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## EPIGRAPHIC AND ICONOGRAPHIC FRAGMENTS FROM THE CHURCH OF AḤUDEMEH IN MOSUL



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On 27 November 2018, the website *ankawa.com*<sup>1</sup> published several pictures of epigraphic and iconographic fragments, which originally were part of the sanctuary gate inside the Syriac Orthodox Church of Aḥudemeh in Mosul. The Islamic State, which invaded Mosul and the Plain of Nineveh in 2014, destroyed all churches, some very old, including this church. Rain cleared the dust from these stone fragments bringing them to light among the ruins and debris near the Syriac Orthodox Church of Upper Ṭāhira—this church was razed to the ground by the same extremist group. One picture (fig. 1) shows these ancient stones among bullets, echoing the atrocities that the Islamic State perpetrated. The epigraphy<sup>2</sup> and iconography<sup>3</sup> of the sanctuary gate date to the brilliant Atabeg period (mid-13<sup>th</sup> century), and although they are both published and thus known, it is worth discussing them again to keep them in record.

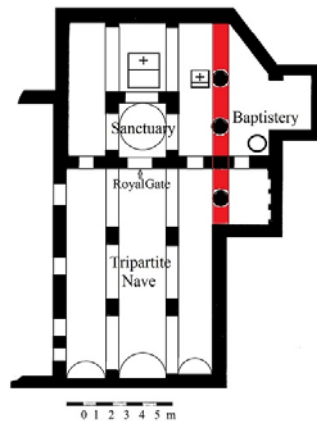


Fig. 1:  
Scattered stones of the Royal Gate from the Church of Aḥudemeh

## CHURCH OF AḤUDEMEH

Aḥudemeh was the first Metropolitan of Takrit (central Iraq) from 559 until the year of his martyrdom in 575 during the reign of the Sassanian King Khusraw I Anushirvan. His church is ancient; the foundations are 7 metres below the current street level, but the actual building dates to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, hence the Atabeg period. Plan 1 describes the various parts of the church to highlight the gate from which the fragments derived.

The tripartite nave is demarcated by two sets of square piers which must have supported arches. Inside the tripartite sanctuary, the Holy-of-Holies is accessed by the magnificent Royal Gate, a masterpiece of Atabeg art. It consists of double lintels surmounted by a lion's head; the lower side ends with stylised flowers hanging like stalactites. The lower lintel is decorated with figures in low relief: the central figure is effaced, and the figures on the far sides represent cavaliers, each holding a falcon. An Arabic inscription, of *thuluth* calligraphy, commemorates its building, although the Royal Gate is not complete. The fragments include the stalactites, cavaliers holding falcons, and an Arabic inscription of *thuluth* calligraphy in vogue during the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries.



Plan 1:  
Syriac Orthodox Church of Aḥudemeh; Mosul.  
Inscribed and depicted fragments from the Royal Gate

## THE ROYAL GATE (FIG. 2)

The middle gate of the sanctuary is called Royal, for in the Eucharistic Liturgy a psalm is chanted: *Lift up your heads, you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.*<sup>4</sup> It is therefore highly decorated, consisting of double lintels, the upper one surmounted by a lion's head, and the lower one ends with stylised flowers hanging like stalactites. The lower lintel is also decorated with figures in relief: the central figure is effaced, and the figures on the far sides represent cavaliers, each holding a falcon. An Arabic inscription in *thuluth* calligraphy commemorates its building, although it is not complete (see below). The fragments include the stalactites, a cavaliers holding an eagle, and the Arabic inscription.

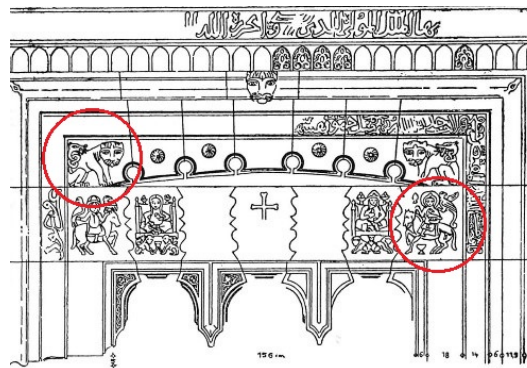


Fig. 2:  
Church of Aḥudemeh, Royal Gate: Survived fragments  
(inside circles) from the double lintels

### STALACTITES (FIGS. 3-4)

The Atabeg architectural style includes stalactites found in churches and mosques of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a style adopted by the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century Jalili architecture of the same region. Stalactites hung from the lower lintels and play mere decorative roles. The surfaces and sides of the stalactites are always decorated with arabesques in low relief as those located at the Mosque of ‘Awn-al-dīn (fig. 3) in Mosul indicate. Only one stalactite from the Church of Aḥudemeh was found in the ruins and it is quite damaged (fig. 4).



