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Word Translating Image. In search of modern-language equivalents for Syriac and Coptic terminology*

Abstract

In general the iconographic details recorded in the hagiographic literature are pretty meagre. Authors focus on the miraculous properties of icons. The Coptic lives of the saints may be selected as representative for the Early Christian and Byzantine hagiography. *The Martyrdom and Miracles of Saint Mercurius the General* and other lives contain stories about the Saint's icons. We have some information about church decoration in the East, but, it does not look as impressive as John of Gaza's extensive *ecphrasis* of St. Sergius' and St. Stephen's complex decorative programmes. However, we actually find a number of interesting minor descriptions in the church histories, in the theological polemic on icons, and in the hagiographies. A Syriac manuscript from the British Museum preserves a chronicle of the monastery of Qartamin, Mor Gabriel. I focus on a chapter which describes the church's construction and its interior decoration. The essential part of the art terminology, which we know from the Coptic texts, consists of the Greek borrowings. The Syriac texts show an entirely different pattern. The Syriac description compiled by an anonymous monk from Qartamin resembles the hymn on the Edessa Cathedral. The Syriac art description in general evolved along entirely different lines from the Greek *ecphrasis*. Greek borrowings in the discussed Syriac texts are rare, and if they do appear, they are limited to only certain words.

Keywords

Word and image, Coptic hagiographic literature, Early Christian icons, Art description in Early Christian literature, Oriens Christianus, Monastery of Qartamin, Greek rhetorical *ecphrasis*.

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Kahzdan and Maguire emphasise the difference between the rhetorical *ecphraseis* and hagiographic writings: ‘The *ecphraseis* are more concerned with the formal qualities of images, with features of style and iconography and how those features conveyed the Christian story and dogma,’¹ they say, while ‘hagiographers were deeply interested in objects of art, primarily those of religious art, including church buildings, icons, holy vessels, and liturgical books.’² They write of ‘humble hagiographers with their curiosity toward elements of reality – works of art are named and described (if briefly), their locations indicated, their prices mentioned, and so on.’³ In fact occasionally we even find technical information, e.g. Leontius of Neapolis writes of images as icons (in all likelihood in referring to wooden tablets), or icons on canvas (ἐν εἰκόσι καὶ ἐν σινδόνι) and also of the work of weavers embroidered on garments (ἐν ἱματίοις).⁴ In general the iconographic details recorded in the hagiographic literature are pretty meagre. Authors focus on the miraculous properties of icons, and such details are numerous.

The Coptic lives of the Saints may be selected as representative for the Early Christian and Byzantine hagiography. *The Martyrdom and Miracles of Saint Mercurius the General*, a high ranking Roman officer executed during the reign of Decius and Valerianus in AD 250 at Caesarea Mazaca, gives us the circumstances of his martyrdom followed by a series of miracles performed by him.⁵ The *Life* contains a number of returning motifs symptomatic of this class of popular literary works: demonic possessions, incurable illnesses, e.g. blindness, black magic practices, hostility to the Christian religion, sometimes love stories concluded with a happy end through the Saint’s intervention, and stories about the Saint’s icons.

The 7th miracle of St. Mercurius⁶ tells the story of Gaipios, a blasphemous Jew, who desecrated the Saint’s Church by entering it on a white she-mule. St. Mercurius immediately appeared in his church accompanied by the Archangel armed with a spear and pierced the body of the Jew with it (fol. 13b). In his ordeal the suffering intruder made a promise that if he were pardoned he would offer an icon of the Saint as a votive for his salvation, and he described the icon: ‘I will make a stele **ΑΥΩ †CMINE Ἰ ΤΕΚΤΗΛΗ** ...to your glory

¹ Kahzdan, Magurie 1991, p. 20.

² Ibid., p. 1.

³ Ibid., p. 20.

⁴ Cited by John of Damascus *pro imaginibus* III 87, PG 93, c.Iud.1600B 8–1601C 10; Kotter 1975, p. 179f.

⁵ Budge 1915, the date of the Saint’s martyrdom at the beginning of the writing: Fol. 1a, Copt. p. 256; Engl.trans.p. 828; the place of miracles identified, fol.20a (Copt. p. 277), trans.p.848; Holweck 1924, Mercurius of Caesarea, p. 706.

