them, and the languages commonly used by the congregations for which they were intended.

Despite the paucity of the surviving evidence, it is conceivable that the difference between the choice for Syriac in a monastic church and Arabic in a city church was the result of the particular context for which the inscriptions were intended, a distinctly religious inscription written in Arabic perhaps being less surprising in an urban context than in a monastic setting, especially considering that Arabic was only accepted as an ecclesiastical and liturgical language in the Syrian Orthodox Church from around the mid-thirteenth century onwards.⁵⁷ A number of the monks who commissioned the thirteenth-century sculptural decoration at Deir Mar Behnam, such as the Deacon Abu Nasr (AE.01.11), have Arabic names, which suggests that Arabic was their common vernacular language, as it was by that time among the Syrian Orthodox community of Mosul.⁵⁸ Indeed, the choice of Arabic inscriptions at the Church of Mar Ahudemmeḥ should be seen within the context of an Arabic-speaking community of Syrian Orthodox Christians.

Strikingly, the language division does not stand by itself, but is actually paralleled in the strong dichotomy between the iconographic programmes of the two Syrian Orthodox churches (see Chapters 6 and 7). Suffice it to mention here that while a considerable part of the iconographic repertoire encountered at Deir Mar Behnam is firmly grounded in the Christian pictorial tradition, the figurative imagery depicted on the Royal Gate at the Church of Mar Ahudemmeḥ is in keeping with fashionable iconographic trends in secular Islamic art. Now, accepting the notion that the inscriptions in both churches are an integral part of their decoration, it makes sense to suggest that the language choice was intimately linked to the

⁵⁷ Teule 2010.

⁵⁸ The field of onomastics requires further investigation, but it would seem that during the period of the Syrian Renaissance a growing number of Syrian Orthodox, including those from the highest echelons of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, receive Arabic names. Examples include Abu al-Faraj bar Shumanna (Basil of Edessa, d. 1169), Bishop Abu Ghalib of Jihan (d. 1177), Bishop Sa'īd bar Sabuni of Melitene (d. 1095), his brother Bishop Abu Ghalib bar Sabuni (d. 1129) of Edessa, Abu'l Hasan, who was abbot of Deir Mar Mattai around 1253, and Maphrian Abu al-Faraj ibn al-'Ibri (Barhebraeus, d. 1286) (Kawerau 1960, 104; Fiey 1965, II, 598-599; Teule 2010; cf. the biographies of Syrian Orthodox scholars and writers in Barsoum 2003). Among the earliest Arabic names featured in the Syriac inscriptions in Tur 'Abdin are those of the monks Abu al-Khayr and Kulaib at the Monastery of Qartmin (c. 1031-1035), while Arabic influence is further evident in the names of the priests Abu Ghalab (d. 1123/24), Abu Sahel (d. 1123/24), and Abu Nasr at Heshterek (Palmer 1990, 220-222).

creation of the respective iconographic programmes. It may accordingly be proposed that the meaning of these programmes can offer additional clues as to the intentions that may have governed the choice for either Syriac or Arabic.

As argued in Section 6.5, two main layers of meaning can be discerned in the decoration programme of Deir Mar Behnam. The first layer of meaning comprises a monastic genealogy of Syrian Orthodox monasticism in the Mosul area. It was argued that the decoration programme as such, together with written documents such as the hagiographies of Mar Behnam and Mar Mattai, was part of a wider operation aimed at establishing and enhancing Syrian Orthodox traditions. Reasoning along these lines, the consistent use of Syriac for the inscriptions may perhaps be conceived of as a conscious act intended to stress the Syriac literary tradition, which was of course an essential component of the Syrian Orthodox tradition as a whole. This would fit our general understanding of the broader literary activities of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as outlined by, amongst others, Van Rompay.⁵⁹

Van Rompay points out that by the twelfth century, the preservation of Syriac could no longer be taken for granted, as it had been gradually superseded by Arabic as a spoken language from the Early Islamic period onwards.⁶⁰ Indicative of the spread of Arabic among the lay members of the community in particular are the collections of Homilies to be read during the great liturgical feasts by the Maphrian and later Patriarch John bar Ma^cdani (1232-1253; 1253-1263). Written in Arabic, these Homilies were evidently intended for a broad public that could no longer understand Syriac.⁶¹ In order to counteract this decline and save Syriac from extinction, much of the literary activity of Syrian Orthodox church leaders such as Jacob bar Shakko and Barhebraeus, according to Van Rompay, was aimed at reviving the Syriac literary tradition. The fact, for instance, that both these authors wrote a grammar of the Syriac language is illustrative in this respect.⁶²