Fig. 3:  
Mosque of ‘Awn-al-dīn,  
Mosul: Stalactites



Fig. 4:  
Church of Aḥudemeh:  
Fragmentary Stalactite

Sarre and Herzfeld visited the church at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and drew the Royal Gate in fig. 2 above. Already at that time, part of the Arabic inscription and most of the flower band at the top of the upper lintel were missing.

### CAVALIERS HOLDING FALCONS (FIG. 5)

Atabeg iconographic repertoire in the Church of Aḥudemeh included fantastic figures such as seated lions bitten by dragons on the back, birds whose tails end with heads of

dragons, seated emirs and horse-riding cavaliers. The latter, in the form of St. George, are found in the Church of the Monastery of Mār-Behnām, also dated to the Atabeg period.



Fig. 5: Church of Mār-Aḥudemeh, Royal Gate, right side: cavalier holding a falcon

There are two such cavaliers in the church of Aḥudemeh, one survives as a fragment (fig. 5), but both hold falcons in their hands, strange and difficult to explain depictions. Bas Snelders discussed at length these falcon-holding cavaliers, concluding that they “were simply a variant of the tradition of placing apotropaic riders at the entrance of the sanctuary.”<sup>5</sup> Two seated lions bitten on the back by intertwined dragons fill the corners of the upper lintel. One lion survives as a quite damaged fragment (fig. 7C), but a similar depiction found in the Monastery of Mār-Behnām gives an idea about its original shape (fig. 6).

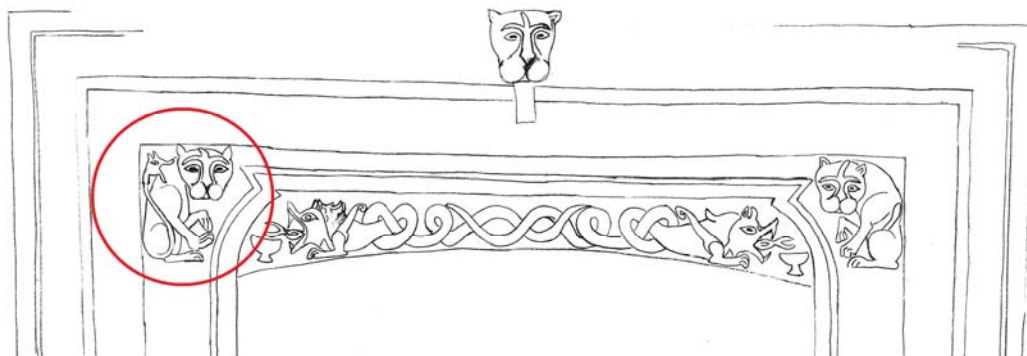


Fig. 6: Monastery of Mār-Behnām, South Gate: Lion bitten by a dragon; drawing by A. Harrak

The lion in all positions was the symbol of the Seljuk dynasty, and thus it is part and parcel of the Seljuk and Atabeg iconographic repertoires.

## EPIGRAPHIC FRAGMENTS (FIGS. 7 AND 8)

Four inscribed fragments survived, three being part of a long Christian Arabic inscription dated to the Atabeg period, and one bearing a Syriac inscription dated to 1971.

### THE CHRISTIAN ARABIC INSCRIPTION (FIGS. 7A-C)



Fig. 7C: Inscrption in *Thuluth* and lion bitten by a dragon.



Fig. 7B: Inscrption in *Thuluth*.



Fig. 7A: Inscrption in *Thuluth*.

During the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Islamic calligraphers created a new Arabic calligraphy called *thuluth* (see fig. 8), which unlike Kufic, is rounded and easily legible. By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, *thuluth* became predominant in Islamic architecture to write verses of the Koran and commemorations, and even the Christians of the time used it in churches, though moderately since Syriac was the official script.<sup>6</sup> In the following Arabic inscription,<sup>7</sup> which had gaps even before the Islamic State destroyed it, the fragmentary texts (fig. 7A-C) will be placed inside borders in both the Arabic script and in English:

يا ايها الملك المولى الذي شرفت بجوده امرنا الشر<ق> اذ  
تفتخر ابواب د[ا]رك لا زالت مفتحة بالعز والن[ور]  
باب [من كرم] مفيض مصفح لا من حد[يد] (7A) ترميك  
حمره نقشه مجراه [من كيد الحسود] [لا زال مفتوحا به]  
...التأييد (7B) في عز وجود (7C)

O Lord King who honoured the princes of the East<sup>8</sup> through your goodness, the Gates to your Dwelling[g] are proud to be still opened with honour and light.