⁶ Budge 1915, Copt. pp. 268–72, Engl.trans. pp. 840–844.

†...κ ΤΕΝΟΥ Ζῆ ΠΕΚΕΟΟΥ picturing the moment when you pierced me with your spear ΕΡΕ ΠΕΚΚΟΥΝΤΑΡΙΟΝ ΤΟΚ̄ Ε ΡΟΙ, and I will show my own portrait ΑΥΩ †ΝΑΣΜΙΝΕ ᾄ ΠΑ ΛΙΜῆ ΖΩΩΤ, lying at your feet helpless ΕΦΝΗΧ ΕΒΟΛ ΠΕΚΟΥΕΡΗΤΕ· and filled with great shame Ζῆ ΟΥΝΟΒ ᾄ ΨΙΠΕ Μῆ ΟΥΜΝΤΑΤΒΟΜ· Your image will be made of the best gold, ΝΤΑΧΡΥΣΣΟΥ ᾄ ΤΕΚΖΙΚΩΝ Ζῆ ΟΥΝΟΥΒ· ΕΦCOTΠ̄ it will look resplendent with jewels of the colour of fire, Μῆ ΖΕΝΝΩΝΕ ᾄ ΝΑΥΕΙΝ ᾄ ΚΩΖΤ̄· that is of chrysolites, ΕΤΕ ΠΕΧΡΥCΟΛΙΝΘΟΣ ΠΕ and also the image of your spear ΑΥΩ ΠΛΙΜῆ ΠΕΚΚΟΥΝΤΑΡΙΟΝ· ...of the precious stones †ΝΑΤΡΕΥΤΟΚCῆ ΕΝΩΝΕ ᾄ ΜΕ

ΑΥΩ †CΜΙΝΕ ᾄ ΤΕΚCΤΗΛΗ †...κ ΤΕΝΟΥ Ζῆ ΠΕΚΕΟΟΥ· ΕΡΕ ΠΕΚΚΟΥΝΤΑΡΙΟΝ ΤΟΚ̄ Ε ΡΟΙ· ΑΥΩ †ΝΑΣΜΙΝΕ ᾄ ΠΑ ΛΙΜῆ ΖΩΩΤ· ΕΦΝΗΧ ΕΒΟΛ ΠΕΚΟΥΕΡΗΤΕ· Ζῆ ΟΥΝΟΒ ᾄ ΨΙΠΕ· Μῆ ΟΥΜΝΤΑΤΒΟΜ· ΝΤΑΧΡΥCΣΟΥ ᾄ ΤΕΚΖΙΚΩΝ Ζῆ ΟΥΝΟΥΒ· ΕΦCOTΠ̄· Μῆ ΖΕΝΝΩΝΕ ᾄ ΝΑΥΕΙΝ ᾄ ΚΩΖΤ̄· ΕΤΕ ΠΕΧΡΥCΟΛΙΝΘΟΣ ΠΕ· ΑΥΩ ΠΛΙΜῆ ΠΕΚΚΟΥΝΤΑΡΙΟΝ· †ΝΑΤΡΕΥΤΟΚCῆ ΕΝΩΝΕ ᾄ Μ ΜΕ.