In addition, teaching programmes set up in the schools of monasteries and parish churches played an important role in preserving the Syriac linguistic tradition. Van Rompay further adds that this system of education ‘had to be built on an ideology that saw the language and literature as constituent elements of Syrian Christian identity’.⁶³ It is conceivable that the strong emphasis on Syriac at Deir Mar Behnam is a reflection of the larger process of consolidation and revitalization of the Syriac literary tradition within the Syrian Orthodox Church as sketched by Van Rompay, especially in light of the apparent iconographic concern for the Syrian Orthodox tradition at the monastery.

Turning to the second layer of meaning, and bearing in mind the strong pro-Christian and presumably anti-Muslim connotations of the iconographic programme, it makes sense to suggest that the distinct prominence of the Syriac inscriptions among the epigraphic material at Deir Mar Behnam yet again reflects the intention to emphasize Christian identity in the face of Islam. Like the iconography, the Syriac language played a role as a distinguishing feature. Within this framework, Syriac did not serve merely as an internal reminder of religious and communal difference. As one of the most important pilgrimage sites in the region, the Syriac inscriptions were visible not only to the monastic community living at the site, but also to a large group of visitors from outside, which, as we have seen, also included non-West Syrian Christians and presumably even Muslims. This highly varied public, accustomed to the monumental Arabic inscriptions that were readily available even on the streets, would presumably have been acutely aware of the linguistic difference.

⁵⁹ Van Rompay 2000c.

⁶⁰ Van Rompay 2000c, § 48.

⁶¹ Teule 2010.

⁶² Teule 2010; Weltecke 2008, 325.

⁶³ Van Rompay 2000c, § 49.

8.3. Dating Systems

Not only the languages of inscriptions, but also the dating system used in these inscriptions may have played a role in expressing Christian identity. This matter has recently been raised by Van Rompay, amongst others, who poses the question of whether the use of the Seleucid dating system as opposed to the Hegira one can be seen as an attempt to emphasize Christian identity (see below). The starting point for our discussion is the dedicatory inscription in the sanctuary, which informs us of the restoration activities performed at Deir Mar Behnam ‘in the year one thousand four hundred and seventy [of the Greeks], which is the year fi[ve hundred] and fifty-nine of the Arabs, in the days of the blessed Fathers, our Patriarchs Mar Athanasius of Syrian Antioch, and Mar Ewannis of Alexandria, in the year during which Mar Ignatiu[s], Maphrian of the East, died’ (i.e., A.D. 1164).

When it comes to the date mentioned in this dedicatory inscription, it may be significant that the inscription not only provides the date according to the Seleucid era (‘the year 1475 of the Greeks’), but also according to ‘the Arabs’, that is, after the Hegira (‘the year 559 of the Arabs’). All the other dates offered by inscriptions from Deir Mar Behnam (see Table 3) are according to the Seleucid era, except for one (A.D. 1882), that is according to the Gregorian calendar. The latter date can be explained from the increasing contacts between the monastery and the West that had been established from at least the sixteenth century onwards.⁶⁴ In order to assess the possible significance of the double dating system on the one hand, and the use of the Seleucid era on the other, it may be instructive to compare the dated inscriptions from Deir Mar Behnam with inscriptions with dates from other Syrian Orthodox centres, such as Deir Mar Musa and Deir al-Surian. To facilitate the comparison, the dated inscriptions collected from the three monasteries have been combined in Tables 3-5, respectively, each providing the relevant inscriptions from one of the monasteries in the equation.⁶⁵

