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

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Citation

Snelders, B. (2010, September 1). *Identity and Christian-Muslim interaction : medieval art of the Syrian Orthodox from the Mosul area*. Peeters, Leuven. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/15917>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

9. Epilogue: Art as an Expression of Syrian Orthodox Identity?

9.1 Introduction

In the preface of this study, it was pointed out that Christian-Muslim relations in the Middle East during the Atabeg and Crusader era were often seen in terms of conflict and violent opposition. Such a presumed dichotomy focuses almost exclusively on theological differences, failing to take account of the social complexities of daily life. The present study challenges these simplistic views of division along religious lines, seeing the boundaries between the Christian and Muslim communities as areas of intermingling rather than separation. Instead of applying the usual model of conflict and confrontation, it emphasizes that the cultural relationship between Christians and Muslims at the time is characterized by interaction rather than antagonism.

As far as the artistic tradition of the Mosul area is concerned, the preceding chapters have shown that Christian and Islamic art are not necessarily antithetical or mutually exclusive categories. In the following sections, we will take up this point and focus in more detail on the relationship between Christian and Islamic art in the Middle East. Starting with an assessment of the profile and character of Syrian Orthodox art in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and Northern Mesopotamia, this will be followed by a brief survey of artistic interaction in these countries. Particular attention is paid to the artwork from Mosul and the vicinity. By way of conclusion, the final section to this chapter offers suggestions for future avenues of research.

9.2 The Profile and Character of Syrian Orthodox Art

9.2.1 Regionalism

To sum up the role played by art in the formation and expression of a communal identity among the Syrian Orthodox, it is first important to note that the way the Syrian Orthodox formulated their identity was determined by their immediate environment. Perhaps therefore it will come as no surprise that regionalism is an important factor in defining the characteristics of the decoration of Syrian Orthodox churches, liturgical implements, and manuscripts. While the Syrian Orthodox comprised one of the two main Christian groups in Mosul during the twelfth and thirteenth century, attaining their full artistic development under Muslim rule, their co-religionists in the Crusader states and in the Emirate of Damascus encompassed only a rather insignificant proportion within the larger community of Christians. The Syrian Orthodox commonly shared local artistic trends with other religions and denominations living in the same area. Consequently, two contemporary art-historical developments can be observed: whereas Christian art from the Mosul area developed in parallel with the art of the Muslims in the region, a matter to which we shall return shortly, the Syrian Orthodox Christians living in the area of present-day Lebanon and Syria mirrored themselves artistically on other neighbouring Christian communities, in particular Byzantine Orthodox and Melkites, Maronites, and Latins.

Irrespective of the precise religious affiliations of the churches situated in Lebanon and Syria, their painted programmes display in addition to a shared use of more or less conventional themes familiar from the Byzantine cycle of the great feasts (*Dodekaorton*), an inclination towards iconographic subjects that enjoyed certain popularity in Eastern Christian monumental decoration. Besides mounted warrior saints, which are virtually a standard feature in medieval church decoration in the Middle East, these regionally popular themes

include the Deisis Vision, the suckling Virgin, and the Three Patriarchs in Paradise. Regional preferences appear also to have governed the choice of saints depicted, which include, among others, the Syrian saints Julian Saba, Marina of Antioch, Sergius, Bacchus, and Simeon Stylites, as well as the Palestinian saint Zosimus. It should be noted, however, that most of the saints depicted belonged to the stock iconographic repertoire of the Eastern Mediterranean, while the veneration of some of these saints even extended as far as the West.¹

As far as can be gleaned from the surviving material, none of the extant scenes and saints was restricted exclusively to a single Christian community. In other words, the iconography of the wall paintings does not seem to have been denomination-specific. Murals like the ones at Syrian Orthodox Deir Mar Musa, for instance, appear to have been completely interchangeable with those encountered in Melkite and Maronite churches in the vicinity, both in terms of style and iconography, and far as the language of the inscriptions is concerned. The obvious conclusion, that the art of the Syrian Orthodox was much inspired by its environment, also comes to the fore at Deir al-Surian, the community's stronghold in Egypt, where the thirteenth-century paintings were probably executed by artists who were also responsible for the decoration of nearby Coptic monasteries. The style and iconography of Deir al-Surian's paintings thus fit neatly in the Coptic tradition, but they were customized by the addition of bilingual Syriac and Coptic/Greek inscriptions, reflecting the mixed character of the monastic community. Moreover, the symbiosis between Syrian Orthodox and the Copts at the monastery at the time was further marked by the visual pairing of Patriarch Severus of Antioch and Patriarch Dioscorus of Alexandria, as well as the juxtaposition of the apostles Peter and Mark.