Gaipios and his wife were converted to the Christian religion and were baptized taking the name of Zacharias and Elisabeth. He fulfilled his promise and ordered the icon by a craftsman. At this point of the story we find a second description of the icon with some new details: He called a craftsman ΑΦΜΟΥΤΕ ΕΥΡΩΜΕ ᾄ ΤΥΧΝΕΙΤΗΣ and gave him ten pounds of the best gold ΑΦ† ΝΑΦ ᾄ ΜΗΤ ᾄ ΛΙΤΡΑ ΝΟΥΒ·, and authentic precious stones Μῆ ΖΕΝΝΩΝΕ ᾄ ΜΕ ΕΥΤΑΙΗΥ, and he made the portrait of St. Mercurius ΑΦCΜῆ ΠΛΙΜῆ ᾄ ΠΖΑΓΙΟΣ ΜΕΡΚΟΥΡΙΟΣ· with the spear in his hand ΕΡΕ ΠῆΚΟΥΝΤΑΡΙΟΝ ᾄ ΤΟΟΤῆ· and studded it with diamonds ΑΦΤΡΕΥΤΟΚCῆ ΕΝΩΝΕ ᾄ ΑΤΑΜΑC, and he also commissioned him to make his own portrait with gold and real jewels ΑΥΩ ΑΦΤΡΕΥCΜΙΝΕ ᾄ ΠῆΛΙΜΗΝ· ΖΩΦ ᾄ ΝΟΥΒ· Ζῆ ΩΝΕ ᾄ ΜΕ·, which showed him lying at the feet of St. Mecrius ΕΦΖΑ ΠΕCΗΤ ᾄ ΠΖΑΓΙΟΣ ΜΕΡΚΟΥΡΙΟΣ·, who was piercing him with his spear ΕΦΠΑΤΑCCE ᾄ ΜΜΟΦ Ζῆ ΠῆΜΕΡΕΖ.

ΑΦΜΟΥΤΕ ΕΥΡΩΜΕ ᾄ ΤΥΧΝΕΙΤΗΣ ΑΦ† ΝΑΦ ᾄ ΜΗΤ ᾄ ΛΙΤΡΑ ΝΟΥΒ· Μῆ ΖΕΝΝΩΝΕ ᾄ ΜΕ ΕΥΤΑΙΗΥ· ΑΦCΜῆ ΠΛΙΜῆ ᾄ ΠΖΑΓΙΟΣ ΜΕΡΚΟΥΡΙΟΣ· ΕΡΕ ΠῆΚΟΥΝΤΑΡΙΟΝ ᾄ ΤΟΟΤῆ· ΑΦΤΡΕΥΤΟΚCῆ ΕΝΩΝΕ ᾄ ΑΤΑΜΑC ΑΥΩ ΑΦΤΡΕΥCΜΙΝΕ ᾄ ΠῆΛΙΜΗΝ· ΖΩΦ ᾄ ΝΟΥΒ· Ζῆ ΩΝΕ ᾄ ΜΕ· ΕΦΖΑ ΠΕCΗΤ ᾄ ΠΖΑΓΙΟΣ ΜΕΡΚΟΥΡΙΟΣ· ΕΦΠΑΤΑCCE ᾄ ΜΜΟΦ Ζῆ ΠῆΜΕΡΕΖ.

In his conclusion the author added that the icon was still to be seen in the sanctuary. The story looks like a chapter cited from a guide's repertoire at a pilgrimage centre. In the above-cited passages we have one of the finest pieces of icon descriptions in the extant literary lore of the early Byzantine period. It contains details which we generally miss in other instances of descriptions or

references to the icons. The icon was richly studded with jewels and adorned with golden leaf (**Μ ΜΗΤ ΝΑΙΤΡΑ ΝΟΥΒ· ΜΝ ΖΕΝΝΩΝΕ Μ ΜΕ ΕΥΤΑΙΗΥ**), the kind of decoration which we certainly know well from the later Russian or Greek Orthodox or Western Catholic traditions. The icon showed the critical moment of the Saint's intervention and the subsequent conversion of the sinner. The icon resembles the class of the Coptic icons, which picture a saint piercing a demon, dragon or magician, as on the icons of St. Pisentios or St. George.

The 8th Miracle of St. Mercurius brings a colourful story of a man who wanted to have a son, and also of a young boy who fell in love with a young girl, who was closely guarded by her father. Kuris (or Kyrios?) Hermapollo, the hero of the story, promised a votive offering to St. Mercurius: 'if the God of St. Mercurius fulfils my petition I will make a bier for the martyr, the bier will be of precious ivory, and will look like the biers of the Roman emperors' (Fol. 17a, Budge p. 274).

A large part of the story is missing. St. Mercurius appeared before the archon as a cavalry general (**Μ ΠΕΣΜΟΤ Ν ΣΤΡΑΤΥΛΛΑΤΗΣ**) and apparently all the wishes of those who prayed to St. Mercurius asking him for assistance were eventually fulfilled. At the end of the 8th miracle we find a more detailed description of Hermapollo's votive offering.