Cat. No.	Date (AD)	Provided Date	Language	Content
AE.01.34	1164	A.G. 1470/A.H. 559	S	renovation of ‘altar’ (sanctuary)
AE.01.20	1295	A.G. 1606	S	looting of monastery by Mongols
AF.02.1B	1300	A.G. 1611	S	construction of tomb Mar Behnam
AE.01.45	1417	A.G. 1728	S	funerary
AE.01.37	1550	A.G. 1861	S	decoration (?) activities
-	1580	A.G. 1891	?	letter from Maphrian Basilius Pilatus ⁶⁶
AE.01.3	1581	A.G. 1892	S	funerary
AE.01.44	1625	A.G. 1936	S	funerary
-	1651	A.G. 1963	S	production of manuscript ⁶⁷
AE.01.1	1660	A.G. 1971	G	renovation of monastery
AE.01.42	1747	A.G. 2058	S	funerary
AE.01.43	1777	A.G. 2088	S	funerary
AE.01.18	1800	A.G. 2111	S	funerary
AE.01.41	1882	A.D. 1882	S	visit

⁶⁴ Fiey 1965, II, 586-589.

⁶⁵ The catalogue numbers given in Table 3 refer to those encountered in Harrak 2009; those in Table 4 refer to the corresponding ones in ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2007. References to the inscriptions listed in Table 5 are found in Van Rompay 2004.

⁶⁶ Fiey 1965, II, 586.

⁶⁷ Fischer 1977, Pl. 1.

Language: G = Greek; S = Syriac

Table 3. Dated inscriptions at Deir Mar Behnam

Cat. No.	Date (AD)	Provided Date	Language	Content
B1	1058/59	[A.H.] 450	A	reconstruction of monastery
B2	1058/59	[A.H.] 450	A	reconstruction of monastery
B9	1058/59	[A.H.] 450	A	commemorative?
B34	1058/59	[A.H.] 450	A	reconstruction of monastery
B7	1088	[A.H.] 481	A	commemorative
B19	1095	[A.H.?] 488	A	redecorated by Hunayn
B21	1129/30	A.G. 1441	S	commemorative
B33	1131	A.G. 1442	A	commemorative
B24	1134/1135	A.G. 1446	A	commemorative
B23	1135/36	A.G. 1447	A	commemorative
B9	1162/63	[A.H.] 558	A	commemorative/visit (?)
B6	1176	[A.H.?] 572	A	commemorative
B18	1208/09	[A.H.?] 604	A	redecorated by Rabban Sarkis
B15	1343/44	[A.G.] 1656	A	visit
B5	1432/33	[A.G.] 1744	A	visit?
B36	1467/68	[A.G.] 1779	S	reconstruction activities
B37	1497/98	A.G. 1809/A.H. 903	S/A	reconstruction activities
B38	1497/98	[A.G.] 1810	S	reconstruction activities
B14	1636	A.G. 1948	A	visit
B16	1661/62	[A.G.] 1973	A	visit
B20	1764	A.D. 1764/A.H. 1178	A	visit

Language: A = Arabic; S = Syriac

Table 4. Dated inscriptions at Deir Mar Musa

Date (AD)	Provided Date	Language	Content
818/19	A.G. 1130	S	(re-)construction of monastery
914	A.G. 1225	S	construction of 'altar' (<i>haykal</i>)
926/27	A.G. 1238	S	construction of wooden screen
932-940	A.H. 32[.]	S	visit by Petros ibn Ishaq from Mosul
1063	A.H. 455	S	visit by Yuhannon from Amid
1078/79	A.G. 1390	S	synodical letter
1165/66 (or 55/56)	A.G. 1477 (or 1467)	S	reconstruction activities
1202/03	A.G. 1514	S	production of liturgical fan
1285/86	A.G. 1597	S	reconstruction activities
1468/69	A.G. 1780	S	visit by Abraham

Language: S = Syriac

Table 5. Dated inscriptions at Deir al-Surian

As can be seen from Table 4, the four dates offered by the Syriac inscriptions from Deir Mar Musa (B21, twelfth century; B36-38, all from the fifteenth century) are invariably according to the Seleucid calendar, though inscription B37 (A.D. 1497/98) does also add the Hegira dating in Arabic. On the other hand, the Arabic inscriptions use both the Hegira (eleventh-thirteenth century) and Seleucid dates (twelfth-seventeenth century). In one instance (B20),

the text first mentions the ‘Christian’, apparently meaning Gregorian year, 1764, and subsequently cites the corresponding year 1178 of the Hegira. When it comes to the use of Hegira dates, it is perhaps significant that only in two relatively late cases (B37 and B20) is the ‘Hegira’ mentioned explicitly. Usually only the year is given, thus without specification of the Islamic era.⁶⁸

