THE MESSIAH AND THE MAHDI
HISTORY PRESENTED AS THE WRITING ON THE WALL

Andrew Palmer

Introduction

In the *Arabian Nights* a magic formula causes a stone door to swing open, revealing a passage into an unsuspected mountain cavern. The Latin, Syriac and Armenian inscriptions at Ehnesh on the Euphrates[1] seem to make this widespread folk-tale dream come true. Whether in the still theatre of the Roman quarries, looking eastward over the river, where pied nightingales nest and sing on the cliffs of amber-weathered limestone, or under the old pistachio-tree which grows inside the ruined Syrian church of St Sergius, above the clear spring near the burial caves, or even in the partially troglodyte village itself, built like the treads of a giant stairway on the southern shoulder of the outcrop, the traveller reaches out in the dark room of the past to feel the silent faces there, interpreting, so far as touch alone enables him, their somewhat inscrutable expressions.[2]

Since the late nineteenth century Jean-Baptiste Chabot, Henri Pognon, Franz Cumont, Jörg Wagner and Hansgerd Hellenkemper have visited and described the village and the church of Ehnesh. In 1989 the Euphrates-Tigris Reconnaissance Project, under the directorship of Dr Guillermo Algaze, visited the site and on that occasion Dr Christopher Lightfoot photographed the Syriac inscription on the south façade of the church. It was his communication with me on this subject that prompted me to go there myself, with my wife, in 1990. On April 8th, a man from Nizip, called Hüseyn, kindly accompanied us to the great

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1 Identified by some with Arulis on the *Peutingeriana tabula*.

2 The present paper has been improved by discussion or correspondence with Sebastian Brock, Larry Conrad, Geert Jan van Gelder, Robert Hoyland, Hubert Kaufhold, Lia van Midden, Gerrit Reinink, Irfan Shahīd, Tom Sinclair and Michael Whitby and by the suggestions of those who attended my talk on the subject at the 'wetenschapsavond' of the Groningen University Department of Greek and Latin, held at Stefan Radt's house on May 1st, 1990.

rock dome of Zeugma, to the tunnelled Roman roads and the cave-tombs, to Ehnesh itself with its fertile riverside fields and orchards, and to the impressive canyon above Halfeti, at the end of which Rumkale can be seen. At Hüseyn's intercession the village-head of Ehnesh (in Turkish: 'Gümüşgün') showed us the place where the spring had bubbled up in the bed of the dry ravine, until it was capped and piped to the village, and told us an interesting fact about the villagers: the 'yellow-skinned ones' traced their descent to the refugees from the Balkan wars, whereas the 'dark-skinned ones' were autochthonous.[3]

Migration between this part of Turkish Syria and the Balkans forms a *Leitmotiv* in the inscriptions of Ehnesh. The first such migration recorded is that of the Fourth Scythian Legion of the Roman empire, which had its camp in Moesia on the Danube until it was transferred to the Euphrates frontier in *c.*56/57 BC. A bugler and a standard-bearer of this legion are among those task-force members who immortalised their names on the quarry-faces just north of Ehnesh. From there the legionaries transported stone by river to Seleucia on the Euphrates (Zeugma) in order to build their camp and the nearby bridge.[4] The god most intimately addressed in these quarry-inscriptions is 'Silvanus Conservator'. Cumont has several paragraphs on the significance of these dedications for the history of ancient religion. He also suggests that the church of St Sergius may have been built on the site of a shrine of Silvanus honouring the numen of the spring, at ten minutes walk from the village.[5]

A Syriac inscription on the southern outer wall of the side-chapel of the church faces towards this spring. It concerns, amongst other things, another migration, this time from Turkish Syria to the Balkans. In 777 the Jacobite (Syrian Orthodox)[6] population from the Vale of Marᶜash[7] was deported by an invading force of Byzantines; the Christian emperor regarded them as heretics and forcibly resettled them in Thrace. The inscription attributes the plight of these refugees to the sins of the author and his readers, an expression of solidarity which indicates that the latter were also Jacobites. What it does not say is that this deportation followed the forcible resettlement of Syro-Byzantine Christians[8] from the Vale of Marᶜash, which was on the Byzantine-Arab border, to al-Ramla in Palestine.

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3 I went to Ehnesh again in June 1992, driven by Hanna Kandemir, with a grant from the Groningen Faculty of Arts; on this second visit I was able to take measurements, read the East Wall Inscription and photograph the Armenian graffiti.

4 More precisely, the ramps to which the pontoon-bridge was attached.

5 Hellenkemper gives the distance as *c.* 500 metres; he also says that the villagers call the ruin Hıdır Ilyas. His statement that the dedication was transferred by the Armenians to St George is mistaken; St George is not mentioned in the literature, except by Chabot, who could not remember whether the patron saint was George or Sergius.

6 'Syrian Orthodox' and 'Jacobite' are synonyms, both referring to those Syrian Christians who developed their separate identity as a Church in opposition to the Byzantine position as defined at the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451).

7 Kahramanmaraş in modern Turkish, Germaniceia to the Byzantines.

8 These were the 'Chalcedonian' opponents of the Jacobites, also known as 'Melkites', from the Syriac word for 'emperor', *i.e.* those who regard the Byzantine emperor's dogmatic position as correct.

Marᶜash was to experience further deportations. Events during the First World War all but deprived eastern Turkey of its rich Armenian culture. Until then, life in Marᶜash had been strongly coloured by its Armenian population (see, for example, Kerr 1973). Ehnesh, too, when it was visited by Chabot, Pognon and Cumont (between 1897 and 1907), was almost entirely populated by Armenians, in contrast to the surrounding villages. Cumont witnessed, on 19 May, 1907, a celebration of the Eucharist in the ruined church and a festive picnic of the villagers by the spring. One of the many Armenian graffiti in the church appears to include the date 1904.[9] Did the villagers have any inkling of the dangers that lay ahead of them? Some may have adopted Islam and so have become the ancestors of the 'black-skinned' inhabitants of the present village. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that a group of 'yellow-skinned' Muslim refugees from the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 were eventually compensated for their losses with the property of the dispossessed Armenians of Ehnesh.

What had created the empty space into which the Armenians themselves had moved, when they had first come to live in this formerly Syrian Jacobite village, has yet to be investigated. The demographic shift from Syrian to Armenian in the upper Euphrates area was already well advanced in the Crusader period. In consequence of this shift, the Syrian Orthodox patriarchs themselves abandoned the Euphrates and moved eastwards, settling eventually near Mardin. These developments would suggest that the Syrian villagers of Ehnesh migrated by choice, in order to be nearer to the centre of their political community, inviting Armenians, their close cousins in the Faith, to buy their houses. Rumkale, meanwhile, a few miles upstream from Ehnesh on the same bank of the Euphrates, had become the see of an Armenian patriarch. Thus the interests of the Syrians and the Armenians may have coincided in this exchange, while it was a comfort to both parties that the village, with its immovable churches and its tombs, remained in Christian hands.

We have begun with a wide-angle shot, panning the events which have linked the Balkans to south-east Anatolia throughout history: in Antiquity, when the Euphrates was an international frontier; in the Middle Ages, when the frontier had moved a little further to the west and to the north; and in the early twentieth century, when a series of wars produced the present configuration of frontiers and populations in what had been the Ottoman empire. In what follows we shall zoom in on the village of Ehnesh itself and bring sharply into focus the two Syriac inscriptions on the church of St Sergius outside the village. The first has been noticed, but not published. The second has been published, but wrongly translated. These two inscriptions provide a complex enigma in a distinct historical context and an 'Open Sesame!' to the mental world of a village in the early Middle Ages. The second inscription is a unique example of symbolic chronography in epigraphic form. As Baumstark observes, it shares a family likeness with the so-called *Chronicon miscellaneum ad annum domini 724* (Baumstark 1922, 274 n. 3; *cf.* Palmer 1992, and Palmer 1993, text No. 2).

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9 I have photographed a number of these graffiti and hope to ensure that they are published.

The paper consists of a number of special investigations, each of which is presented separately. After reconstructing the architecture of the church and explaining its function (1), I shall describe the inscriptions engraved on it, beginning with that on the east wall (2). The investigation of the South Wall Inscription (3) will be subdivided as follows: i. description; ii. analysis of the letter-forms, including a comparison with the letter-forms of the East Wall Inscription; iii. transcription; iv. translation; v. philological notes; vi. chronographical notes; vii. conceptual elucidation; viii. literary background. Readers without Syriac may wish to take the more technical sections as read, but the last three sections are designed specifically for them. After this an exegesis of both inscriptions in their archaeological context will be attempted (4). Reference is made throughout to the bibliography (5), which is subdivided as follows: a. primary sources; b. secondary literature; c. articles in the new *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Section 1 is illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, Section 2 in Figures 3 and 4, Section 3 in Figures 5, 6, 7, and 8. Figures 9 and 10 contain a hand-written edition of the East Wall and the South Wall Inscriptions. Figure 11, at the end, shows a sketch-map of Turkish Syria.

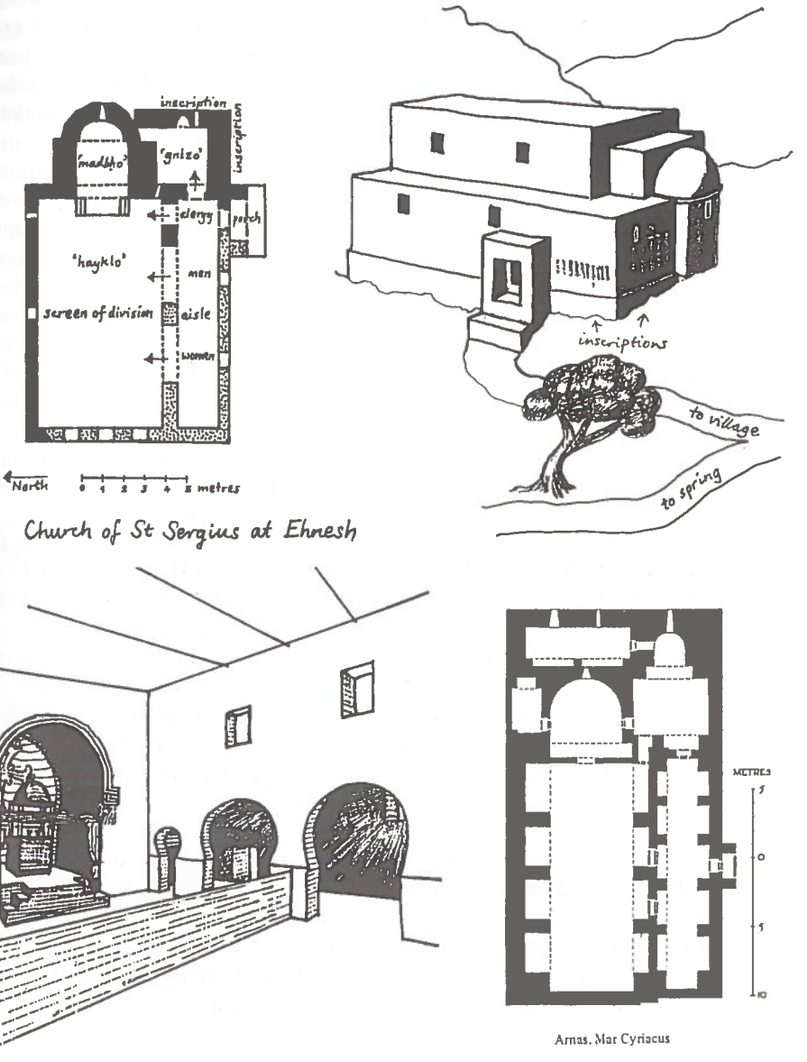
1 The Church of St Sergius at Ehnesh

The church of St Sergius at Ehnesh is a curious building, constructed entirely of squared, and occasionally carved, limestone with no apparent use of cement or iron. The north wall of the nave (or hayklō), which was more than ten metres long, survives to some height. The masonry technique is unusual. Instead of regular horizontal courses the ashlar is laid now vertically, now horizontally, creating a pattern reminiscent of the infilled grid of a timber-and-brick wall.[10] There is one long and one short vertical window on the north side and there may have been more which have been blocked up with stone.