'And they also made a bier of pine wood logs **ΑΥΩ ΟΝ ΖΕΝΠΕΥΚΙΟΝ ΑΥΣΜΝΤΟΥ Μ ΠΟΒΕ·** and carved ivory plaques **ΑΥΨΕΤΨΩΤΟΥ Μ ΠΕΤΑΛΟΝ ΖΙΛΕΦΑ[Ν]ΤΙΝΟΝ·** and thus made the bier **ΑΥΩ ΤΑΜΙΟ Μ ΠΜΑ Ν ΜΚΑΤΚ** and fixed to it the Martyr's icon **ΑΥΩϞΤ ΕΖΟΥΝ ΕΡΟϞ Ν ΘΙΚΩΝ Μ ΠΜΑΡΤΥΡΟC** adorned with jewels (sparkling beautifully? beautiful and sparkling?) **ΖΝ ΖΕΝΝΩΝΕ ΝΑΥΑΝ ΕΝΙΒΕ·** together with three crosses of gold **ΜΝ ΨΟΜΤ ΝCΤΑΥΡΟC ΝΝΟΥΒ·** and three *sphrageis* (seals) of silver **ΜΝ ΨΟΜΤ ΝCΦΡΑΓΙC Ν ΖΑΤ·**

ΑΥΩ ΟΝ ΖΕΝΠΕΥΚΙΟΝ ΑΥΣΜΝΤΟΥ Μ ΠΟΒΕ· ΑΥΨΕΤΨΩΤΟΥ Μ ΠΕΤΑΛΟΝ ΖΙΛΕΦΑ[Ν]ΤΙΝΟΝ· ΑΥΩ ΤΑΜΙΟ Μ ΠΜΑ Ν ΜΚΑΤΚ ΑΥΩϞΤ ΕΖΟΥΝ ΕΡΟϞ Ν ΘΙΚΩΝ Μ ΠΜΑΡΤΥΡΟC ΖΝ ΖΕΝΝΩΝΕ ΝΑΥΑΝ ΕΝΙΒΕ· ΜΝ ΨΟΜΤ ΝCΤΑΥΡΟC ΝΝΟΥΒ· ΜΝ ΨΟΜΤ ΝCΦΡΑΓΙC Ν ΖΑΤ·

'And they also made a bier of pine wood logs and carved ivory plaques, and thus made the bier and fixed to it the Martyr's icon adorned with jewels (sparkling beautifully? beautiful and sparkling?) together with three crosses of gold and three *sphrageis* (seals) of silver.'

Budge's rendering by-passed the difficulties in the interpretation of the 'jewels' described as **ΝΑΥΑΝ ΕΝΙΒΕ**. They are actually given a characteristic feature, probably as very beautiful or sparkling (from **ΝΑΥ** to see?), but I am not sure of the exact meaning (see Crum, **ΩΝΕ**). The Coptic text does not mention 'three crosses of gold and three crosses of silver' **ΜΝ ΨΟΜΤ**

ΝΣΤΑΥΡΟΣ ΝΝΟΥΒ· ΜΝ ΨΟΜΤ ΝΣΦΡΑΓΙΣ Ν ΖΑΤ as translated by Budge, but ‘three crosses of gold and three silver *sphrageis*’: perhaps medallions? Probably **ΝΣΦΡΑΓΙΣ** stand for the equivalent of the Syriac word ܠܘܕܐ translated by Nau as *sceaux*, *sphrageis*, seals, the meaning which we find in the description of the church in Qartamin, where they pictured the story of Salvation, an Evangelical narrative presented as a series of small images set on a large vase. We also know of a cross alternating with a rosette decoration on the cancelle of Qirqbize, which may probably be taken as an illustration of the obscure word in both the Syriac and Coptic texts.⁷ Let us collect together other words and phrases in the above-quoted text, which refer to the fine arts and craftsmanship: **ΖΕΝΠΕΥΚΙΟΝ...Μ ΠΟΒΕ** I understand as ‘the bier of pine wood logs’, τὰ πεύκινα, pine logs; **ΠΟΒΕ** Teil, Stück, Tafel (Westendorf); broken piece, *BMis* 2755 bier of **ΖΕΝΠΕΥΚΙΝ(Ο)Ν ΔΥΣΜΗΤΟΥ ΜΠ(ΟΒΕ)** wood-inlay? **ΑΥΨΕΤΨΩΤΟΥ ΠΕΤΑΛΟΝ ΖΙΛΕΦΑ[Ν]ΤΙΝΟΝ** refers to ‘carved ivory plaques’. **ΠΜΑ Ν ΜΚΑΤΚ** the bier, literally the place of sleep; **ΘΙΚΩΝ Μ ΠΜΑΡΤΥΡΟΣ ΖΝ ΖΕΝΝΩΝΕ** the martyr’s icon studded with precious stones.