Although iconographic and linguistic features were occasionally employed as symbols of Syrian Orthodox identity, there is no evidence to suggest that the Syrian Orthodox community can be traced by a direct and exclusive type of material culture. The present research has not yielded an objective set of criteria that can be used as a checklist to establish the Syrian Orthodox nature of a work of art. Syrian Orthodox material culture is bound up with regional and local developments, and therefore far from uniform in appearance. In short, the profile and character of the art of the Syrian Orthodox community is as diverse as its members are widespread, inhabiting different regions in the Middle East, ranging from Tur ʿAbdin in the North to Egypt in the South, and living under rulers of various religions and denominations. This highlights yet again that rigid classifications do not do justice to the complex artistic development of the Middle East during the Atabeg and Crusader era, which is characterized by a vast number of interactions and convergences between different cultures, ethnic groups, religions, and confessions. Like regionalism, artistic interaction is precisely one of the defining features of the artistic tradition of the Syrian Orthodox.

9.2.2 Artistic Interaction and the Relationship between Christian and Islamic Art

It will have become clear from the preceding chapters that Christians living under Muslim rule, though considered second-rate citizens in terms of their subordinate legal position as *dhimmis*, certainly did not live in splendid isolation. On the contrary, during the flourishing of the cultural and artistic activities in the medieval Middle East, the Christians interacted freely with their Muslim fellow-countrymen, both in countries that were firmly under Muslim rule and those which for a period of time were occupied by the Crusaders. When reviewing some of the recorded instances of Christian-Muslim collaboration earlier in this study, reference was already made to Canon Wilbrand of Oldenburg, who informed us about the mixed company of 'Syrians, Saracens, and Greeks' who worked together to complete the

¹ Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 101; Immerzeel 2004a, 20-23; *idem* 2009, 144-145.

construction and decoration of the Crusader palace of John of Ibelin in Beirut in 1211. Oldenburg appears to have been quite astonished about the fact that, despite their different religious backgrounds, Christians and Muslims worked closely together. This practice does not seem to have tallied with his Western perception of life in the Levant.

Such interfaith collaboration, which was based on shared or complementary skills rather than ethnic or religious background, may also come as a surprise to modern scholars, who still tend to see Christian-Muslim relations exclusively in terms of conflict and opposition.² The main reason for this ignorance is that the systematic study of the medieval Christian material culture from the Middle East is a fairly recent phenomenon and, moreover, often remains limited to specific regions or kinds of objects. Such a limited approach, however, stands in the way of the larger picture. In order to further our understanding of the relationship between Christian and Islamic art, the present author, together with Immerzeel and Jeudy, adopted a broader geographical approach, focusing not only on Christian-Muslim interaction as reflected in the artistic traditions of Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Northern Mesopotamia, but also on the relationship between the artistic traditions of the different constituent Christian groups in these regions.³ Although much remains to be learned, our preliminary overview showed that the medieval patrimony of the Middle East is the result of a lively interaction between artists and patrons, irrespective of their faith.

We also expanded the discussion to include an analysis of different artistic media in conjunction, and it emerged that in certain types of media, such as woodwork, metalwork, and manuscript illumination, the artistic interaction between Christians and Muslims was the rule rather than the exception. On the other hand, it turned out that this cross-fertilization was not ubiquitous. The embellishment of churches with wall paintings in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and, to a lesser degree, Northern Mesopotamia, for instance, seems to have been primarily put in the hands of artists with a Christian background, who were apparently either monks, clergymen, or lay painters.⁴ What is more, these murals are firmly grounded in the Christian iconographic traditions, whether Byzantine, Eastern Christian, or a combination of the two. A shared Christian-Muslim visual vocabulary essentially only comes to the fore in the use of certain floral and ornamental patterns, including arabesques and ornamental designs. Perhaps the best example is provided by Deir Anba Antonius in Egypt, where, in the late thirteenth century, the *khurus* vault was refurbished by a team of artists comprising an anonymous figural master and an ornamental master, whose combined efforts resulted in a remarkable synthesis. While the biblical themes painted by the figural master are executed in what may be called a Byzantine manner, the abstract designs and epigraphic elements painted by the ornamental master reflect fashionable trends throughout the Islamic Middle East.⁵

In terms of style, the wall paintings in Lebanon and Syria are closely tied into Byzantine artistic developments, and even those murals painted in the 'Syrian style' should perhaps better be seen in terms of a regional development affiliated with Byzantine art, rather than a

² Previous scholarship on so-called Crusader art, especially, has been dominated by a segregational or Orientalist perspective. On this topic, see Georgopoulou 1999.