The east end of the nave has its oddities, too. In the centre of the wall is a semicircular arch with plain mouldings, which are continued horizontally at the base for a short space to north and south; beneath the base of the arch on either side is a square capital, carved with vertical fronds in four superimposed registers. This last seems to be an unskilled imitation of the late-antique acanthus motif, but without its spreading leaves. The arch would be unremarkable, but for the fact that the base, instead of resting directly on the capitals, is placed on top of two stones with slightly different plain mouldings, which seem to have formed the base of an earlier arch. It is possible that the church was built with spolia from an earlier building, the original capitals of which were damaged and had to be replaced by a poor imitation. Between the two fronded capitals a thick wooden beam was fixed, as can be seen from the square holes on either side; on this beam the curtain of the sanctuary must have been suspended.

10 Indeed, the vertical gaps along the bottom of the wall may originally have contained wooden posts.

Fig. 1. The church of St Sergius at the spring of Ehnesh.
A) Plan (based on Hellenkemper's measurements and photographs and on the author's own observations, whereby the dotted parts are conjecturally restored); B, C) artist's impressions from within (view to south-east) and from without (view to north-west); D) the plan (adapted from Gertrude Bell) of the church of St Cyriac, martyr, at ʿUrdnus (Arnas) in Ṭūr ʿAbdīn, a typical Jacobite village-church of about the eighth century.



The sanctuary itself (or madbḥō) is small. It consisted of two elements: a stone vault continuing the curve of the arch and resting on a moulded cornice; and a conch, forming a round apse with an arch slightly smaller than the arch of the vault and a single slit-window in the centre of its wall. The apse is now partially destroyed (Hellenkemper's photograph shows the window), but one can still see that it was heptagonal on the outside. Inspection of the apse from within and from without suggests that the floor was raised, as we should expect (the steps in fig. 1A and B are conjectural). The whole church is built on ground sloping down towards the south and the floor of the nave may have been partially excavated from the hill. Those parts of the church on the lower side, which have yet to be described, are built on a platform which projects a little further than the walls above it, forming a clear ledge (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. The south-east angle of the church of St Sergius at Ehnesh (photo: A.N. Palmer, June 1992).

The sanctuary is flanked on the south by a vestry (in Syriac gnīzō) with a small arched niche in the thickness of the east wall. Next to this, on the south side, is a small slit-window, through which perhaps the priest could observe his flock as it approached the church from the village. This wall is extended northwards to meet that of the sanctuary, concealing part of the heptagonal exterior wall of the apse.[11] Against the inside of the south wall was built an inner wall of the same thickness. The vestry, it would seem, was vaulted like the sanctuary (though walled off square on the east instead of being rounded to an apse), and the thick wall on the south was necessary to buttress the vault. The north wall was built up against the south wall of the sanctuary, which acted as a buttress on that side. From the north-west corner of the vestry the priest could observe the congregation through another narrow slit in the wall of the nave. The vestry once had an entrance on the west, with a composite frame (*i.e.* the doorposts and lintel are not monolithic), which was distinguished by the plain mouldings visible on Hellenkemper's photograph. This door was at the centre of the east wall of the narrow south aisle from which the vestry was entered, but it was not exactly opposite the niche, which was at the centre of the east wall of the vestry. This was because the nave of the church left less space on the south for the aisle than the sanctuary left for the vestry.

The small horse-shoe arch at the east end of the nave, communicating with the aisle just to the south of the main sanctuary arch, enabled the priest and his deacons (the size of the sanctuary will have limited their numbers) to make their entrance from the vestry. Hellenkemper is mistaken in drawing a doorway connecting the sanctuary and the vestry directly with one another. The west side of the priest's entrance forms the eastern pier of a higher, slightly inward-curving arch, which pierced the south wall of the nave. This is another unusual feature of the building, from which Hellenkemper conjectures an arcade between the nave and the aisle (though the arches projected on his plan are too small). In fact there were probably only two big arches, one giving access to the eastern part of the nave, the men's section, while the other gave access to the women's section at the west. The fragment of moulded corbel projecting above the priest's entrance must originally have carried a horizontal beam which belonged to the roof of the aisle; it would thus indicate the height of the two entrance-arches. Some blocks of stone projecting from the south wall of the church, on the north-south line of the wall which divides the aisle from the vestry, might indicate an entrance porch on the south side, facing the spring. A porch in this position would have opened near the path from the village to the spring.

Jacobite village-churches were normally entered from the south, through a south aisle parallel to the nave, not from the west through an atrium or a narthex, as projected by Hellenkemper. The groundplan of the Jacobite church of St Cyriac at ᶜUrdnus in Ṭūr ᶜAbdīn is a reasonable model from which to reconstruct the church of St Sergius at Ehnesh (fig. 1D).[12] Lack of space from north to south,

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11 Hellenkemper advances it too far to the east and to the north.

12 Bell 1982, fig. 34; *cf.* Wiessner 1981-83, *passim*; on the dates of the village-churches of Ṭūr ᶜAbdīn, see Palmer 1990a, 212-3.

due to the sloping ground, may have necessitated a simplification of the classic design; but if the church of St Sergius was used on the feast-day of the martyr and on other appropriate occasions, but not at Easter, then the chamber to the east of the sanctuary, which was probably designed for the ceremony of the burial and resurrection of Christ, was not needed. There is no need to suppose there was an atrium on the west side, even if there was, as Hellenkemper states, an extension of the north wall of the nave to the west.

The niche in the vestry cannot really be described as an apse. The function of the side-chambers that often flank the sanctuary in Syrian churches has been investigated for the pre-Islamic period by Descoeudres (1983, esp. 69-75). Like the examples discussed there, the side-chamber at Ehnesh is likely to have served a number of different purposes, besides the obvious one of vestry; but it is distinguished from them by the ritual character of the niche backing onto the rising sun. Historians of liturgy may find this an important piece of evidence, for example in the discussion of the history of the ritual of Prothesis.

The function of the south aisle of a village church is discussed in my *Monk and mason* (Palmer 1990a, 135-6). In the church at ᶜUrdnus there was probably a division in the aisle, as there was in the nave, into a men's and a women's section, with the women at the west. But the women did not have a separate entrance to the aisle, only a separate doorway from the aisle into the nave, so any fence between the sexes in the aisle must have had a door.

The men and the women coming to the church would have caught sight of the inscription on the outside east wall of the vestry from a distance; it was probably picked out in bright paint (*cf.* Palmer 1990a, 207). Those of the men who had been trained in singing the diurnal prayers would have read it without difficulty, because it consisted of well-known quotations from the Jacobite Book of Common Prayer. There would have been little time to linger over the more difficult inscription on the outside south wall before the service began, but after the service, when the men gathered to discuss the sermon and other matters, while the women prepared a feast for the martyr in the shade of the trees below the church, on the slope above the cleft in which the spring rises, the former would have had leisure to puzzle over its enigma and to ask the priest to explain its meaning.

2 *The East Wall Inscription*

This inscription was carefully laid out. At the top in the centre was engraved a kind of cross made of five overlapping circles, perhaps symbolic of the five wounds of Christ. Under this was a single line inscribed horizontally, which appears to have recorded the name of the mason who engraved the inscription. The order in which the five vertical lines of the inscription are arranged is symmetrical and can only be understood with reference to the 'cross-bar' formed by the horizontal line. Normally a vertical inscription in Syriac runs from above, with the second and subsequent lines to the right of the first. In this case the first vertical line appears to be that in the centre, the second half of Ps. 92, verse 15:

"They (i.e. those who fear God) shall be fat and comfortable!" The other vertical lines are all quotations from psalms and the only chance we have of restoring this one is to assume that it, too, is a psalm-verse. The concordance to the Syriac psalter offers no alternative to Ps. 92:15 (14), so I restore this, even though that means the SEMKATH must have contained an unusual angle. The second line is to the right of it, but the third is to the left of it, for these two lines are the first and second halves of Psalm 34, verse 6: "Look upon him and hope on him; and your faces shall not blush with shame!" Lines 1 to 3 begin just under the horizontal line, but lines 4 and 5 begin to right and to left of it, respectively. These two lines are also the two halves of a psalm-verse, Ps. 44:5: "In you we shall beat down our enemies; and for your name's sake we shall trample on those that hate us!" So, in each case, the first half of a divided psalm-verse is placed on the right, the side on which the horizontal line begins. Besides, the right-hand side is the good side.

With the exception of the first horizontal line, in the centre, these quotations from the psalms are associated, in the Syriac tradition, with pictorial representations of the Cross. It is very probable that the whole inscription on the east wall represents the Cross. The five interlaced circles are in the place of Christ's head, the horizontal line represents the cross-bar, the first vertical line represents the vertical beam, and the rest are draped symmetrically, like banners, from the side-bars.

The inscription covers a part of three courses of stone on the outer east wall of the vestry, each course being 42-45cm deep. The enlaced circles are on the course above. The lowest inscribed course was at about eye-level when I saw it. The interval between the five vertical lines of text is a regular one; from baseline to baseline it measures about 25cm. This regularity, and the order in which the vertical lines were engraved, explains why the last line had to begin across the crack between one block and another of a course. The letters are of uniform size, with the greatest height above the baseline about 11cm and the average middle height between 5cm and 5.5cm. The letter-forms are very similar to those of the South Wall Inscription; a detailed comparison will be made in section 2, ii. Chabot, working from a notebook without photographs, mistakenly tagged what he thought he had read of this inscription (which included the name of the heretic Mani!) onto the end of the South Wall Inscription; his mistakes were corrected by Pognon. But Pognon thought the East Wall Inscription was a mere graffito and did not take time to read more than a few words of it.

Horizontal line:
[7-10 letters = short name and title (perhaps: ʾdy qšyšʾ)?] ktb

Vertical lines
(1 centre, 2 right of centre, 3 left of centre, 4 far right, 5 far left):

1 [šmynʾ wbs]ymʾ nhwwn (dots above second word)
2 [ḥwr] lwth wsbr bh
3 [w]ʾpykwn lʾ nḥprn (dots above first and last words not visible)
4 bk ndqr lbʿldbbyn (dots above last word not visible)
5 wmṭl šmk ndwš lsʾnyn (dots above last word)

The three quotations from the psalms, Ps. 92:15 (14), Ps. 34:6 and Ps. 44:5, are distinguished from each other by the fact that those who fear God are spoken of in the third person, the second person and the first person, respectively. This fact helps to mark off the five vertical lines from one another and to pair 2 with 3 and 4 with 5. The author of the inscription evidently meant the reader to study it attentively, not just to read the five vertical lines mechanically from left to right, as in a normal inscription, such as that on the south wall. One is reminded of another verse in Psalm 92 (verse 7): "The fool does not understand."