We have some information about church decoration in the East, but, it does not look as impressive as John of Gaza’s extensive *ecphraseis* of St. Sergius’ and St. Stephen’s complex decorative programmes. However, we actually find a number of interesting minor descriptions in the church histories, in the theological polemic on icons, and in the hagiographies.

I am going to collect together dispersed information, which may help us to imagine and in a way to restore a mental picture of the appearance of the church interiors in one or another of the Oriental churches, their original splendour, the glory which has been lost forever, the glory of their mosaics and painted adornment together with their liturgical utensils and other works of craftsmanship in bronze, gold, silver, wood and stone.

A Syriac manuscript from the British Museum, catalogued by Wright as *Additional 17265*⁸ and subsequently translated and published by Nau,⁹ preserves a chronicle of the monastery of Qartamin, Mor Gabriel, concluded in 784/5 by an anonymous writer, and continued until 818 (–48?) by another anonymous monk. The extant version was copied in the 13th century.¹⁰ I would like to focus on a chapter which describes the church’s construction and its interior decoration. The church with its 6th-century mosaics is still frequented by visitors from Europe (Fig. 1–2).

⁷ Lassus, Tchalenko 1951, Pl. II, 2.

⁸ Wright 1872, p. 1140, 2.

⁹ Nau 1907.

¹⁰ Leroy 1956, p. 76; Baumstark 1922, pp. 273f.



Figure 1. Mor Gabriel



Figure 2. Mor Gabriel

The restoration of the church and monastery was carried out on Anastasius' order. The Emperor commissioned the work to his engineers Theodorus and Theodosius, sons of Shufnay.¹¹ They sub-contracted goldsmiths, silversmiths, bronze workers, blacksmiths, besides painters, sculptors, mosaicists and stonecutters. This particular passage resembles the one we know from St. Gregory's description of St. Theodore's martyrion in Euchaita. The construction work was completed in 512, as confirmed by the anonymous chronicler with the usual exactness so admired by Baumstark.¹² The chronicler praises the opulence of Anastasius' donations for the newly built church's interior (Fig. 3–4).

The Syriac text is unique in the integrity of its description. It is worth reading in its full extent.



Figure 3. The Interior of Mor Gabriel

¹¹ Vollkommer 2007, s.v. Theodorus, p. 887.

¹² Baumstark 1922, p. 273; cf. Ihm 1960, p. 56, 234; Bell 1910, p. 234; Monneret de Villard 1940, pp. 55–60.

Three interiors were built on the eastern side of the church.

הַיְהוָה בְּתוֹכָהּ אֲלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֵינוּ אֵלֵינוּ כְּתוּבָה.

The Holy of Holies was in the middle. הַיְהוָה בְּתוֹכָהּ אֲלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֵינוּ אֵלֵינוּ כְּתוּבָה.

The altar was made of marble.

וְהָאֲבִיבָה וְהָאֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה

It was six and half cubits long and four and half broad.

וְהָאֲבִיבָה וְהָאֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה

There were also images carved in relief on its sides: the figures of a lion, ox, eagle and a man.

וְהָאֲבִיבָה וְהָאֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה

וְהָאֲבִיבָה וְהָאֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה

A splendid imperial vase stood on a pediment.