³ Immerzeel/Jeuzy/Snelders, forthcoming.

⁴ Painters known from inscriptions dating from the eleventh to the thirteenth century include: John and Sergius son of the priest Gali ibn Barran at Deir Mar Musa (ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2007, inscr. nos B19, B18); Theodore at Deir Anba Antonius (Pearson 2002, inscr. nos N35.3, S38.7); Theodore the Armenian and Theodore the Egyptian, who may well have been the same person, at Deir al-Abyad; Theodore, monk and priest of Armant at Deir al-Shuhada near Esna; the deacon John of Aqfahs at Deir al-Naqlun in the Fayyum (van Loon 1999, 194 n. 884, with further references).

⁵ Bolman/Lyster 2002, 127-154, Figs 8.1, 8.4, 8.25-8.26. Here we might refer to the white interlace pattern filled with diamond-like fillings in the alternating colours red, white and/or green, assumed to have been derived from Seljuk art, which is encountered in numerous wall paintings in Lebanon and Syria, as well as on Cyprus (Immerzeel 2004a, 23, Pl. 1; *idem* 2004b, 50-51; *idem* 2009, 141 Pls 38, 52, 123).

strictly local phenomenon. Byzantine stylistic trends are occasionally also encountered in the wall paintings in Coptic churches, but they were usually executed in a traditional style and iconography, aspects of which even extended back to Late Antiquity.⁶ The art of wall painting appears hardly to have been influenced by the newer trends typical of the Islamic Middle East, which were then being developed and used by Muslims, Christians, and Jews, both in secular and religious contexts. Perhaps the only exception are the murals painted at Deir Anba Bula in A.D. 1291/92, the calligraphic style of which differs greatly from the long tradition of antecedents in Coptic art and displays remarkable affinities with *Kalila wa Dimna* manuscripts of the late thirteenth and fourteenth century. It should be noted, however, that the stylistic correspondence with contemporary Islamic art in this particular can be explained as the direct result of the artist responsible being trained as a manuscript illuminator rather than a mural painter.⁷

Admittedly, few monumental paintings have come down to us from Islamic contexts, but in spite of this lack of sufficient reference material, it would seem that the visual language of the Islamic Middle East in Christian art of the region was primarily limited to the realm of minor art and church furnishings.⁸ In the refurbishment of medieval churches in Egypt, for instance, the overlap between Christian and Islamic art is mainly limited to liturgical woodwork, in particular altar screens and doors. This convergence comes to the fore not only in the eleventh-century screen from the Church of Sitt Barbara in Old Cairo, which, as we have seen earlier in this study, is decorated with fashionable iconographic subjects from the Princely Cycle, but also in the more or less aniconic screens from the thirteenth to fifteenth century, embellished with overall star pattern designs formed by assembled polygonal plaques of wood, bone or ivory.⁹ Although they share the contemporary popular geometric designs with wooden *minbars* and *mihirabs* made for Muslim sacred buildings, the screens and doors intended for Coptic churches were commonly provided with Christian identity markers, such as crosses, inscriptions featuring Psalm texts, wooden panels carved with distinctively Christian saints, or icons painted with scenes from the life of Christ.

Unfortunately, works of art of this kind do not seem to have come down to us in Lebanon and Syria, where, unlike Cairo, history has wiped out virtually all traces of medieval Christian patrimony in the major cities such as Tripoli, Beirut, and Damascus. Nevertheless, there is some evidence to suggest that the artistic symbiosis between Christians and Muslims at the level of the minor arts extended to Syria. Illustrative in this respect is the group of inlaid metalwork vessels decorated with Gospel scenes, images of the Virgin and Child, and friezes of saints and clerics, together with non-Christian scenes familiar from Islamic art, such as the standard set of images based on the pastimes of the royal court, which are commonly ascribed to the Syro-Mesopotamian region. One such example is a basin bearing inscriptions that state the name and titles of Sultan al-Salih Ayyub, the last ruler of the Ayyubid dynasty. Ward supposes that the basin was made between 1240 and 1249 in Damascus, which was a major centre of metalwork production at the time.¹⁰

⁶ Cf. Bolman 2002, 91-102; *idem* 2008a.

⁷ Bolman 2008b.

⁸ When it comes to the murals in Lebanon and Syria, Cruikshank Dodd (1997-1998, 270; *idem* 2001, 117) nevertheless postulates that Syrian Christian painters were either directly influenced by Islamic art or at least acutely aware of the stylistic trends in their surrounding artistic milieu, pointing out some very general stylistic analogies between the 'Syrian style' murals at Deir Mar Musa dating from the early thirteenth century and a fragment of wall painting from a Fatimid bath house in Fustat (Cairo, Museum of Islamic Art, inv. no. 12880: R. Hillenbrand 1999, 72, Fig. 51; Ettinghausen/Grabar/Jenkins-Madina 2001, Fig. 310; Grube/Johns 2005, Fig. 16.3).