Fig. 3. The East Wall Inscription, St Sergius, Ehnesh (photo: A.N. Palmer, June 1992).

The quotations gain point from being juxtaposed with the inscription on the south wall, which starkly juxtaposes the Mission and the Passion of Christ with the suffering of contemporary Jacobite believers at the hands of the Byzantines and the Arabs alike. Psalm 44 must have been read with much feeling by Christians who experienced defeat at the hands of the Arabs. It begins with a celebration of the victories which God in the past had given to his chosen people; then it laments the present defeat, claiming that the chosen people have not become apostate (like the Banū Tanūkh in the South Wall Inscription), but have remained true to their covenant with God and have not deserved punishment; finally it calls upon God to stand up for his people once more. Psalm 34 is more confident: "I shall bless the Lord at all times! A host of angels surrounds those who fear God. Depart from evil and do good! Those who hate the just man shall perish! He shall keep all his bones, that not one of them may be broken!" Psalm 92 is equally assured: "How great are the works of the Lord! The wicked flourish now, but they shall perish for ever! Good times will come for those who fear God!"

Psalms 44 and 34 were familiar to Jacobite Christians from the regular prayers chanted on Fridays in honour of the Cross. The verse quoted from the latter suggests a comparison, which is made in those prayers, with Numbers 21:8, the bronze snake raised on a stick by Moses, at which those bitten by poisonous snakes gazed, and were healed. This snake is one of the best known types of the crucified Christ. The Jacobite liturgical celebration of the Cross plays on all the themes of divine victory, from the victory of good over evil represented in the healing of those poisoned by snakes, to the victory of God's people over their

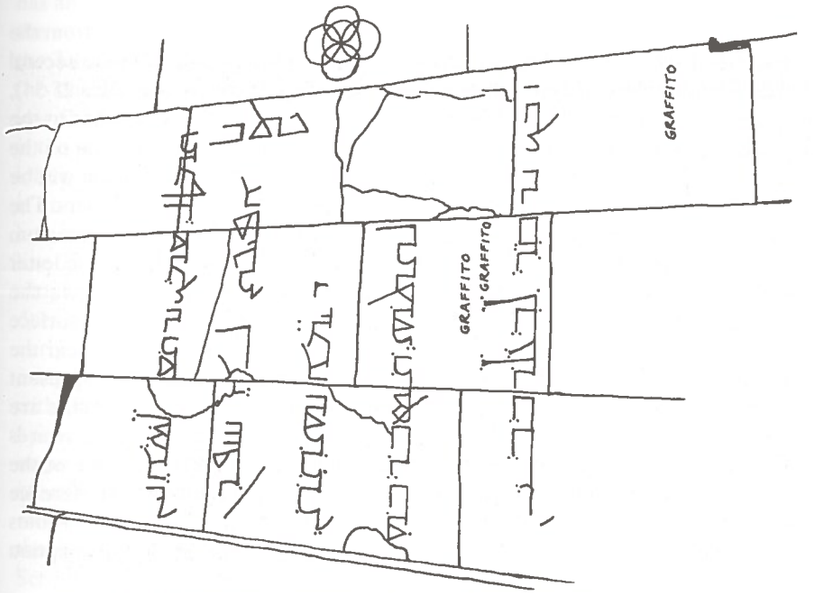


Fig. 4. The East Wall Inscription, St Sergius, Ehnesh, drawing by A.N. Palmer.

enemies, for which the psalmist longs, and which was given to Constantine in the sign of the Cross. Thus the East Wall Inscription takes on an urgent significance when juxtaposed with that on the south wall.

3 *The South Wall Inscription* (= Pognon, No. 84)

i) Description

Like the East Wall Inscription, that on the south wall is orientated vertically. It covers two blocks of limestone ashlar and part of a third, moving from left to right and ending with the block at the south-east angle of the building. These blocks, which are well smoothed and bevelled at the edges, though without removing the diagonal marks of the fine drag (a sort of metal comb), are laid end to end in a horizontal course at above the middle height of the surviving wall. A single-word supplement to the inscription is chiselled on the course below, near the right-hand edge of the last block but one before the angle, the block under the second and third stones of the inscription. The course below that, which forms a ledge at the top of the slightly projecting lower section of the wall, is at about the eye-level of the visitor today. The ledge is 42.5cm below the lower edge of the course on which the inscription is engraved. From the lower to the upper edge of this course is 44.5cm, but the block which forms the cornerstone is slightly thicker. The left-hand inscribed block is 101cm long; the second block is 93.5cm long; the third block is 110cm long, but the original inscription ends 62cm along this block.

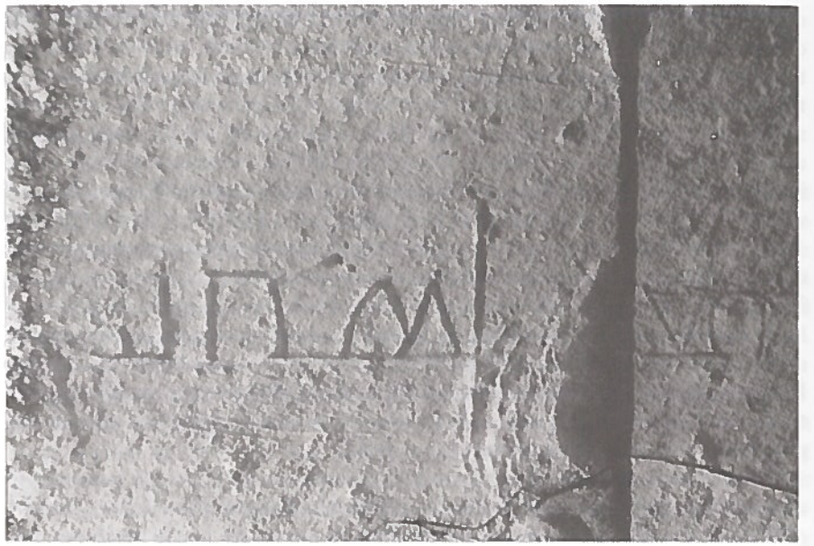
There were thirteen short lines of writing on the first block (starting from the left), of which the last has been almost completely broken away. On the second block there are eleven (lines 14-24); on the third block there are ten (lines 25-34), not counting a later unfinished graffito (lines 35 and 36) and the crosses to the right of that. The supplement on the course below is opposite the sixth line on the third block (line 30). Lines 1-28 are written in large letters (this section will be called Part One), while lines 29-34 (Part Two) are written in smaller letters. The large letters reach a maximum height of 5.5cm above the baseline, with a medium height of between 2cm and 3cm; one measurement for the full length of the letter ṬETH is 7cm. The small letters reach a maximum height of 4cm above the baseline, with a medium height of between 1.5cm and 2cm. There is slight surface damage in lines 1, 3, 14, 20, 22, 25 and 26; between line 29 and line 30, near the bottom edge of the stone, is a depression which appears to have been present when the inscription was written, because the last two letters in that line are arranged around it; but that the area of the depression was increased afterwards we can see from the damage to the HE in the last word before the edge of the stone in line 30. In lines 5, 6 and 15 and after line 34 there is graffito interference by knife, which is distinct from the chisel-work and does not employ drill-holes resembling dots, as the original mason of both this and the East Wall Inscription did.

ii) Analysis of the letter-forms

The letter-forms are everywhere Esṭrangelo (Gospel Script), though with two occurrences of one form derived from the Serṭo Pshīṭo (Plain Script) at the end of lines 20 and 30. This deviation is due, as Pognon remarks, to lack of space at the edge of the stone in both cases. The letter-forms have some peculiar features: HE, with a middle leg shaped like a thick wedge; WAW retaining a tail even when not joined to a following letter; OLAF, WAW, HE and TAW are joined to the left along the base-line to a following letter. This last feature occurs in some other inscriptions of Osrhoene, but is not familiar from north-eastern Mesopotamia, on which the present writer's study of epigraphic letter-forms was based (Palmer 1989). Nevertheless, that study can be tentatively used to give a very approximate date; for we should not, perhaps, assume without further enquiry that the inscription was made in the reign of al-Mahdī (AD 775-85), even if this seems likely (see Baumstark 1922, 274 n. 3). In order to do this we must go through the analysis of letter-forms on pp. 86-89 of the article and see how the inscriptions at Ehnesh compare with those in Ṭūr ᶜAbdīn. In what follows, 'early' means 'datable to the period before the late eighth century' and 'late' means 'datable to the period after the late eighth century'.

OLAF, when isolated, has no hook at the bottom of the right foot and no arching of the right foot, and in this it resembles late forms of the letter. The use of Plain Script OLAF on some occasions and the alignment of the horizontal bar and the originally oblique riser to the right of it on others are also late characteristics. On the other hand, the fact that OLAF is never tilted and never has an oblique riser at an exaggerated angle shows that it is not far removed from the early forms. HE with a middle leg shaped like a thick wedge does not occur in the Ṭūr ᶜAbdīn corpus, but it seems related to the HE with a V-shaped dip above the middle leg which is there late. On the other hand, in Part Two, which is inscribed on a smaller scale, we find the early form. Another early characteristic is the retention of the hook on the right leg when the HE is joined to a previous letter, though the disappearance of the hook in some places where it is not joined is an indicator of lateness. WAW does not occur with the 'monk's hood' of some late inscriptions, only with the early form. ḤETH, even when written large, as in line 28, has nothing of the early complexity; instead the second upright is drawn simply as a parallel to the first, a late tendency. ṬETH could be late or early, but it does not occur with the curvilinear elements which would appear to be distinctly early. LOMADH has the vertical hasta attested as late. MIM (non-final) occurs in early and late forms, with near parallel legs and a perfectly horizontal upper bar, with the second leg pointed forwards and the left end of the bar tilted fractionally upwards, and with the second leg forwards and a horizontal bar. NUN does not occur in the final unattached form which alone proved useful for dating. SEMKATH occurs once only, with a late form: right 'ear' triangular, left 'ear' round. ṢODHE, which occurs twice in the South Wall Inscription, has nothing of the zig-zag found in true Esṭrangelo, tending rather to the form found in the Plain Script, an upper curve reduced to a short horizontal, followed by a wide,

Fig. 5. A detail of the inscription on the east wall of the church of St Sergius at Ehnesh, showing the decorative drill-holes (photo: A.N. Palmer, June 1992).



sweeping curve describing approximately a third of a circle, beginning at the right of a diameter which lies on the base-line. Pognon misrepresents the joined form in line 11, which does not have the short vertical incision or 'horn' shown in his drawing at the inception of the letter. For what it is worth, no early joined ṢODHE from Ṭūr ᶜAbdīn has the 'horn'. SHIN has the hollow form attested as early as the mid-eighth and as late as the early ninth century. TAW does not have the early near-vertical hasta dividing the upper horizontal, nor does it have the early loop, only a triangle.

This analysis has shown that this inscription is not unambiguously classifiable as either early or late, in the sense defined above. It should therefore be described as transitional and dated around the end of the eighth century, although the scarcity of ninth-century inscriptions in Ṭūr ᶜAbdīn makes it impossible to say for certain that it was made before 800.