וְהָאֲבִיבָה וְהָאֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה

The vase was surrounded by a crown, cast in silver.

וְהָאֲבִיבָה וְהָאֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה

300 seals (*sphrageis*) were set in it. They show the economy of the Incarnation.

וְהָאֲבִיבָה וְהָאֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה

A Cherub and the ciborium were located above the altar.

וְהָאֲבִיבָה וְהָאֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה

A canopy rested on four columns.

וְהָאֲבִיבָה וְהָאֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה

There was also a chandelier of pure gold hanging on a silver chain on the eastern side

וְהָאֲבִיבָה וְהָאֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה

The floor of the chancel was paved with marble tiles of different colours:

וְהָאֲבִיבָה וְהָאֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה

white, black, red, yellow, purple, gold, making different patterns.

וְהָאֲבִיבָה וְהָאֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה

The surrounding walls were covered with plaques of marble.

וְהָאֲבִיבָה וְהָאֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה

There were also gilt mosaics on the ceiling,

וְהָאֲבִיבָה וְהָאֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה

and two bronze trees on either side of the entrance to the chancel (alternatively: of the main gate to the church).

וְהָאֲבִיבָה וְהָאֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה

They were 20 cubits in height.

וְהָאֲבִיבָה וְהָאֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה

A hundred and eighty lamps shone in the foliage of each of the trees

וְהָאֲבִיבָה וְהָאֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה אֲבִיבָה

and fifty silver chains were hanging from them down to the floor.

مستعميم ممتللا، وصصعا حح للالابحا للاملا، وحصلاام حصم

They were adorned with ornaments of bronze in the shape of red eggs, vessels, animals, birds, crosses, crowns, grapes, figurines and rings.

رقتالا، وبسلا. امر حقا صهقتلا. هلاقتا همتقلا هرتقت هحكلا همتقلا
 حقةلحا حقتالا

Some of them were made of gold, others of silver, and yet others of bronze.

ههلاام حح حصموم وم، ووهط. هحصوم، وهصاا. هحصوم، وبسلا.

It is impossible to count their number or compare their value to anything else.⁷

املم، ولا حبرها، وحصامب، مسمصلا هحصلا، وحصاملاوم.

The plan of the church is by far not unique with its three interiors along the eastern wall: the chancel (حبروم ههوقوم) between two *pastoforia*. The altar (لوهوم) made of marble was actually not very big. As it seems, the four images (وحتالا) carved in relief on its sides. *وحصم*, actually means *représentés* (Leroy), but basically *وحصم* is usually rendered by *insculpsit, incidit* i.e. in this particular usage: carved in relief in the marble stone of the altar. They showed the four symbols of the Evangelists. The fourth took a human shape (حصملا). We may infer that it was an angel, however, this is not clearly specified e.g. by a *حصلاط*. A magnificent vase (حصانا), large judging by the description, stood on a column, a pediment or a base (حصا literally means a rock; *sur la pierre* as rendered by Leroy). The attributive ‘imperial’ (حصحما), of the ‘imperial vase’, refers in all likelihood to Anastasius’ gifts, sent by the Emperor to the church for the opening celebrations. The gifts are praised by the chronicler time and again. There were also 300 medallions (لوحوم) around a silver crown which surmounted the vase (واملا حص) (Leroy: *médailles*; Nau: *sceaux, sphrageis, sigles*, from *لوحد*: *signavit, sigillo munivit*). They showed the economy of the Incarnation, or in other words the Evangelical cycle of the life of Christ: the childhood, miracles and Passion. Were they painted on gold? Were they enamels, as suggested by Leroy’s translation (*peinte*, *لوح*, *pinxit, depinxit, delineavit*)? It is difficult to decide. The number of 300 seems by far too many for a conceivable repertory of 6th-century Christian art. They probably alternated with decorative medallions or panels adorned with different geometrical or floral patterns, frequently combined with Greek crosses. The analogies gathered in the Syrian churches are numerous. Let us only recall the ‘*sphrageis*’ from the chancel of the church in Qirqbize. It shows a cross and rosette combined in one impressive decorative pattern.¹³ The altar was shaded by a canopy (ههصالا; Leroy: *un ciborium d’airain*; Nau: *tabernacle*), which rested on four columns (حصهوا) and adorned with a cherub, probably represented as an angel-like creature. Where