⁹ Hunt 1998a; Jeudy 2006, 159-179; *idem* 2007, 129-132.

¹⁰ Washington, D.C., Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, inv. no. 55.10: Ward 2005, 315-321, Fig. 18.2. Cf. Baer 1989, 18-19, Pls 63-68; Khoury 1998, Figs 2, 2a-2f; Auld 2009, 47-48, 66-67, Pls 3.5-3.7.

In comparison with other regions in the Middle East, the Christian-Muslim artistic overlap appears to have been particularly pronounced in the Mosul area. The present research has made it clear that the Christians of the Mosul area relied fully on local expertise, whether Christian or Muslim, for the embellishment of churches and monasteries with architectural reliefs and stuccowork, the illustration of manuscripts, and the production of metalwork. By contrast, the few indications for wall paintings in the region point in the direction of a purely Christian approach, as in Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria. It seems that the production of murals in the Mesopotamian region in general, and the Mosul area in particular, never reached the level of that in Mediterranean areas. No wonder Barhebraeus welcomed a passing Byzantine artist with open arms; this unexpected visitor enabled him to have the church he erected at Deir Mar Yuhanon bar Naggare in Bartelli decorated with fashionable wall paintings, which, to judge from the surviving description of the iconography, were typically Byzantine. The activities of Byzantine artists or local artists trained in the Byzantine tradition in Lebanon and Syria seem to have been much less a matter of coincidence than in Northern Mesopotamia, but it remains to be seen whether it was simply availability or any particularly high appreciation of the Byzantine style that was the decisive criterion in employing these artists' services, a matter to which we will return in Section 9.3.

An important result of the present research is that stylistic features cannot be connected exclusively with one religious or confessional community. A strong example is the liturgical fan from Deir al-Surian. There is an obvious agreement in style between this object and Islamic metal objects and illustrated manuscripts, which have often been assumed to be the work of Muslim metalworkers and miniature painters. In the case of the fan, the Syriac inscriptions might be taken as an indication of a Christian craftsman, but we would say rather that it shows that the question of the religious identity of the maker is essentially irrelevant. Artists and craftsmen made objects for Christian and Muslim patrons interchangeably. We would stress that the formal characteristics of these works of art are determined by the techniques the artist applied rather than by his religious or linguistic background. The stylistic and iconographic resemblance to contemporary Islamic art is striking and demonstrates that there was often a distinct conformity between Christian and Islamic art.

In addition to a shared style, the adaptation of a wide range of interchangeable images and patterns to differing purposes illustrates the cultural symbiosis between the two communities. Time and again, Christians and Muslims used the same kind of representations, which received an Islamic or Christian connotation only within the context in which they were represented. In a distinctively Christian religious setting, the specific meaning of the mounted falconers, for instance, derives from their contextual location and not so much from the image of the falconer itself, which remains in accordance with the iconographic standards of the period. The Eastern Christian tradition of placing paired equestrian saints at entrances, where their protective connotations are most fully exploited, provides the key to the interpretation of the mounted falconers at the Church of Mar Ahudemme in Mosul. As argued, the falconers may be seen as a fashionable variant of the specifically Christian mounted warrior saint. Christians participated fully in the visual culture of their times, and the mounted falconers were simply one of the possibilities for placing apotropaic riders at the entrance of the sanctuary.

9.2.3 Monastic Context versus Parish Context

Whereas Christian and Islamic texts of the period and region can often be seen to emphasize exclusion and confrontation, most works of art, by contrast, suggest a culture of inclusion and interaction. Our study of the artistic tradition of the Mosul area shows that there was a fruitful interaction between the Christian and Muslim communities, with the Syrian Orthodox sharing

the same visual vocabulary and artistic techniques with the Muslims. Although this is perhaps not always consciously articulated, one might say that the Syrian Orthodox, despite being subjected to certain social and religious restrictions, were thus able to establish their position as full members of contemporary Islamic society.

At the same time, a clear distinction should perhaps be made between parish and monastic contexts, at least as far as monumental sculpture is concerned. The aforementioned Church of Mar Ahudemme, for example, displays scarcely any specifically Christian motifs, apart from the now lost cross on the keystone, whereas the church at Deir Mar Behnam near Qaraqosh shows representations that are typically Christian, including saints, martyrs and monks, as well as two scenes based on the life of its patron saint, Mar Behnam. Strikingly, this distinction finds a parallel in the use of languages: the inscriptions at the Church of Mar Ahudemme are in Arabic, the language of the people – Muslim and Christian –, whereas in the monastery the liturgical language, Syriac, takes a dominant position.