An individual feature of the South Wall Inscription is formed by the decorative drill-holes, resembling dots, two at the beginning or at the end of a stroke, where in writing the pen would be set down or lifted, one just outside the letter where the letter forms an angle. This feature is also present in the East Wall Inscription (see Fig. 5), although the upper 'skin' of the limestone has flaked off there through weathering, so that sometimes only the deeper drill-holes are visible. I have not seen it in any other inscription; nor was it imitated by those who added graffiti to the Ehnesh inscriptions.

The letter-forms of the East Wall Inscription conform in every respect to the patterns described for the South Wall Inscription. Particularly striking is the unusual HE and the OLAPH and WAW joined to letters on the left, which are shared by the two inscriptions. Compare further the SHINs in vertical line 5 with that in the third line of the South Wall Inscription, the SEMKATHs in vertical lines 1 (residual), 2 and 6 with that in line 9 of the other inscription, the PE in vertical line 3 with that in line 19 of the other inscription, and the KAPH in the same line with that in the last line of the other inscription.

The resemblance of letter-forms, combined with the unique feature of the decorative drill-holes, in two inscriptions on adjoining walls of a single church, means that they were most probably the creation of a single mason. This presumption is strengthened by the fact that the mason of the East Wall Inscription appears to have signed it with his name in a very prominent way. No signature distinguished the author of the South Wall Inscription from this mason.

Fig. 6. The south wall of the vestry of the church of St Sergius at Ehnesh (photo: A.N. Palmer, April 1990).

Fig. 7. The inscription on the south wall of the church of St Sergius at Ehnesh, stones A-D (photo: Chris Lightfoot, 1989)

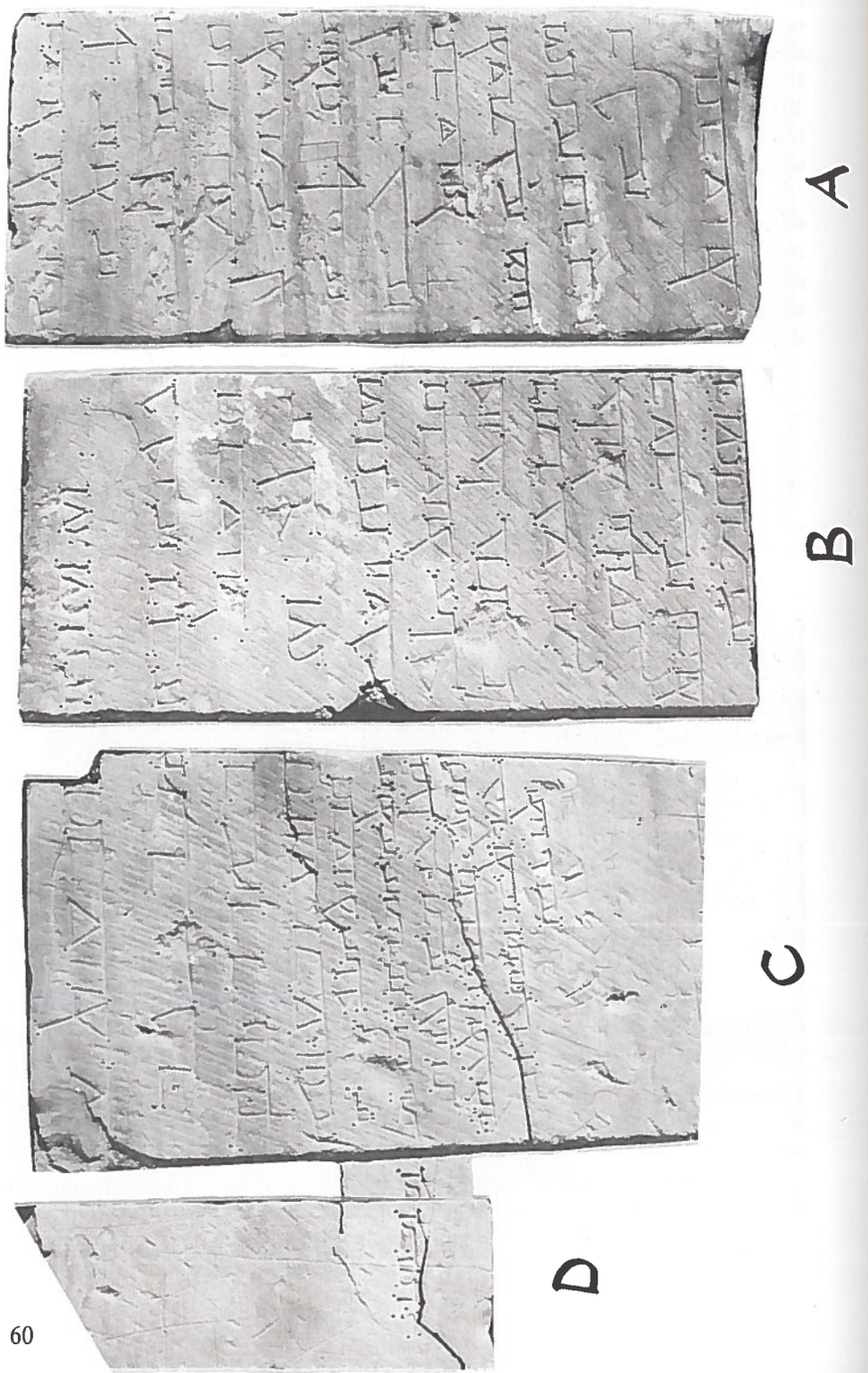
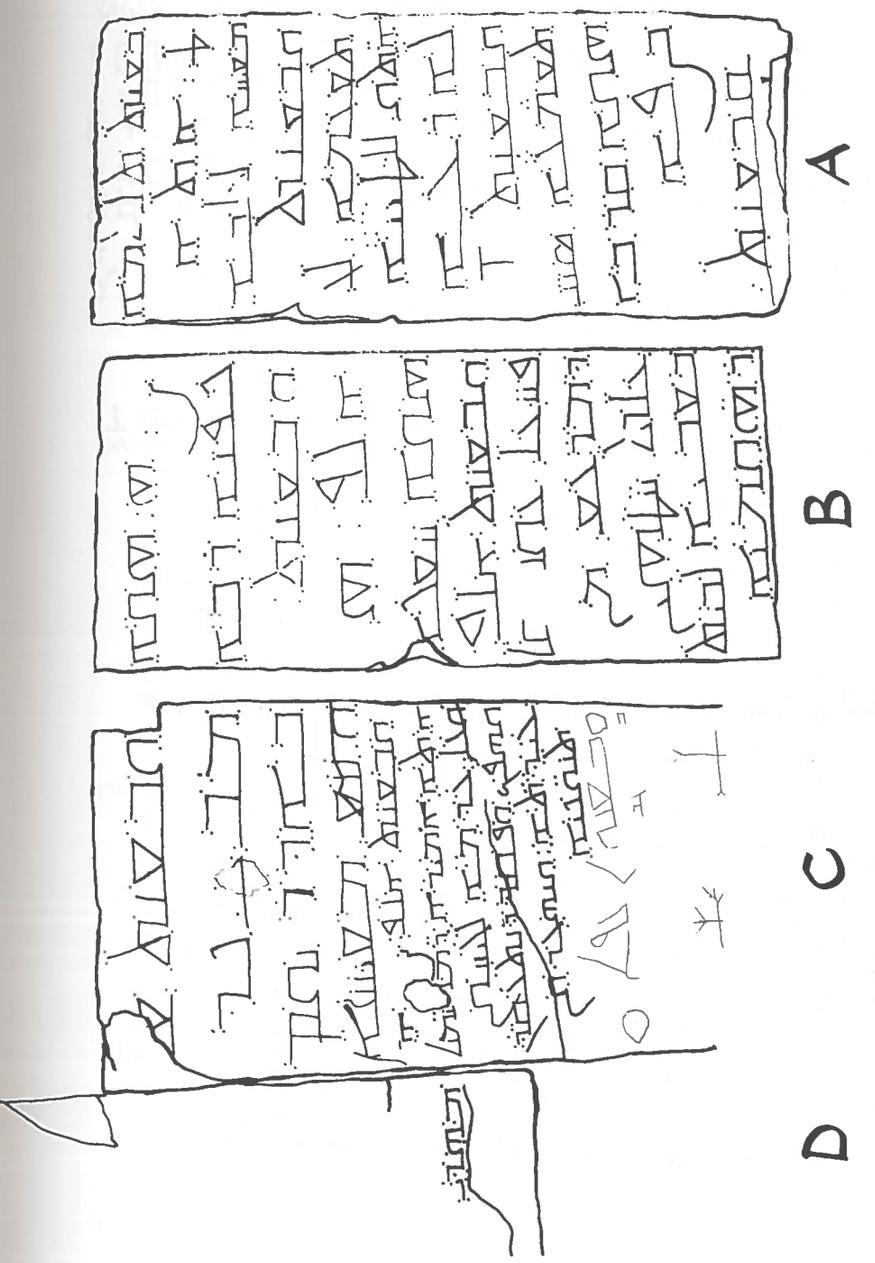


Fig. 8. The inscription on the south wall of the church of St Sergius at Ehnesh, stones A-D, drawing by A.N. Palmer.



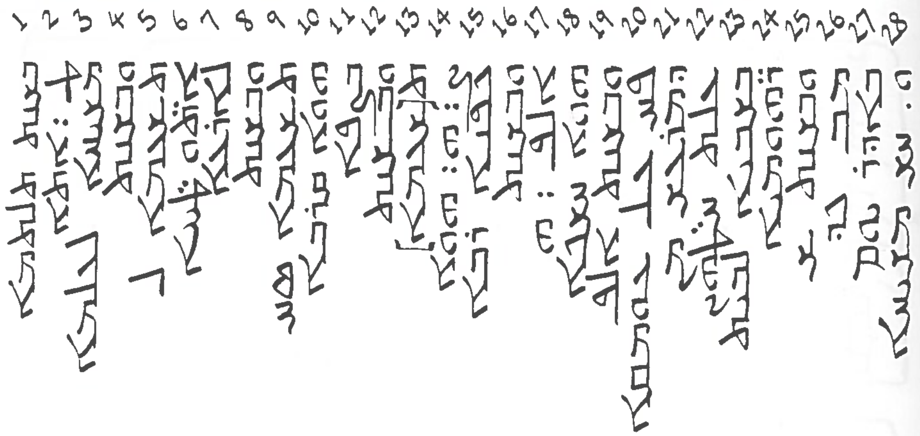
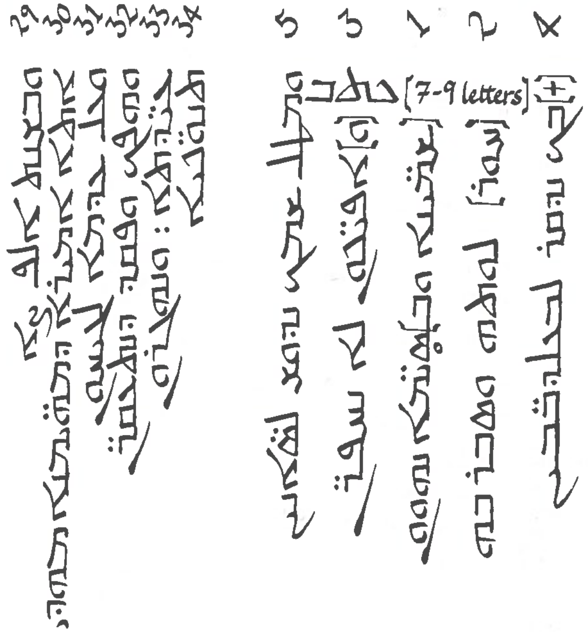


Fig. 9. Ehnesh, St. Sergius, South Wall Inscription, Part 1.