¹³ Lassus, Tchalenko 1951, Pl. II, 2.

did the splendid golden chandelier hang? Nau read **ܘܥܠܘܢܐ** as ‘à l’Est’, ‘in the eastern part of the church.’ Leroy on his part interpreted the characters as ‘sur l’autel’ **ܘܥܠܘܢܐ**, above the altar, that is in the chancel. The word **ܘܥܠܘܢܐ** appears in the passage for the first time in the narrow meaning of an altar or the space of the chancel, and secondly in a more general meaning, which is synonymous with the church as a whole. Leroy chose to translate **ܘܥܠܘܢܐ** and **ܘܥܠܘܢܐ** as denoting the floor of the whole church. If his speculation is not right, then we are obliged to read ‘the floor of the chancel (**ܘܥܠܘܢܐ**; Nau: *le sol de l’autel*) was paved (**ܘܥܠܘܢܐ**) with the marble tiles (**ܘܥܠܘܢܐ**) of different colours arranged in different patterns’, the sort of decoration which can still be seen in some of the oldest Byzantine churches. Paul Silentarius also speaks of ‘marble meadows’ in his *ecphrasis* of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. The marble meadows of the Hagia Sophia were composed of ‘the green flanks of Carystus... the speckled Phrygian stone, sometimes rosy mixed with white, sometimes gleaming with purple and silver flowers... a wealth of porphyry stone, besprinkled with little bright stars... the bright green stone of Laconia and the glittering marble with wavy veins... exhibiting slanting streaks of blood-red and livid white; the pale yellow with swirling red...the glittering crocus-like golden stone (Lybian marble)... glittering black... vivid green or darker green, almost blue. It has spots resembling snow next to flashes of black so that in one stone various beauties mingle’ (vv. 620–646).¹⁴

The interior walls of the church in Qartamin were covered with marble tiles (**ܘܥܠܘܢܐ**), which is also usual for the Byzantine churches. The ceiling was gilt with mosaics (**ܘܥܠܘܢܐ**). I follow Leroy, who corrects Nau’s **ܘܥܠܘܢܐ** (*dans les pierres*, from **ܘܥܠܘܢܐ** – *saxum, rupes*) into **ܘܥܠܘܢܐ**: that is ‘dans le ciel’, in the skies, which means ‘on the ceiling’ (*la vouûte*). **ܘܥܠܘܢܐ** is a Greek borrowing of **κῦβος**, *tesselae*, mosaic cubes or stones.¹⁵ The illuminating reading of **ܘܥܠܘܢܐ** as ‘adorned with golden mosaics’ put forward by Dupont-Sommer¹⁶ in his translation of the Syriac hymn to the Cathedral Church of Edessa presents us with a picture of a spacious cupola adorned with golden mosaics spangled with stars which shone mysteriously in the semi-dark church interior. The previous reading offered by Goussen ‘geschmückt mit vergoldeten Höhlungen (Cassetten)’,¹⁷ and followed by Schneider¹⁸, is still being reproduced in the good faith by modern authors.¹⁹ In fact it had always caused confusion for archaeological reasons. Dupont-Sommer read **ܘܥܠܘܢܐ** as a borrowing from the Greek **κῦβος** (lat. *cupus, capsula* – cube), which is the Greek

¹⁴ Mango 2004, pp. 85f.

¹⁵ Cf. Leroy 1956, p. 80.

¹⁶ Dupont-Sommer 1947, pp. 30f.

¹⁷ Goussen 1925, p. 120.

¹⁸ Schneider 1941, p. 162.

¹⁹ ‘zdobne w złote kasety’ Kania 1973, p. 165; id. 1991–2, p. 235.

equivalent of the mosaic *tessela*, and *pars pro toto* ‘a mosaic’. This meaning had already been attested by Brockelmann *LS* p. 685b.