Though the monks of Deir Mar Behnam would seem to have made conscious and deliberate choices in language and iconography to bolster their general Christian identity, and apparently even specifically Syrian Orthodox identity, we should remember that even in this monastery many motifs can be found that are paralleled in Islamic contexts. The recently discovered sculpture showing the Virgin and Child Enthroned at the Church of the Virgin in Mosul shows that the distinction between monastery and parish should not be drawn too strictly. Nonetheless, in contrast to the parish churches of Mar Ahudemme in Mosul and Mart Shmuni in Qaraqosh, Deir Mar Behnam's decoration programme does not convey any iconographic subjects from the Princely Cycle, such as the cross-legged seated prince holding a drinking vessel, the cross-legged seated prince subduing lions or dragons, or mounted falconers.

In other words, the combined evidence shows that the syncretic juxtaposition of distinctively Christian themes and non-religious subjects from the Princely Cycle, acceptable to Christians on secular objects and in parish churches, is not exactly the same as the blend of images at Deir Mar Behnam. At the monastery, with the exception of the stylistic element, the Christian-Muslim overlap is limited to the shared use of certain floral and ornamental patterns, as well as a number of animal motifs. While the monks certainly did not have any affinities with non-Christian subjects from the Princely Cycle, and may even have found such worldly themes unacceptable, other Syrian Orthodox Christians clearly found no difficulty in using such imagery. As far as the monumental decoration of their monastery is concerned, the monks of Deir Mar Behnam displayed a certain attitude of openness to the cultural world of Islam, while retaining their Christian identity. In this respect, the monastic patrons are comparable with Jacob bar Shakko, who participated fully in the surrounding culture of his time, but simultaneously sought to enhance Syrian Orthodox communal identity by distancing his community from both Muslims and other Christian confessions.

In the case of the aforementioned group of inlaid metalwork vessels, the primarily social and secular function probably accounts for the mixture of Christian themes with subjects from the Princely Cycle. In contrast with the fan from Deir al-Surian, for instance, these objects were probably not intended to function in a liturgical setting, and while decorated with Christian elements, they were not primarily associated with religion. On the contrary, they functioned as items of display in the houses and on the dining tables of wealthy lay people, irrespective of their precise religious affiliation. As argued earlier in this study, the success of this distinct group of luxury objects, which functioned in a non-religious social context, is explicable from their intrinsic appeal to both the Muslim and Christian upper classes. These elite groups shared the same fashionable taste, which was connected with their social position rather than with their religious backgrounds.

The social function of iconography in the case of luxury objects used within the realm of private display is obvious, but another means for wealthy Christians to acquire prestige was to contribute to the erection and decoration of churches, either individually or as part of a cooperative venture. In adopting fashionable themes from non-Christian art, the patrons responsible for the decoration of the Royal Gates in the churches of Mar Ahudemmeh and Mart Shmuni, who were arguably Christian members of the wealthy urban elite, apparently sought to make a public statement about their social identity and status and to show their affiliation with the powerful in their region. Whereas in the case of the programmes in the two parish churches it is even possible to say that the intention of those responsible for their commissioning was to positively align themselves with the Muslim upper class, the decoration programme of Deir Mar Behnam, with its iconographic emphasis on the struggle between Good and Evil, and the cross as the sign of victory, was arguably much more concerned both with underlining the patrons' own tradition and demarcating the boundaries between the Syrian Orthodox and the Muslims. The proliferation of Islamic *ziyara* culture may have played an important role in this respect. If we posit that Deir Mar Behnam, in addition to Christians, was also frequented by Muslim pilgrims in search for *baraka*, it is perhaps not far fetched to assume that the religious fluidity, which resulted from the joint Christian-Muslim veneration taking place at the site, called for a decoration programme with a more distinctively Christian profile. Perhaps the marked emphasis on the symbol of the cross, with its triumphal and apotropaic connotations for Christian viewers, but negative connotations for Muslim audiences, was intended to ward off destruction or confiscation.