Another point of interest is that the Seleucid dates are lacking from the eleventh century, while both dating systems are encountered in the twelfth and thirteenth century, and subsequent dates (fourteenth – seventeenth century) invariably use the Seleucid dates, irrespective of the language in which they are featured. This gradual development towards a consistent use of the Seleucid dating system has led Van Rompay to suggest that this particular dating system perhaps gained importance as a marker of Christian identity from the twelfth century onwards.⁶⁹ If this hypothesis is indeed correct, this might also have been the case at Deir Mar Behnam. Within such a gradual development, the use of the Seleucid and Hegira dates in conjunction would of course have been the ultimate exponent of a transitional phase. Before coming to any conclusions, however, we will first examine information from two other data collections.

The dated inscriptions from Deir al-Surian provide a slightly different picture again as can be seen from Table 5. In contrast to Deir Mar Musa and Deir Mar Behnam, a development from Hegira towards Seleucid dates can certainly be excluded, as practically all dated inscriptions are according to the Seleucid system. The only two inscriptions that have retained Hegira dates are not monumental inscriptions, as Van Rompay points out, but graffiti left on the walls by visitors. Significantly, these two occurrences relate to the visit of Ishaq ibn Petros from Mosul (between A.D. 932 and 940), and of Yuhannan of Amida (A.D. 1063) from Tur^cAbdin. Van Rompay connects the latter inscription with the only two inscriptions using the Hegira dates known from Tur^cAbdin: one at the Church of Zaz (A.D. 932), and the other at the Monastery of Mardin (A.D. 961/62).⁷⁰ The epigraphic evidence from Deir al-Surian thus seems to point in the direction of regional differences in the use of the Hegira dating system. This assumption is corroborated if we include manuscript colophons in our discussion.

Recently, Brock has also pursued the question of identity and dates in a provisional survey of dating systems used in Syriac manuscripts (Syrian Orthodox, Church of the East, Melkite, Maronite), dating from the seventh to the twentieth century.⁷¹ The sample of dated manuscripts analysed by Brock amounted to some 2600 specimens, of which a Hegira date was encountered in the colophon of only a mere 85 (or 3.3%). Presenting his evidence in the form of a table (our Table 6), Brock shows that the use of the Hegira date is best represented in the thirteenth, sixteenth, and nineteenth centuries. He does stress, however, that the high figures for these centuries reflect the fact that it is precisely from these three centuries that most dated Syriac manuscripts have survived. Brock further notes that the highest proportion, in comparison with the approximate total number of dated Syriac manuscripts from a given century, is to be found in the thirteenth century. The manuscripts of the Church of the East outrank by far those of any other ecclesiastical denomination.⁷²

⁶⁸ Ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2007, 137.

⁶⁹ Van Rompay 2004, 63 n. 49. It should be observed that the seemingly natural development of the use of the different dating systems from the eleventh to the thirteenth century as sketched by Van Rompay is no longer tenable, given that the date mentioned in the inscription recording the refurbishment activities performed by Rabban Sarkis (B18), which was previously interpreted as 1504 of the Seleucid calendar (A.D. 1192/93: Cruikshank Dodd 2001, 170-172), has recently been read more convincingly as the Hegira year 604 (i.e., A.D. 1208/09).

⁷⁰ Van Rompay 2004, 63-64. Cf. Palmer 1987, nos A.11, A.13; *idem*, 1988, 114. According to Palmer, the inscription from the Church of Zaz is the oldest Syriac inscription dated by the Hegira system.

⁷¹ Brock 2005.

⁷² Brock 2005, 276, 278, Appendix II.