ܘܘܡܠܐ ܗܘܢ ܠܘܩܢܐ ܘܠܘܩܢܐ ܘܠܘܩܢܐ

can be rendered as follows: in the church (ܘܘܡܠܐ) on both sides of its entrance (ܘܠܘܩܢܐ), ‘dans la nef des deux côtés de la porte du sanctuaire’ (Leroy). ܘܠܘܩܢܐ was rendered by Nau as ‘porte de l’autel,’ i.e. the entrance to the chancel. However (ܘܠܘܩܢܐ) is also suggestive of *velum*, *secretum*, *tegumentum*, *latibulum*, *occultum*. It is not clear if the chronicler actually had in mind two curtains hanging on either side of the chancel. Personally I am inclined to believe that Nau’s rendering was correct.

Two bronze trees (6–7 m high) adorned with many lamps sparkling through the foliage make up one of the most impressive pictures in the Syriac description. ܘܘܡܠܐ ܗܘܢ ܠܘܩܢܐ ܘܠܘܩܢܐ means ‘places for lamps’ (*place pour les lampes*, Leroy). It must be a technical term, however, of obscure meaning to us (lamp stands, lamp holders, candelabra arms?). The next passage I understand in the following way: the fifty silver chains hung from the tree down to the floor. ܘܘܡܠܐ ܗܘܢ ܠܘܩܢܐ also refers to the second part of the passage, that is both to the lamps as well as to the chains. ܘܠܘܩܢܐ should be rendered as vessel, crater, or hydria. ܘܠܘܩܢܐ as vitis, surculum, grapes, a bunch of grapes, vine scrolls and grapes (*cloches*, *grappes*, *vitis*, ἄμπελος, Leroy). ܘܠܘܩܢܐ – different sculptures, figurines? (*objets sculptés*, Nau; *objets ciselés*, Leroy). What does it exactly mean? What kind of objects? It is impossible to tell. The manuscript ܘܠܘܩܢܐ from ܘܠܘܩܢܐ might have been related to ἄλφιτα, polenta, sweet cakes? ܘܠܘܩܢܐ – rings, discs (*des sphères*, *des anneaux*, Leroy).

In conclusion let us collect up the chronicler’s terminology referring to the arts and crafts: ܘܠܘܩܢܐ *altar*; ܘܠܘܩܢܐ ܘܠܘܩܢܐ the Holy of Holies, chancel; ܘܠܘܩܢܐ ܘܠܘܩܢܐ marble; ܘܠܘܩܢܐ, *imago*; ܘܠܘܩܢܐ here probably a column, podium, basis; ܘܠܘܩܢܐ *vas*, *crater*; ܘܠܘܩܢܐ *sigilla*, *gemmae*, *signa*, *species*; ܘܠܘܩܢܐ cherub; ܘܠܘܩܢܐ *tabernaculum*, *ciborium*, canopy; ܘܠܘܩܢܐ *columnae*; ܘܠܘܩܢܐ *candelabrum*; ܘܠܘܩܢܐ ܘܠܘܩܢܐ chancel (?), the Holy of Holies (?), the floor of the church (?); ܘܠܘܩܢܐ ܘܠܘܩܢܐ mosaics of marble plaques; ܘܠܘܩܢܐ ܘܠܘܩܢܐ *tesselae* covered with gold leaf, mosaics of a golden colour; ܘܠܘܩܢܐ ܘܠܘܩܢܐ marble tiles; ܘܠܘܩܢܐ ܘܠܘܩܢܐ ornaments, adornments made of bronze; ܘܠܘܩܢܐ lamps.

The essential part of the art terminology, which we know from the Coptic texts, consists of the Greek borrowings. The Syriac texts show an entirely different pattern. The Syriac description compiled by an anonymous monk from Qartamin resembles the hymn on the Edessa Cathedral composed by an anonymous poet of the Justinianic period. The Syriac art description in general evolved along entirely different lines from the Greek *ecphrasis*. Greek borrowings in the discussed Syriac texts are rare, and if they do appear, they are limited to only certain words (ܘܠܘܩܢܐ κύβος, ܘܠܘܩܢܐ φανός).

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