Unlike the Christian urban elite, for whom the act of patronage was primarily intended to advance their social position and prestige, the monks were much more concerned with preserving the Syrian Orthodox tradition and stressing communal distinctiveness. It would seem that the identities expressed in the written sources formed a concern mainly for the clerical elite, whereas local church members had to deal with the reality of everyday life in the towns and villages, which necessitated contacts between the various communities to a much higher degree than the keepers of the Syrian Orthodox tradition may have wanted. Along with the written evidence, such as the legend of Mar Behnam, the art-historical evidence of Mosul suggests that the monastic clergy were both carriers and inventors of the Syrian Orthodox tradition, acting much in the same way as the *Traditionskern* in ethnogenesis theory (see Section 1.3.2).¹¹

As pointed out by Weltecke in her discussion on the social and cultural history of the Syrian Orthodox from the eleventh to the thirteenth century, 'only parts of the members of the church were constantly involved with ecclesiastical matters, built their careers on the church and formed their *habitus* through it. Others, like professionals and merchants, had to constantly interact with members of different religions and cultures. By their training, their occupations and their environment, the secular scholars and professionals developed different cultural interests and forms than those known from the clerical sources written in Syriac'.¹² Indeed, the discernable iconographic and linguistic differences between Deir Mar Behnam and the churches of Mar Ahudemmeh and Mart Shmuni, which should be explained from differences in context, patronage, and function, allow us to see that identities are never uniform and simple, but usually multiple and at times even contradictory. In addition to being loyal to religious ties, Syrian Orthodox Christians were faithful to their city or village, as well as their social and professional networks.

9.3 Identity in Word and Image: Future Avenues of Research

¹¹ Ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2009, 33-34, 51.

¹² Weltecke 2008, 333.

The systematic study of the art of the Mosul region undertaken in this study has made it clear that all communities in the region ordered metal objects, illustrated manuscripts, and sculpture, and that these works of art came from the same workshops or were at least made by artists with identical training, who produced art for Christian and Muslim patrons alike. The appeal of Christian themes to a Muslim audience in a secular context has demonstrated that the presence of Christian subjects should not necessarily be assumed to indicate a particular religious or communal identity, either on the part of the artists or the patrons. The considerable overlap between Christian and Islamic art shows that it is not possible to distinguish properly between the two groups from the point of art and craftsmanship. Terms such as 'Christian style' or 'Islamic style' appear to be redundant.

The stylistic agreement between the Islamic and Christian art of the Mosul area makes it impossible to use style as a criterion for the Syrian Orthodox nature of a work of art. The same holds true for the other features that we initially considered possible identity markers. Even typically Christian representations were not unique to the Syrian Orthodox, as we found parallels in other Christian communities. An exception to the rule is the iconographical attention paid to the patron saint and a few Syrian Orthodox martyrs at Deir Mar Behnam. Mar Behnam was a local saint, venerated at the time only by the Syrian Orthodox. Specifically Syrian Orthodox saints such as Mar Behnam and Mar Barsauma are lacking from the monumental decoration at Deir Mar Musa, but it should be noted that the loss of some wall paintings at the site may account for this absence, especially considering that the name of the latter saint turns up in a twelfth-century Arabic invocation in the southern isle.¹³ Nonetheless, we should not overestimate the extent and importance of features proper to Syrian Orthodox monumental decoration.

This conclusion finds confirmation in other medieval wall paintings in Lebanon and Syria, where divisions between Christian communities known from the written sources also appear to be broken by artistic links. Notwithstanding the obvious function of church art as a marker of Christian identity, the sponsors of the painted programmes in Lebanon and Syria, whether Melkite, Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, or Latin, do not seem to have been much concerned with visually demarcating their doctrinal differences. The general interchangeability of the painted decoration programmes of these Churches (see Section 9.2) leads Immerzeel to conclude that 'all those involved in the decoration of church interiors were resigned to the common oriental repertoire. They must have considered the themes suitable to their purposes, despite the imagery being borrowed from rival Churches, and did not feel the need for more specific representations to distinguish their art from that of others. To each community, its church decoration must have been in line with its own tradition and doctrines, making the addition of distinctive elements superfluous'.¹⁴

According to Immerzeel, whose first objective was to establish the artistic elements that make Syrian Orthodox art different from that of other Eastern Christian Churches, the impossibility of retracing church denominations on the basis of iconography or style shows that both these aspects minor significance as a marker of denominational identity in the wall paintings of Lebanon and Syria.¹⁵ As we have already explained in Chapter 1, however, the fact that we are unable to distinguish properly between the wall paintings of the Syrian Orthodox and those of other denominations should not necessarily be taken to imply that the Syrian Orthodox community did not perceive its art as a defining characteristic of their communal identity. A case in point, once more, is the factor of language: medieval Syrian Orthodox authors commonly regarded Syriac as an important marker of their identity, despite

¹³ Ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2007, inscr. no. B33.