Century	Syrian Orthodox	Church of the East	Melkite	Maronite	U	P
7th	-	2	-	-	-	2/10
8th	2	2	-	-	1	5/18
9th	3	1	-	-	-	4/23
10th	-	2	-	-	1	3/16
11th	1	-	-	-	-	1/23
12th	1	3	-	-	-	4/56
13th	-	18	4	-	1	23/200+
14th	-	3	-	-	-	3/52
15th	-	2	2	-	-	4/150
16th	1	11	3	-	-	15/400+
17th	1	4	-	1	1	6/350+
18th	-	3	-	-	-	4/400+
19th	-	10	-	-	-	10/700+
20th	-	1	-	-	-	1/200+
Total	9	62	9	1	4	85/2600+

U = uncertain; P = proportion of all dated mss in the sample

Table 6. Occurrence of Hegira dates in Syriac manuscripts by century according to Brock 2006

Distinguishing between the various ecclesiastical denominations, and focusing exclusively on the Syrian Orthodox Church, the table provided by Brock seems to corroborate Van Rompay's suggestion that from the twelfth century onwards the Syrian Orthodox Church used the Seleucid era consistently, and that the use of the Hegira dating system disappeared in the Syrian Orthodox tradition around the twelfth century. It should be observed, however, that the picture provided by Brock's data collection is slightly distorted in this matter. According to Brock's sample, which is derived primarily from information made available in catalogues of most Western collections and some Eastern ones, the Syrian Orthodox Church refrained from using the Hegira dating system in the thirteenth century. However, even a cursory consultation of colophons of manuscripts that are not featured in the catalogues used by Brock shows that the Hegira system was indeed applied in Syrian Orthodox manuscripts from the thirteenth century: for instance, Ms. 8/11 (containing the so-called *Synodicon*) in the Library of the Patriarchate of the Syrian Orthodox Church in Damascus, which is dated both to the year 1515 'of the Greeks' (i.e., A.D. 1204) and the year 500 'according to the Arabs'.⁷³ Besides, Barhebraeus uses the Hegira era throughout his *Chronography*, either in isolation or in addition to the Seleucid era.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, this does not impact heavily on the more general observation that the use of the Hegira date is most prominent in the Church of the East. This strongly suggests that the use of the Hegira dating was also heavily influenced by regional factors.

Considering the thirteenth-century East Syrian manuscripts with Hegira dates, Brock makes the interesting observation that they are all dated to the first half of the thirteenth century, 'precisely the time when the Christian community of the Mosul area were enjoying a period of comparative peace and well-being, under the rule of Badr al-Din Lu'lu'.⁷⁵ Although he ultimately concludes otherwise (see below), Brock seems to suggest by this

⁷³ Vööbus 1975-1976, I, X-XI.

⁷⁴ Budge 1932, I, e.g., 199, 200, 201, 207, 209, 305, 307, 399. *Contra* Cruikshank Dodd 2001, 17, who states that both Michael the Syrian and Barhebraeus made use only of the Seleucid calendar.

⁷⁵ Brock 2005, 276.

observation that the peaceful relationship between Christians and Muslims at the time is reflected in the combined use of the Seleucid and Hegira dating systems. Language, according to Brock, appears sometimes to have been a determining factor in using the Hegira era, for Christian authors who were used to writing in Arabic appear to have been more likely to provide a Hegira dating.⁷⁶ Here it worth repeating that at Deir Mar Musa only Arabic inscriptions include a Hegira dating, while those in Syriac are all according to the Seleucid calendar.

All in all, the rationale behind the inclusion of the Hegira date is difficult to fathom and may often, Brock argues, even have been a matter of the scribe's personal inclination. Significantly, there does not appear to have been a difference in use of the Muslim era between manuscripts written in towns and monasteries, although in the latter case local scribal traditions at some monasteries seem to have played an important role. Intentions to adapt to the contemporary Islamic cultural context may have played a role, but other factors seem to have been even more important, especially regional practice and language.⁷⁷ On the contrary, the insistence on the Seleucid era is perhaps more easily explained. As Brock suggests, the use of the Seleucid date was most probably the result of traditionalism; the comparative rarity of the *Hegira* dating system is 'due to traditionalism, rather than to any deliberate disinclination towards the use of the Muslim era'.⁷⁸ Accepting this to be correct, one can also put it differently: the use of the Seleucid dating system is a sign of unreflected behaviour rather than a conscious choice intended to emphasize the Christian identity. In short, one should not overestimate the possible identity considerations that may have stood behind the general consistent use of the Seleucid era at Deir Mar Behnam.