Fig. 10. Part Two (South) and East Wall Inscriptions, Ehnesh.



Notes:
Graffiti: [illegible] added at end SWI5; [illegible] attached to front of [illegible] SWI6; after SWI34: [illegible] [illegible]; SWI9 [illegible] is written [illegible].
The last word of SWI30 was added on another stone in the same style: [illegible].
The letter [illegible] in EWI1, if rightly restored, has a form unlike the [illegible]'s in SWI9 & EWI, 5 & 2.

iii) Transcription:

ON STONE A

1. bšnt tltmᵓ
2. ṭ: ᵓtᵓ
3. mšyḥᵓ lᶜlmᵓ
4. wbšnt
5. tšᶜmᵓ: lg (the g was added later: no decorative drilling)
6. ᵓtw llṭyyᵓ (dots over the first ᵓ and over the ṭ) (the two l's were added later: no decorative drilling)
7. lᵓrᶜᵓ
8. wbšnt
9. tšmᶜᵓ sḥ (triangles of dots over m and ᶜ indicate transposition)
10. hwᵓ qrbᵓ
11. bṣpᵓ
12. wbšnt
13. t[šᶜmᵓ]

ON STONE B

14. ṣ: h: hwᵓ
15. kpnᵓ rbᵓ
16. wbšnt
17. ᵓlp: h
18. hwᵓ ḥškᵓ
19. wbšnt ᵓlp
20. pḥ ᶜl ᶜwmqᵓ
21. dmrᶜš mn
22. ᶜlt ḥṭhyn (dots over the HETH)
23. bšbyᵓ lbyt
24. rhwmyᵓ (dots over the HE)

ON STONE C

25. wbšnt š
26. mb kd (the area between the two pairs of letters is messed up somewhat)
27. bᵓdr ywm
28. w. ḥš mšyḥᵓ
29. wbṣnt ᵓlp ṣ ᵓ
30. ᵓtᵓ ᵓmyrᵓ dmhymnᵓ (dots over the DOLATH)
31. wᶜl ᶜdmᵓ lgyḥwn
32. whpk wpqd dntᶜqrn (dots over the RISH)
33. ᶜydtᵓ wnhgrwn (dots over TAW; note abnormal spelling of ᶜdtᵓ)
34. tnwkyᵓ (dots over the WAW)
35. wbšnt ᵓlpᵓ w (these are later graffiti)
36. b gb (these are later graffiti)

(there follow some crosses)

ON STONE D (continuing line 30)

Supplement: mhdy

iv) Translation

The translation ignores later additions and graffiti. For ease of reference the text is divided into eight sections (a-h), each devoted to one year.

Part One
(in large letters)

(a) In the year 309 the Messiah came to the world
(b) and in the year 930 the Arabs came to the land
(c) and in the year 968 a battle occurred at Ṣēfē
(d) and in the year [9]95 a great famine occurred
(e) and in the year 1005 a darkness occurred
(f) and in the year 1088 the Vale of Marᶜash entered into captivity in the territory of the Romans on account of our sins
(g) and in the year 342, on 24th March, the 6th day, the Messiah suffered

Part Two
(in small letters)

(h) and in the year 1091 the Commander of the Faithful came and entered as far as Gīḥōn and he returned and ordered the churches to be torn down and the Tanūkhids to adopt Islam.

Supplement
(After the words "Commander of the Faithful")

Mahdī

v) Philological notes

1. The second OLAF (= ʾ) of the word mʾʾ = 'hundred' is consistently omitted in this inscription.
2. Alphabetical symbols are used for digits and tens but not for hundreds or for a thousand; there is one exception in line 25, where SHIN is used for 300.
3. WAW = 'and' is not used between the elements of a composite number, except perhaps in the graffito, line 35.
4. In spite of the generous use of dots, there are no vowel-signs, not even on proper names (lines 11 and 31, for example) and no diacritical signs indicating the perfect or another verbal aspect.
5. The two dots above the masculine third person plural form of the verb in line 6 are incorrect, but can be paralleled from *e.g.* the Vatican Syriac MS 163, foll. 1-6 (*Chron. Edessa 540*).
6. The graffito additions to line 6 have no conceivable significance and should be seen as idle doodling.

7. The transposition of the third and fourth letters of tšᶜmʾ in line 9 is indicated by a triangle of dots above each of the two letters, by no means so unusual in manuscripts as is claimed by Torrey (1950-51, 445), although they are not often preserved in inscriptions. They may sometimes have been added in paint or so lightly that erosion has obliterated them (*cf.* Palmer 1987, 59, A.1, line 5, last word).
8. The form - ṣpʾ - for the place-name Ṣiffīn is also attested in the *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, II, p. 153, AG 968, where it has the two dots indicating a plural; in the *Chronicle of AD 1234*, I, p. 278, it is written: ṣʾpyn, which might indicate either Ṣēfīn or Ṣāfīn. The Arabic form suggests the former, which is why the name is vocalized Ṣēfē in my translation.
9. The insertion of a colon between the ṢODHE and the HE in line 14 may have been intended to fill out what would otherwise have been rather a short line.
10. The word ḥškʾ (line 18), translated "darkness", is sometimes used to describe an eclipse of the sun: *cf. Chronicle of Zuqnin*, II, p. 148, AG 912, where a slightly different form, ḥēšūkhō, is used.
11. The divergence from Pognon in lines 19-24 revolves around the verb ᶜl. Pognon took it to mean 'invaded'. He recognized the oddness of the phrase "the Vale of Marᶜash invaded the Byzantine empire to plunder it", even if, as must be the case, it is the inhabitants of the Vale who are actually meant; his solution (rather a lame one) was to suppose that some words had been omitted here by an oversight. An exact parallel to the phrase ᶜl bšbyʾ has not come to my attention, although Payne-Smith quotes ʾzlw bšbyʾ as a translation of the Greek ἐπορεύθησαν and šbyʾ alone as a translation of the Greek αἰχμαλωσία. The *Chronicle of AD 1234* has similar phrases, only from the point of view of the captors; the first is on p. 298 of vol. I, lines 26-7: "Then the Arabs forced the city open and took it captive (ʾpqwh bšbyʾ) and returned to Syria." The second is in the same volume, on p. 259, line 28: "They also took captive (nsbwhy bšbyʾ) the governor of that city." By contrast, vol. I, p. 296, lines 19-20 have: wᶜl šbʾ wʾpq šbytʾ dlʾ skʾ, of which a literal translation might be: "and he invaded and captured and extracted a vast quantity of slave-material." These examples give sufficient philological support to the common-sense assumption that the Vale of Marᶜash, being a geographical entity, must be the victim, rather than the agent, of aggression. This interpretation is confirmed by the report of the same event in the Greek chronicle of Theophanes (see below).
12. Pognon translates kd in line 26 as if it were the word 'when', adducing a parallel from Heshterek in Ṭūr ᶜAbdīn (No. 99 in his collection). The letter-combination kd appears to occur twice in the Heshterek inscription. The first occurrence is not relevant to our inscription, because there is a verb involved: kd ᶜyl ḥ ywmʾ bḥzyrn yrḥ{ʾ} bngh ᶜrwbtʾ, "at the beginning of (reading the active participle ᶜoyel with a phonetic spelling) the eighth day of the month of June on the Friday eve." The second occurrence is in lines 4-6, where we read: wbšnt ʾlp wr wp wd bdywnyʾ ywm ᶜrwbtʾ kd y btšr{yn} qd{ym}, which Pognon would translate "and in the year 1284 of the Greek (era) on Friday when (supply: it was) the tenth of October." Pognon then has the problem

that 10 October, AD 972, was in fact a Thursday; this he attempts to solve by suggesting that the exact day had been forgotten. Apart from the objection that one would not give the weekday unless it was remembered, it is improbable that the communal memory of the village would fail to retain this information for three years after the man's death. He had been, after all, the rector of their church and the Syrians have always had a strong tradition of commemorating the dead. Unfortunately there is no means of checking Pognon's reading here, since the inscription was never photographed and appears to have been destroyed. But on the basis of Pognon's drawing one might speculate that the DOLATH was in fact a fragmentary HE and the YUDH was either the left vertical of the same letter, with an accidental scratch resembling a tail, or altogether accidental. If this were right it would give the following text: "and in the year 1284 of the Greek (era) on Friday, 25 October." The fact that 25 October, AD 972, was indeed a Friday is an argument in favour of this reading. Against Pognon's reading stand both the false synchronism and the unparalleled Syriac construction, which is hardly credible *a priori*. Even if Pognon's reading of the Heshterek inscription were correct, it would not supply an exact parallel for the syntax proposed by him in the case of the inscription at Ehnesh; and since there are viable alternatives to both of Pognon's readings and no external control, it is better to opt for the straightforward interpretation in the case of the inscription at Ehnesh.

13. Friday is usually called ᶜrwbtᵊ, although the first to the fifth days of the week are known by their numbers. Moreover, it is usual to write not just 'day X' but 'day X of the week': ywm ḥd bšbᵊ, 'day one/the first day of the week' for example. The form we find here might suggest that the number six itself was of importance to the author in this context.
14. The title ᵊmyrᵊ dmhymnᵊ, 'Commander of the Faithful', is a translation of the Arabic ᵊamīr al-muᵊminīn; it is found also, in the mouth of a Muslim emphasizing the religious responsibilities of the caliph, in the *Chronicle of AD 1234*, p. 277. The Muslim caliph is usually referred to by Syrian Christians as 'the king (mlkᵊ) of the Arabs'. Barhebraeus (d. 1286) does not use the word 'caliph' or 'caliphate' before the foundation of Baghdad in 752 (*Chronicon syriacum*, p. 122, line 3; p. 125, 10 up etc.), although Budge's translation has 'this Caliph' at the beginning of each notice on a 'king of the Arabs', where Barhebraeus has 'this one' (*i.e.* 'this man' or 'this king'). All the other instances known to me of the title 'Commander of the Faithful' in Syriac are also in this work of Barhebraeus (pp. 227, 231 and 236; these passages were pointed out to me by Hubert Kaufhold). On each of these three occasions he is quoting diplomatic exchanges in the mid-eleventh century. Only in the second example is the title employed by a non-Muslim, and that is in a bilingual Greek and Arabic letter from the Byzantine emperor Constantine Monomachus to the caliph Abū Jaᶜfar, which has been translated by Barhebraeus's source into Syriac. The tenth-century emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus had already laid down rules of Byzantine diplomacy which allowed the use of the title αμερουμνην (*De ceremoniis*, II 48, vol. 1, p. 686, line 4); but the garbled form and the lack of a translation into Greek make it probable that the meaning of the title was not fully understood. The title is found, in a different Greek transcription, in a seventh-century mosaic inscription beginning with a cross at Ḥammat Gāḏēr in Palestine, with reference to the caliph Muᶜāwiya (Hirschfeld-Solar 1981, 203-4; Hirschfeld 1987, 106-7). The wording of this inscription was probably decided by John (Jōannēs), an official of the Arab administration at Gadara, the man under whose 'care' the warm baths near that city were repaired. His name shows him to be a Christian, which, together with the early date, explains both the use of the Greek language and the cross at the beginning. Muᶜāwiya, after all, attempted to introduce coinage without the sign of the cross, but had to withdraw it from circulation, because 'it was not accepted' (*Maronite Chronicle*, under the Seleucid year 971 = AD 650; the inscription at Ḥammat Gāḏēr is dated by the era of the city and that of the Arabs to AD 663). However, the official nature of the inscription and the fact that the funds were provided by a non-Christian, the 'counsellor' ᶜAbd Allāh, the son of Abū Hāshim, is sufficient explanation of the use of the title 'Commander of the Faithful'. Thus none of the known examples of this title in Greek and Syriac texts can remove the impression that its presence in the inscription at Ehnesh is paradoxical.
15. Syriac frequently adds the word nhrᵊ 'river' after the name of a river. The fact that it is not added after 'Gīḥōn' need not mean that the reference is not to a river, since inscriptions are habitually economical of expression (see Palmer 1988b, 116).
16. The verb translated "returned" (hpk) has a considerable semantic range in its various forms and combinations, including the concepts of destruction and renegation.
17. For "the churches" one might also read "some churches", since Syriac does not always indicate the definiteness or indefiniteness of a substantive and there is no clear indicator here. The spelling of ᶜdtᵊ as ᶜydtᵊ is phonetically justifiable and is found in many inscriptions (*e.g.* Palmer 1987, 122, C.2, lines 3 and 10).
18. The graffito at the end (lines 35 and 36) does not yield any meaning beyond the phrase "and in the year".