¹⁴ Immerzeel 2009, 178. Cf. Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 101-103.

¹⁵ Immerzeel 2009, 145, 172.

the fact that it was simultaneously used by opposing Christian communities, such as the Melkites and the East Syrians. Communal identities are not automatically mutually exclusive categories.

The fact that it proves impossible to establish a set of criteria by which to distinguish Syrian Orthodox art from that of other communities cannot be taken to mean simply that the works of art in question did not play any role in the formation and maintenance of a Syrian Orthodox communal identity. In light of the above, we might concur with Immerzeel that the painted decoration of the churches in Lebanon and Syria are not specific to denomination, but his research simultaneously offers some remarkable patterns and correlations, which might actually have been the result of a desire to enhance communal identity. When surveying the murals around the Tripoli area, in particular, Immerzeel demonstrated 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 customers seem to have favoured artists working in a more local Syrian style and preferred Syriac in their inscriptions (see Section 8.1.2; Table 1).¹⁶

Considering that the formation and maintenance of a communal identity always involves a continuous dialectic between similarity and difference (see Section 1.3.1), and focusing our attention on the Melkites, it might be appropriate to ask the question whether there was any deeper meaning or rationale behind the perceived similarity between the various Melkite churches on the one hand, and the stylistic and linguistic difference between Melkite and Maronite churches on the other. In other words, were the similarity and difference brought about intentionally, and what does this tell us about the communal self-definition of the Melkites?

A similar question is raised by Glenn Peers in his thought-provoking study on a fragmented wall painting discovered in the eastern apse at a Melkite site known as the Church at the Jerusalem Gate in Crusader Ascalon, situated in the former Kingdom of Jerusalem.¹⁷ The mural (c. 1153-1187) depicts four officiating prelates, who stand in a nearly profile position facing the centre of the apse, each carrying an open scroll with excerpts of Greek liturgical prayers. Strikingly, the painting shows the same Byzantinizing stylistic and iconographic tendencies as the late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century wall paintings at the Melkite Cave Chapel of Mar Elias in Ma^carrat Saydnaya, located in the former Emirate of Damascus, where four Greek, scroll-bearing church fathers are similarly turned towards the centre of the apse. On the basis of their formal characteristics, the paintings in the Chapel of Mar Elias are assumed to have been painted by a Cypriot master.¹⁸ The theme of the concelebrating hierarchs carrying scrolls and converging on the centre of the apse was developed in Byzantine apse decoration from the twelfth century onwards, perhaps as a result of theological discussions around 1156 about the nature of Christ.¹⁹ At present, these are the only two known examples of such apse programmes to have come down to us in the Middle East, where the church fathers are usually depicted in a strictly frontal position, as at Syrian Orthodox Deir Mar Musa and Melkite Deir Mar Ya^cqub.

In trying to answer the important question of whether the iconographic and stylistic similarity between the Melkite churches has any meaning, Peers essentially adopts an intentionalist and programmatic approach, which emphasizes the involvement of the patrons and conceives the painted programmes as the conscious attempt to enhance communal identity. According to Peers, the common thread between the Church at the Jerusalem Gate and the Chapel of Mar Elias shows Melkite unity across Crusader and Muslim boundaries and

¹⁶ Immerzeel 2004a, 24-26, Fig. 2; *idem* 2009, 173; ter Haar Romeny *et al.* 2009, 32.

¹⁷ Peers 2009.

¹⁸ Immerzeel 2005a, 176-181, Figs 42-43, Pls XVIIa, 21, 22b; *idem* 2009, 49-54, Fig. 5.

¹⁹ Gerstel 1999; Immerzeel 2005, 173-174.

reveals Byzantine style and iconography as a common language of confessional identity: 'In other words, evidence of what one can call a lingua franca that operated over various spheres of influence, while maintaining aspects of a Melkite identity'. Peers further argues that the 'Melkites evidently had access to painters and builders who were current to practices in the eastern Mediterranean broadly speaking, and they choose elements that, evidently, mirrored liturgical and artistic practice in Byzantine churches'.²⁰ Hence, according to Peers, the wall paintings in the two Melkite churches were aimed at effectuating religious and cultural affiliation with the Byzantine Orthodox. In this connection, it is worth pointing out that precisely in this period the Melkite Church witnessed a Byzantinization of the traditional Antiochene liturgical rite.²¹

Immerzeel, on the other hand, favours a functionalist interpretation, arguing that the obvious link between Melkite denomination and Byzantine-style paintings with Greek inscriptions in the churches situated in the Tripoli region should be explained mainly in terms of existing relational networks between Melkite patrons and masters trained in the art and the tradition of Byzantium.²² Such a pragmatic approach to matters of art and identity may be safest, but it is probably also too reductive. Especially considering that artists of different stylistic persuasions are known to have worked in the relatively small geographical area around Tripoli, it is highly conceivable that at least some of the Melkite patrons deliberately chose a 'Byzantine artist' over an artist painting in the 'Syrian style', and Greek inscriptions instead of Syriac ones. In practice, the coming into being of the wall paintings in Melkite churches (and the Maronite churches, for that matter) probably evolved as a combination of these two interpretative models, which brings us to an important methodological problem in studying questions of art and identity.