8.4 Conclusion

The evidence presented above shows that it is not possible to distinguish properly between churches of the West Syrian, East Syrian, Maronite, and Melkite denominations in terms of their usage of Syriac in inscriptions. In short, the Syriac language and script, whether *Estrangelo* or *Serto*, cannot be regarded as a criterion for ascribing a work of art to either of these denominations, especially in the absence of other signifiers. In analysing the role of language within the formation and maintenance of a communal identity, however, it is important to emphasize that the observed linguistic overlap should not be taken to imply that Syriac played only a minor role in the expression of a Syrian Orthodox communal identity. In this respect, it is significant to recall that the Syrian Orthodox ecclesiastical elite usually considered Syriac a pivotal marker of their identity.

Considering that these Syrian Orthodox ecclesiastics commonly had a monastic background, it is perhaps not entirely surprising to find that Syriac was the preferred inscription language throughout the Syrian Orthodox Church in the twelfth and thirteenth century, especially in the monastic context. This preference for Syriac is reflected in the monumental decoration at Deir al-Surian in Egypt, Deir Mar Musa in Syria, Deir Mar Behnam in Mesopotamia, and possibly also at the Church of Mar Tadros in Bahdeidat in Lebanon, as well as in the case of portable works of art, such as the numerous illustrated Syrian Orthodox manuscripts, and the liturgical fan from Deir al-Surian. Although one inclines to believe that all these Syriac inscriptions played an important role in the formation and expression of a Syrian Orthodox communal identity, a basic problem in the field of art

⁷⁶ Brock 2005, 276-277.

⁷⁷ Brock 2005, 279-280.

⁷⁸ Brock 2005, 282.

history remains how to assess whether linguistic features were indeed consciously used to enhance communal identity.

In addition to the specific denomination of the church for which they were intended, the language of the inscriptions could, generally speaking, have been determined by a wide variety of factors: the period in which the work of art was executed; the geographical region in which the church is found; the stylistic and technical tradition in which the artist was trained; the iconographic programme in its entirety. Historical events also impacted on inscription language, as is exemplified by the Uighur inscription at Deir Mar Behnam. Given that we simply cannot know for certain which of these factors, or which combination of factors, contributed most to the choice of language, it is usually difficult to evaluate accurately whether Syriac was intended as a marker of a distinctively Syrian Orthodox identity, a more general Christian identity, or a monastic identity. Examining the inscriptions in their proper context (regional, historical, iconographic etc.) nevertheless provides us with some clues as to the rationale behind the choice of a certain language.

In so doing, it makes sense to suggest that the Syriac and Coptic/Greek inscriptions at Deir al-Surian represent an active attempt to juxtapose the Syrian and Coptic communities that lived side by side at the monastery, while the Syriac inscriptions at Deir Mar Behnam were most probably actively used to mark the boundaries between the Syrian Orthodox and the Muslims, especially considering that its iconographic programme was clearly much concerned with laying down Syrian Orthodox tradition. The remarkable language shift at Deir Mar Musa, and the strong emphasis on Syriac at Deir Mar Behnam, finally, may perhaps best be related to the broader agenda in the Syrian Orthodox Church to revitalize the Syriac literary tradition, or at least language/script. At the very least, the Syriac inscriptions constituted a difference from the Islamic environment, where Syriac was absent.

A remarkable outcome of the present research is that while the Syrian Orthodox evidently displayed a preference for Syriac inscriptions, the Melkites, by contrast, showed an undisputable preference for Greek inscriptions. Particularly interesting in terms of the relationship between religious denomination and language are the extant inscriptions in the painted churches in Lebanon: Melkite patrons were generally more eager to hire the services of artists trained in the Byzantine stylistic tradition, and to have their wall paintings furnished with Greek inscriptions, whereas Maronite (and perhaps also Syrian Orthodox) customers seem to have favoured artists working in a more local Syrian style, and preferred Syriac in their inscriptions. Without additional evidence from contemporary written sources, however, it remains virtually impossible to establish with a degree of certainty whether these remarkable linguistic and stylistic choices were guided by the wish to enhance Melkite and Maronite communal identity, respectively, a matter to which we shall return in the following chapter.