vi) Chronographical Notes (letters refer to lines of the English translation)

The dates in this inscription, as in most Syriac inscriptions, are Seleucid = AG (counting from 1 October, 312 BC). They should be read as follows: a) by inference from (g): March 25th, 2 BC; b) AD 621/2; c) AD 656/7; d) AD 683/4; e) AD 693/4; f) AD 776/7; g) March 24th, AD 31; h) AD 779/80.

a) The date of Christ's Incarnation is that given by the archives of Edessa, reflected by the *Chronicle of Edessa*. Jacob of Edessa defended this date against that of Eusebius (AG 312 = 1 BC) in a letter to John of Litarba (see Nau 1900). December 25th, AG 310 (= 2 BC) is given in the *Chronicle of Michael* (text, p. 88, left column) as the date of the Nativity, a tradition which probably regarded the

Edessene date as correct, but applied it to Christ's Conception, not his birth. The *Chronicle of AD 724* reflects some uncertainty here, since it states on p. 95 that the Nativity of Christ occurred in AG 310, whereas the date AG 309 is given on p. 97f. for the 'Epiphany' of Christ (see Palmer 1992, 32-3; Palmer 1993, 9). The words "came to the world", in our inscription, should probably be understood as referring to the Conception on March 25th. This finds confirmation in the date given for Christ's Passion on March 24th (see below).

b) This date is problematical; a later hand has chiselled in a supplement which makes it 933 (AD 621/2), the correct date for the beginning of the Islamic era, but not for the Arab conquest of Euphratesia. There is little doubt that the original date inscribed was 930; the diagonal stroke which turns 30 into 33 is a graffito, not a chisel-stroke, and it does not have the drilled holes characteristic of the original lettering. Robert Hoyland points out that a Syriac text written in AD 755 (*Account of the Generations*, 348; see Palmer 1993, 51) appears to agree with the Ehnesh inscription in dating Muḥammad's 'entering the land' in AG 930, AD 618/9; that the same source distinguishes this event from the beginning of 'the era of the Hagarenes' in AG 933; and that there is a recurrent aberration of two years and nine months in the Arabic chronology of Islam.

c) AG 968 is the date given for this battle by the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* (compiled in AD 775). The Syriac Ṣēfē is equivalent to the Arabic Ṣiffīn, a place on the Euphrates north of Ruṣāfa, on the same side as that city. There the Arabs of Muᶜāwiya fought against the Arabs of ᶜAlī and so began the most important civil war in Arab history.

d) The famine cannot certainly be identified with one recorded elsewhere. John bar Penkāyē refers to a bad famine in AH 67 = AD 686/7. A famine dated in the *Chronicle of AD 1234* (pp. 195-7) to AD 541/2 is placed by Michael, *Chronicle*, 11.11b, pp. 430-3, in the late seventh century; it is only the fact that it affected the area of Marᶜash which suggests a possible connection. At the risk of overburdening this list of concise notes I translate it here:

> *At a time of extreme hunger, such that men ate wild beasts and everything impure, there was in the village of* ᶜUfri *in the region of Germaniceia, which is* Marᶜash, *a certain man whose name was Elisha, an easterner by origin, who used to associate with thieves. Later he separated from them and went to live alone in a cave on the mountain, as if he were a solitary. During the famine this man was driven to eat human flesh; but when the chastisement of the famine passed, he did not give up his evil habit. He would come down constantly to the villages and kidnap little boys by deceit, take them up, slaughter them pitilessly, then eat their flesh. As for their bones and their clothes, he would hide them in a certain place near his cave. When he saw the mothers of the boys weeping, he would speak execrable words of comfort to them and offer them some of the flesh of their children to eat, saying, 'You are grieved on account of your son who has died; but do not be sorrowful. Call him blessed because he has been delivered from the famine. This meat is from some game I caught: take it and eat it.' The poor women were so hungry that they would eat it without knowing where it came from and they even thanked him for it.*

> *At grape-picking time he said to the labourers in that village of* ᶜUfri, *'I am going to prepare a feast for you, so that you will give me wine from your vineyards.' Having delivered his invitation he went to the village to get some food in his usual brazen way. That day, however, he did not come across any little boys. Now it so happened that a deacon called Damian, from the monastery of Mor Mari, had come to that place to buy some cheese. When the wicked Elisha saw him, he said, 'Come with me! I will sell you a hundred pounds of cheese.' He took him up and showed him into the cave, then said to him, 'Lie down and rest for a little, while I go and get the cheese.' When he was asleep Elisha came and struck him on the head with a stone and killed him. Then he roasted his flesh, which was very fat indeed. After that he went down to the village, taking the flesh of his thighs, and set it down before the labourers. While they were eating, one of them, whose name was Matthew, said, 'My lord Elisha, this meat does not taste good.' The murderer swore that it was wild ox meat, but that man would eat no more of it. His friends, however, ate their fill.*
>
> *The next day, Damian's relatives came looking for him, because he had gone missing. Certain persons had seen him going up with Elisha to buy some cheese, so they began to suspect. A few days later, that dog Elisha came down to the village to hunt for little boys in his evil way. He found none, because, as a result of what had happened, the villagers were hiding their sons. But he did find a young priest and said to him, 'Do you want to buy some cheese?' The priest decided to trick him and said, 'Yes, I do. How much do you sell it for?' He answered, 'One denarius for a hundred pounds.' So he went up with him to the cave and kept on his guard. 'Lie down and rest till I come back,' said Elisha to the priest. He stayed away a long time, but the priest kept a wary vigil. Late in the evening, when he imagined the priest would have fallen asleep, Elisha went in with a stone in his hands to kill him. The priest sprang to his feet and said, 'Were you planning to kill me, Elisha?' He replied, 'No, I was not. I was just fooling about and pretending.'*
>
> *That priest remained standing the whole night, singing psalms. At dawn he asked, 'And where is the cheese?' 'There is no cheese,' was Elisha's answer. Then the priest began to work on his feelings of remorse and got him to go down with him. When the two men came into the village, the priest gave a yell and all the villagers gathered round. Then the priest gave them the signal to arrest him. After the priest had told them everything that he had done, they tied Elisha up and went up to make a search in his cave. They found there eleven skulls of children and, still intact, the head of Damian, together with a supply of dried human meat and the clothes of the boys. So they committed him (to the authorities) and under torture he confessed to all his atrocious crimes. They impaled him on a stake.*
>
> *At the same time, in the Christian village of* Kfar Ḥimṣ, *there were two women who shared a house and one of them had a baby. Her companion said to her, 'How can you bring up that baby and give it suck in such a famine as this?' The mother of the child replied, 'Fear God, Sargo! What on earth are you thinking of?' But she was silent. The next day the mother of the baby went out to gather grass, so extreme was the shortage of food. Then that woman went and*

fetched two other women and a man who were in the habit of eating human flesh. Together they slaughtered the baby, boiled it and ate it. When the mother returned that wicked Sargo said to her, 'Your son is dead. We buried him with the unbaptized.' But she said, 'Show me the grave.' When she showed her a place, she excavated it, but she did not find her son. Then she ran to the judge and told him what had happened. The women were arrested and under torture they confessed to the crime and told the name of the man who had been their accomplice. All of them were burnt. At the same time another woman died and women came and ate her thighs.

e) The solar eclipse referred to here occurred on October 5, 693, and was total in Euphratesia, as has been shown by the painstaking astronomical calculations of Von Oppolzer (1962, Chart 91). It is also mentioned by Michael (*Chronicle*, 11.16b, pp. 446-7) and by other literary sources (Schove-Fletcher 1984, 137-42).

f) In AD 768/9 the Chalcedonian or 'Melkite' population of the Vale of Marᶜash was deported by the Arabs for allegedly spying for the Byzantines and settled in al-Ramla (Michael, *Chronicle*, 11.26a; Theophanes refers to this event under Anno Mundi 6262 = AD 770). The Byzantine invasion of AD 777 alluded to in our inscription was led by the general of the Thrakesian Theme, Michael Lakhanodrakon, and others and affected those inhabitants designated by the Byzantines themselves as 'Syrian Jacobite heretics'; these were forcibly resettled at the emperor Leo's command in Thrace (Theophanes, Anno Mundi 6270).

g) The Crucifixion of Christ is presumably calculated from the date of his coming 'into the world' — see (a) above — on the assumption that he lived for (exactly) 33 years, counting from the day of his conception, 25 March, 2 BC.

h) The invasion is not recorded in the Syriac chronicles, but the Arab chroniclers have a description of an invasion led by the caliph al-Mahdī in the Islamic year 163 (= AD 779/80), in the course of which he passed Mosul, traversed Mesopotamia (= "came", in our inscription, from the perspective of Ehnesh) and arrived at Aleppo, where he ordered the execution of many Manichaeans, before invading Byzantine territory (= "entered" in our inscription) as far as [the river] Jayḥān. Theophanes, Anno Mundi 6272, records that al-Mahdī went to Dabekon (Dābiq, north of Aleppo) with a large force, whence he sent his son Aaron (Hārūn) on an invasion of Byzantine territory, while he himself returned to the Holy City (Jerusalem). "He also sent out Moukhesias, known as the Zealot, with authority to make the slaves of the Christians apostatize and to devastate the holy churches." Two places in and between which this devastation occurred are mentioned, namely Emesa and Damascus; but some part of the area to the north of Emesa is also indicated. Michael, *Chronicle*, 12.1 (text pp. 478-9, quoted in the *Chronicon Syriacum* of Barhebraeus, pp. 126-7), records the destruction by this caliph of churches built since the time of Islām and the forced conversion to Islām of the Christian Arab tribe of the Banū Tanūkh (the 'Tanūkhids' of our inscription), with the exception of a few men and most of the women. These and other sources for this event, including the South Wall Inscription, are examined by Shahīd (1984, 423-32).[13]

vii) Conceptual Elucidation

There are concepts occurring in the South Wall Inscription which are specific to the culture which generated it:

'The year': The Syrians used a solar year, beginning on 1 October. Year One in the era most often used by the Syrians began on 1 October, 312 BC, when Seleucus I Nikator entered Babylon. This era is called the Seleucid or Greek era and is sometimes referred to as the era of Alexander.