In the Middle East, the various Christian communities were confronted by a range of artistic and linguistic possibilities, the selection of which may represent a conscious choice intended to stress communal identity and to mark the boundaries with other communities. If the works of art are the only evidence at hand, however, it becomes virtually impossible to establish with any degree of certainty whether this was indeed the case. The great difficulty when it comes to evaluating whether works of art, or the images represented on them, were appropriated in order to enhance communal identity is that images, generally speaking, have the capacity of conveying a multiplicity of meanings, depending on the social and religious position of the onlooker. This polysemic and multivalent quality makes them powerful, as well as susceptible to appropriation by other groups for other purposes. The use of the same symbols by different groups often greatly diminishes the possibility of assessing whether works of art were used to demonstrate communal identity. All this raises the important point about the difference between texts and images as sources for retracing meaning in general and the expression of communal identity in particular.

Religious writing tends to establish communal self-definition by more or less explicit contrast and polemic. As for the Syrian Orthodox tradition, we have seen that ecclesiastical authorities such as Dionysius bar Salibi and Jacob bar Shakko were concerned with demarcating the borderlines between, for instance, Islam and Christianity or the Syrian Orthodox and the Greek Orthodox. Religious imagery, by contrast, is far more ambiguous. Throughout art history one may come across images that explicitly pinpoint the object of attack or mockery, but usually images are only implicitly polemical. Some anti-Muslim considerations may have played a role in the depiction and design of Christ's Trial in the two Syrian Orthodox lectionaries from the Mosul area, Vat. Syr. 559 and BL Add. 7170. As we have seen earlier in this study, the subject is virtually identical to the *qadi* in trial scenes, but

²⁰ Peers 2009.

²¹ Cannuyer 1986, 115.

²² Immerzeel 2009, 170-172

whether this represents a peculiar instance of Muslim-Christian syncretism resulting from common workshop practices, or a deliberately anti-Muslim adaptation of Islamic iconography, will probably always remain a mystery.

Considering that works of art are usually not provided with interpretative keys to unlock their intended meanings and functions, the obvious methodological implication is that only a truly interdisciplinary approach, which takes into account both visual and written sources, has any chance of shedding more light on this matter. In keeping with Cohen's model of the symbolic construction of community, which allows for the transmission of style and iconography, while permitting local and individual interpretations, the present study has analysed the importance and meaning of the architectural reliefs at Deir Mar Behnam and the wall painting at the Church of Mar Giworgis in Qaraqosh by taking full account of contemporary Syrian Orthodox sources. In the case of the wall paintings in Lebanon and Syria, by contrast, little iconological research has been done. Even in those cases where the denomination of the church in question is certain, as at Syrian Orthodox Deir Mar Musa, for example, where the programmatic layout of Layer 3 is essentially clear despite the loss of some material,²³ scholars have not yet attempted to uncover the meanings of each individual scene depicted, nor those of the decoration programmes in their entirety.

For a more conclusive assessment of the extant material and its possible ideological motivation, an attempt should first be made to reconstruct Syrian Orthodox, Melkite, and Maronite views on the iconographic subjects depicted in their respective churches. Such a future study should make use of a variety of written sources, including liturgical texts (e.g., commentaries on the liturgy), literary texts (e.g., legends about biblical figures, saints or martyrs), and historical sources (e.g., chronicles).²⁴ Research on Syrian Orthodox, Melkite, and Maronite iconography and iconology are still in a preliminary stage, but our understanding of whether and how these communities expressed their communal identities in visual terms should become clearer in the years to come as further studies are done in this field and more contemporary written sources become available in editions and translations. This will help to refine the conclusions reached in this study, and provide more evidence of the dynamic development of the Christian communities in the Middle East. Hopefully, the present research will provide a foundation upon which further work on these issues can be based.

²³ Westphalen 2007, 111-114.

²⁴ Such a future study could be modelled on van Loon's 1999 study on the wall paintings with Old Testament themes in Coptic churches (van Loon 1999, esp. 10-12, 125-183, 196-211).