A Gate [plated not with iron] [but with boundless] nobility. The red colour of its ornamentation keeps you away] of the trap of the Jealous.<sup>9</sup> [With might and generosity], [it will still open in honour and magnanimity].

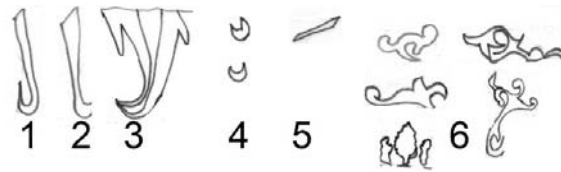


Fig. 8: Decorative elements in *Thuluth* Calligraphy; drawing by A. Harrak

## THE SYRIAC INSCRIPTION (FIG. 9)

The following inscribed fragment was once the upper part of a niche located left of the Royal Gate inside the Church of Aḥudemeh. The fragment is a rectangular slab, measuring 45 x 15 cm, which bears a commemorative inscription written in Serto calligraphy, as follows:



Fig. 9:  
Church of Aḥudemeh: Syriac commemorative inscription

- |  |                                      |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| (1) [The Church of] Mār-Aḥudemeh                     | .1 [ܡܪܝܢܐ ܘܥܝܘܒܐ ܡܪܝܢܐ ܘܥܝܘܒܐ]       |
| (2) [of the Syrians] Orthodox.                       | .2 [ܘܥܝܘܒܐ ܡܪܝܢܐ ܘܥܝܘܒܐ ܡܪܝܢܐ]       |
| (3) [It was renovated in the ye]ar 1971 of Nativity. | .3 [ܡܪܝܢܐ ܘܥܝܘܒܐ ܡܪܝܢܐ ܘܥܝܘܒܐ ܡܪܝܢܐ] |

There were two other Arabic commemorative inscriptions inside the church. One of them, dated to 1896 and located to the left side of the old church's gate, says: “(The church) was rebuilt out of the grants of our greatest lord and illustrious Sultan-Khaqan ‘Abd-al-Ḥamīd Khan al-Ġāzī—may God preserve his glorious days with might and power, and may He grant his fundamental rule good fortune and expansion!” Another says: “The Church of Mār-Aḥudemeh was renovated during the time of his Holiness Mār-Ignatius Afrām the First, Patriarch of Antioch and the rest of the East, and Mār-Athanasius Tūmā Qaṣīr, Bishop of the Archdiocese of Mosul and its suburbs. Deacon Jamīl Ḥannā *afandī* Ḥāwā took care of the restoration—may God reward him. It was in the first of March, the year 1950, corresponding to the year 1369 of H(egira).”<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, the fate of these two historical inscriptions is unknown. One would hope that they survived even if fragmentarily as did the fragments discussed above.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ankawa.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> A. Harrak, *Syriac and Garshuni Inscriptions of Iraq*, Recueil des inscriptions syriaques, 2 (Paris: Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, 2010), AA.07.01.

<sup>3</sup> Bas Snelders, *Identity and Christian-Muslim Interaction: Medieval Art of the Syrian Orthodox from the Mosul Area* (Leuven, Peeters, 2010), p. 441. The gate was drawn by Friedrich Sarre and Ernest Herzfeld, *Archäologische Reise im Euphrat - und Tigris- Gebiet*, vol. III (Berlin, 1911-1920), Abb. 281, p. 294.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 24:7-8.

<sup>5</sup> Snelders, *Identity and Christian-Muslim Interaction*, p. 354-359, esp. 359.

<sup>6</sup> On this subject, see A. Harrak, *Le Monastère de Mār-Behnām à la période Atabeg - III<sup>e</sup> S.* (Paris : Geuthner, 2018), p. 128-134.

<sup>7</sup> For the full text see Harrak, *Syriac and Garshuni Inscriptions of Iraq*, AA.07.01.

<sup>8</sup> Probably a reference to the Magi who paid homage to the infant Jesus as in Matthew 2:1-12.

<sup>9</sup> The term Jealous refers to Satan, in Syriac ܝܘܠܘܣܐ.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*