'The Messiah': A concept of Jewish origin. The word means 'the anointed one', that is, the leader or king appointed and consecrated by God to lead the people chosen by God. Jesus of Nazareth was accorded this title by his followers, but he was recorded as saying that his kingdom was 'not of this world'. The coming of the Messiah was associated with the hope of liberation from oppressive alien rule. As Messiah, Jesus was also called the 'Son of God'. This was taken to mean that his mother's conception of him was caused by mysterious processes, not by the seed of a human father, and that the person Jesus existed eternally, before and after his life as a human being. His appearance in his mother's womb could therefore be attributed to his having 'come' there from the spiritual world.

'The world': Without further qualification, this means the created or material world, as opposed to the spiritual world.

'The Arabs': The Syriac word 'Ṭayyōyē' is derived from the name of one Arab tribe, but it was soon adopted as a name for all Arabs and by the time of this inscription it was, for the Jacobites, a virtual synonym of 'Muslims'.

'The land': It is difficult to say for certain whether this should be understood to mean 'the Promised Land', as often in the Old Testament, or the land where the inscription stands, Euphratesia. The third possibility is that the land in question is that of Medina, if AG 930 represents the hijara (cf. Palmer 1993,51).

'The Vale of Marᶜash': An ancient lake in a rift valley which has now been silted up and forms a level vale joining a number of converging valleys. This area is criss-crossed by streams and has marshy areas here and there; and the whole vale is drained north-westwards through a narrow neck into the hollow river valley of the Jayḥān below. Such areas are favourable to cultivation and, being surrounded on all sides by hills, form natural units of human habitation.[14]

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13 For Shahīd, the chief importance of the inscription at Ehnesh is that it confirms the encounter of the Tanūkhids with al-Mahdī. He also sees the coupling of al-Mahdī's destruction of churches with his islamisation of the Tanūkhids as evidence that the churches in question were those of the Banū Tanūkh (p. 424). However, as we have seen, Theophanes (AM 6272) attests the widespread destruction of churches. As for the inscription, the destruction of the churches there precedes the reference to the Tanūkhids and is not formally related to it. *cf.* al-Ṭabarī, *Tarikh*, VIII, 136 (Islamic year 161 = AD 777/8) and 147-8 (Islamic year 163 = AD 779/80).

14 Brooks 1900-01, 89 note 210, says that the Syrians referred to the Vale of Marᶜash as the Vale of Antioch, but our inscription and Michael (*Chronicle*, p. 476 of the Syriac text) show that this is not, or not invariably, so; by the Vale of Antioch the Syrians probably meant the extension of the same rift valley to the south-west, beyond the watershed.

'The territory of the Romans': This means the Byzantine or Christian Roman empire of the East, which straddled Europe and Asia and had its capital at Constantinople (ancient Byzantium) on the European shore of the Bosphorus. The South Wall Inscription makes it doubtful whether the border of the territory of the Romans stopped at the Taurus above Cilicia at this time, as drawn most recently by Treadgold,[15] or extended further, to the east of the river Jayḥān.

'The faithful': Normally in a Christian text this would mean Christians of the same persuasion as the writer. It is often used in Syriac to mean the lay people as opposed to the clergy. In this inscription it turns out, surprisingly, to mean the Muslims.

'Mahdī': Here of course a name, 'al-Mahdī'; yet it is not improbable that the author was aware of the meaning and associations of that name. The Arabic al-mahdī means 'the rightly led one' and designates a saviour-figure in Muslim scenarios for the end of the world comparable with the Messiah in Christian Apocalyptic.

'Gīḥōn': There is no need to suppose that this name is anything other than a form of 'Jayḥān', the Arabic for the river Pyramos, of which a variant form is 'Jayḥūn'. It is probably mere coincidence that the name Gīḥōn is that of one of the four rivers of Paradise in Genesis 2:13 and that Gīḥōn, near Jerusalem, is also known from the Old Testament (I Kings 1:33,38,45; II Chronicles 32:30, 33:14) as the place where Solomon was anointed and proclaimed king. However, it is as well to be aware of this coincidence, since it is possible that the inscription alludes indirectly to apocalyptic literature, in the context of which the biblical Gīḥōns might have some symbolic significance. Gīḥōn is apparently represented here as a topographical designation for something within the Byzantine empire, since al-Mahdī is said to have entered, *i.e.* invaded, as far as Gīḥōn. Both the inscription and the Arabic chronicles leave open the possibility that Gīḥōn in this case is a place, not the river of that name; such a place has not been mapped by historical geographers concerned with the early Islamic period.

'Tanūkhids': For this Arab tribe I refer to the full treatment in Shahīd 1984. I take issue with Shahīd, however, on the denomination of the Banū Tanūkh. He says (Shahīd 1984, 427) that "they presumably remained what they had been in the fourth century, orthodox Dyophysites" and adds in a note that a part of the same tribal group "was Monophysite in Mesopotamia after its conversion by Aḥūdemmeh." The Banū Tanūkh cannot have been 'Dyophysites' before the Council of Chalcedon, AD 451, which defined the dogma of the two natures of Christ. In the reign of Maurice (582-602), according to the *Chronicle of AD 1234* (p. 213), Nuᶜman b. al-Mundhir stated that "All the Arab tribes are Jacobites." Even if this is a Jacobite exaggeration, there is the evidence of Michael (*Chronicle*, XI 8c, p. 422) that the Jacobite patriarch John (632-648) employed Tanūkhids, among others, to translate the Gospel into Arabic. In the corresponding passage of the *Chronicle of AD 1234* (p. 263), based on the same excellent ninth-century Jacobite source, the Tanūkhids are called 'pious'.[16] The agreement between Michael and the *Chronicle of AD 1234* shows that this report is derived from the lost history by Dionysius of Tel-Maḥre, a well-researched work, which was finished about 842 (see Palmer 1993, Part Two).

15 Treadgold 1988, 12: 'The empire in 780'.

The total number of dates for which events are recorded is eight, a number which was thought to contain "the fullness of resurrection". The opening of the eighth book of the *Chronicle of Michael* reads: "To our Lord the Messiah, who consented to fulfil the law of the eighth day and on the eighth day he comes and makes everything new." After the seven days of the Jewish week, the day on which Christ rose from the dead could be counted as the eighth day and the beginning, not of a seven-day cycle like the others, but of a new era, a day that would never end (see Dölger 1934). In a Syriac translation of the well-known tale, one young man was added to the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus; this is an example of the resurrection symbolism of the number eight in the popular literature of the time in which the South Wall Inscription was written (the translation was included in a chronicle composed at Amida in AD 775).

The purpose of these notes is not to suggest that all the levels of meaning described are present in the Ehnesh inscription, only to make the reader aware of some of the possibilities. It would be possible to look for further number-symbolism in the coincidence that Christ's Passion occurred on the sixth day of the week in the sixth month of the Seleucid year; but, although the unusual way in which Friday is referred to accents the number (see Philological Notes, 13), this seems too far-fetched.

viii) Literary background

This section will be limited to brief treatments of two genres of Syriac texts: the epigraphic memorial and the chronographic record. As an inscription our text should belong to the first category, but it is written in the form of the second.

Epigraphy: Syriac inscriptions of the post-Constantinian period are generally monuments either to the fashioning of objects (most often buildings), or to the death of a person. The objects and the people concerned are almost invariably connected with the sacred sphere, the furthest removes from the sacred being represented by a brick-kiln, winepress or kneading-trough made for a monastery

16 Shahīd 1984, 436 n. 90, assumes that these were not representative of the whole 'tribal group', but only of 'the Monophysite branch', but he nowhere cites his evidence for believing that there was a Chalcedonian branch, or indeed that the tribe was divided in its allegiance. Instead, he alludes to its fourth-century stance, evidenced by the signature of Pamphilus, bishop of the Arabs, at Nicaea (pp. 330-34) and by the Tanūkhids' opposition to the Arian emperor Valens (ch. IV), contrasting that with the anti-Orthodox stance of those Tanūkhids later known to have been Jacobites. In fact the opponents of Chalcedon did rally to the flag of Nicene Orthodoxy and could even be called ultra-Nicene, in that they maintained the Nicene anathema against additions to the Creed as invalidating the new definition of Chalcedon. It is for this reason that the Jacobites call themselves 'Syrian Orthodox'.

and by the death of a child who was born into a priestly family and so should have become a member of the village clergy, had he lived. Other kinds of memorial exist, but they are rare. The masons who engraved the inscriptions were frequently priests and monks.

The only Syriac inscription known to me in which a series of dates is reported, as in a chronicle, is unpublished. It is in the ancient burial vault on the south side of the church of the Saffron Monastery, near Mardin. The inscription consists of three parts, the last dated AD 1894; but the first part seems to have been copied from an earlier document. It reads as follows: "In the Greek year 1998 [AD 1686/7] George of Mosul was consecrated patriarch over the Jacobite nation; and again, in the year 2008 [AD 1696/7], he restored the Zaᶜfarān monastery which had been in ruins; and he was working on it for three years until he had made the whole of it complete; and in the year 2017 [AD 1705/6] there was a fatal epidemic within Mardin, like the Flood, and in it died this George and departed to the spiritual world with the succour of God." Probably this inscription is based on an obituary or even a biography of George of Mosul and was intended as a memorial to the man and to his achievement. It is this purpose which governs the selection of events recorded. The comparison with the Flood might have evoked the guilt of man and the wrath of God; but this seems to be belied by the praiseworthy life of the patriarch.

The conclusion of this investigation is that the South Wall Inscription on the church of St Sergius at Ehnesh is unique in the Syriac epigraphic genre, according to the present state of our knowledge. Does the key to its exegesis lie perhaps in the conventions of another genre?

Chronography: The earliest complete work of Syriac historiography to have survived is an Edessene chronicle ending in AD 506 (*Chron. Edessa 506*, on which see Palmer 1990b). After a preface there follows a historical excursus tracing the political (non-theological) causes of the war which had just ended when the chronicle was written. This excursus puts the blame for the war, in human terms, on the Persians, thus exculpating the Byzantine emperor, Anastasius. The author, almost certainly a steward of the cathedral at Edessa, taking the story up year by year from AG 806 (AD 494/5), then describes various portents and calamities, including the day (Saturday, October 23rd, AD 499) when the sun was dimmed and the famine of AD 500-502. All of these things he attributes directly to the agency of God. The cessation of the famine he presents as a divine response to the cessation of the mime-shows, which had been such a blot on the Christian face of Edessa. For this and for relief and good government during the years of famine, the Edessenes had Anastasius to thank. But there was another sin, which, theologically speaking, was the cause of the war that followed (AD 502-506). The author does not name this sin directly, but he intimates that it is the arrogance of opinionated theologians, which threatened the very unity of the Church in his time. He discusses the theory that the war was destined to occur, regardless of human guilt, because the end of the world was approaching; but he rejects it, because the war at the end of the world was to be a World War and because the False Messiah, who should also appear at that time, had not yet been seen. This

chronicle was not merely a record of recent events, but an answer to critics of the emperor Anastasius and of his religious policy (at that time a policy which put Church unity above doctrinal differences), which they blamed for the disaster of the war and especially for the sack of the city of Amida. The author finds it necessary to answer on two levels, the human level of historical rights and wrongs and diplomatic exchanges and the level of divine justice, perceived as transcending other kinds of causation. Mistakes and injustice at the terrestrial level can cause wars, but only if those wars are allowed by God, who sees human affairs from another perspective and is angered only by sin. The sin of a whole people rather than the errors of its leaders can, in absolute terms, be the cause of a war.

The next most ancient chronicle is an Edessene chronicle ending in AD 540 (*Chron. Edessa 540*). It begins with a long extract from the archives of the once autonomous kingdom of Edessa concerning a flood in AD 201. The next section follows directly on from the record of the flood: "In the year 180 (132 BC) began the reign of the kings in Edessa; and in the year 266 (46 BC) began the reign of Augustus Caesar; and in the year 309 (1 October, 3 BC, to 30 September, 2 BC) our Lord was born; and in the year 400 (AD 89) King Abgar built a burial tower as a monument to himself etc." The list of dates continues up to AD 540, with mainly short entries (less than eight lines of text), except for an extended entry on the anti-Chalcedonian bishop Paul, who was deposed AD 522. At the end there is a recapitulation of the four disastrous floods which destroyed the city walls in 201, 303, 413 and 525, beginning with a paradoxical allusion to the blessing given to Edessa, by Christ himself, promising that those walls would be immune to siege until the end of the world. The sentence in question reads as follows (I translate literally to communicate the immediacy of the original): "As we have learned from the historical records, behold, four times water is breaching the walls of the Blessed City and throwing down her towers and drowning her children, behold since the Messiah ascended to his glorious Father." (It was after the Ascension, according to the legend, that the promise of immunity was given to Edessa.) This chronicle is a rhetorical statement which relies on the juxtaposition of selected events from the history of Edessa and of the world to put events around the year 540 in a particular perspective. Once again the Persians were on the war-path. Once again, as in AD 503, Edessa had escaped the fate of other cities. But the same question had arisen: who was to blame, in theological terms, for the sack of Antioch and other cities? The author of *Chron. Edessa 540* was a supporter of the reigning emperor, Justinian, and of his ecclesiastical policy. Reading between the lines, we can see a case made out in this chronicle for blaming the 'Monophysite heresy' which was so strong in the patriarchate of Antioch for the war. Heresy had also been the underlying cause of the four floods which destroyed Edessa, most recently in AD 525. Since God had promised Edessa that it would not be sacked by the enemy, flooding was the most drastic means he had of teaching them a lesson. (There were tens of thousands of casualties and many buildings were ruined.) What the writer hoped to achieve by composing this chronicle is a question to which I shall return elsewhere (I touched upon it in Palmer 1988a, 124).

Chron. Edessa 506 starts with an excursus on the history of the relations between Byzantium and Persia; *Chron. Edessa 540* begins in AD 201, jumps back to the Hellenistic period, then reports select events in order up to AD 540 and ends with a recapitulation of the history of flooding in Edessa since AD 201. This method of moving the finger back and forth over the page of history seems characteristic of the genre. There were also chronicles which introduced an event or a series of events from sacred or from secular history into a sequence of later dates. The so-called *Chronicon miscellaneum ad annum domini 724 pertinens* contains a rubric headed: "Explanatory note consisting of annalistic information on a wide range of subjects, beginning with an earthquake that occurred at Antioch." This rubric jumps backwards and forwards between the seventh century, when it was composed, and the first century of the Church's existence, and introduces a theological statement concerning the centurion at the foot of the Cross of Christ between two related pieces of historical information on the sixth century (see Palmer 1992; Palmer 1993, 5-24). These 'flash-backs' appear to be used to suggest diagonal links between the parallel vertical structures of sacred and secular history. If this interpretation is correct, then our inscription, with its 'flash-back' from the late eighth century to the Passion of Christ, can be seen as belonging to the same genre. Baumstark (1922, 274 n. 3) did indeed make this connection, although he could not see any sense in either the last-mentioned chronicle or the inscription at Ehnesh.

4 Exegesis

What, then, can be made of these two inscriptions, which, to judge by the letter-forms and the decorative drill-holes, one hand carved and to which, in that case, one mind must have given meaning?

The East Wall Inscription contains verses associated with the power of the Cross for victory, although Psalm 44 wrestles with the problem of the defeat of God's chosen people. A long period of Muslim rule could lead Christian subjects of the Muslims to reinterpret this victory in terms of the mere survival of their religious community, or to interiorize it. But as long as the Christian Empire of Byzantium could hold its own in war with the Muslims, Christian subjects of the Muslims near the border with Byzantium must have wondered whether the victory of the Cross should be envisaged in literal, military terms. The purge by al-Mahdī in AD 780 seems to have suggested to at least one Jacobite Christian that history was approaching its apocalyptic end.

The obscurity of the South Wall Inscription is surely intentional: the reader was meant to puzzle over it long and hard. Our survey of the Syriac chronographic genre gives us some important clues. The famine and the eclipse are there because they are signs of God's wrath. The suffering of Christ is recorded between two events of recent history to invest them with a special significance. Most importantly, the eight events recorded are somehow to be connected: the Syrians used chronography to prove a particular point and to attain a certain purpose. The coming of the Messiah, of Muḥammad ("the Arabs") and of al-

Mahdī form a significant series, cutting through the rest of history. The Battle of Ṣiffīn, the famine and the eclipse form another. The 'entry' of the people of Marᶜash into slavery is parallel to the 'entry' of al-Mahdī "as far as Giḥōn" and both stand in some relationship of meaning with "our sins" and the suffering of the Messiah, which are placed between them. The caliph is referred to not as 'king of the Arabs' (the usual Syriac term for him) but as 'Commander of the Faithful', a title which only Muslims could consistently accept and use. Yet the inscription was certainly not made by a Muslim, for it mentions the suffering of Christ.

Could Part Two of the South Wall Inscription have been added as an afterthought, as a supplement adding a new example? A case can be made out for seeing Part One as originally complete in itself. The seven sections give it a certain completeness and it ends impressively with a long drawn-out sigh: Ḥašš Mšīḥō (note the phonetic symmetry of the fricatives ḤETH and SHIN). The juxtaposition of Christ's Passion with the deportation might be intended to suggest a theological dimension, giving meaning to this human suffering. Later the sequence of years might have seemed to invite a supplement.

While this would absolve us from seeing the whole of Part One in the light of Part Two, it would leave us with the question why al-Mahdī is referred to as 'the Commander of the Faithful'.[17] Besides, we should then have to find another explanation for the selection of this remarkable series of events from the past.

My own feeling is that Part One is incomplete without Part Two. The way the Arabs are introduced in a phrase closely modelled on the opening notice about the Messiah suggests to me the statement of two themes in a piece of music, which should come together again at the end. If Part Two is added to Part One, the parallel is clearly restated, for then the second notice about the Messiah is followed immediately by a notice about the 'Commander of the Faithful', who in this case called himself the Mahdī. Even the verbal echo is there: first Christ came, then the Arabs came, then the caliph came; the people of Marᶜash entered Byzantine territory, then the caliph entered it. Concepts are echoed as well as words: first the Messiah was injured, then "the Mahdī" injured the Church of Christ. The symmetries are not merely retrospective, for the earlier statements to which they refer would be suspended pointlessly without an balancing answer at the end.

If Part One was never a self-contained unity, then another explanation is needed for the fact that Part Two is inscribed in smaller characters, but that could be simply because the mason overcompensated: the whole text, executed in the larger script, might not have fitted on the stone. Anxiety about diminishing space on the stone accounts for the gradual reduction in the size of the letters of an inscription at Qartmīn Abbey (Palmer 1987, A.6, 64-7; Palmer 1990a, 223). In the case of the Ehnesh inscription, the division into dated sections gave the mason pause after the seventh section to estimate the space left for the whole of

17 To posit Muslim authorship of a unobtrusive supplement to a Syriac Christian inscription without any denial of the statement that Christ suffered would be to overburden credulity, especially since there is no evidence of Muslims ever having written in Syriac.

the long eighth section; hence the sudden reduction in the size of the letters. Anxiety about space could also account for the initial omission of the name Mahdī, in apposition to the title 'Commander of the Faithful', though this might really be an afterthought.

The inscription ends on a black note, with the destruction of churches and the forced conversion of a tribe of Jacobite Bedouin to Islam. Yet this is not altogether the last word. The East Wall Inscription may have been read first, on the way to the church; but the writing on the south wall leads the reader back to the south-east corner and invites him to go round that corner and read the words on the east wall again. The south wall faces in the direction from which the Arabs originally came and in which they directed their prayers, whereas the east wall faces the rising sun, with all its associations for Christian worship and eschatological expectation. The psalms quoted here, if read in their entirety, suggest the fervent hope of believers humiliated by a stronger enemy that God will return and go out with their armies once more, as he did in the days of old.

When the late eighth-century Christian author carved these psalm-verses, he may well have been thinking of two different kinds of enemies, metaphorical and literal, interior and exterior. The ascetic tradition promised victory through the sign of the Cross over greed and resentment and even over the sexual urge itself. When visualised as demons these sins and others could be called 'enemies' of mankind. But although Jesus himself had apparently rejected the idea of a messianic kingdom on earth, imposed by the sword, the sign of the Cross had been the Roman empire's standard in battle since the conversion of Constantine. The early Byzantines, like the later Crusaders, could read the psalms with a literal application to the enemies of the Christian empire. If the inscriptions at Ehnesh were composed in AD 782, they will have been conceived and read against the background of al-Mahdī's preparations for a full-scale invasion of Asia Minor, which would put the expedition of AD 780 in the shade. The Arab army which took the field in AD 782 was "of unprecedented size": allegedly 95,793 men (Treadgold 188, 67). At the same time there may have been some awareness at Ehnesh of the fact that the year 780 had marked the beginning of what Treadgold calls 'the Byzantine revival' and that the Caliphate was already in decline. Perhaps it looked as if the great struggle predicted for the Last Days was about to begin.

The South Wall Inscription also refers to the Arabs as well as to the sins of the Christians. The Cross itself is not named, but the suffering of the Messiah, which took place (though the Koran denies it) on the Cross, is 'writ large' by being placed outside its chronological context. It is the redemptive suffering which brought about the Messiah's victory over death that is the source of the invincible power of the Cross. Sin can always block the flow of that power and delay the redemption of the world.

The Muslims, who had just destroyed many churches and forced a whole tribe of Christians to betray their Faith, are obviously the enemies of the Cross. Since the author of the inscription is a Christian, we have to admit that the title 'Commander of the Faithful' bears a heavy weight of irony. Given the impressionistic juxtaposition of a great battle (Ṣiffīn), a famine and an eclipse and the

intrusion of sacred into temporal time, the author might even be experimenting with apocalyptic imagery. Matthew 24:5ff contains most of the elements incorporated in the inscription: war (Mt 24:6), famine (Mt 24:7), eclipse (Mt 24:29), captivity (compare Mt 24:9). If Muḥammad is understood to be one of the false prophets predicted at Mt 24:5,11 and 24, then the coming of the Arabs fits in with this scriptural apocalypse as well. The 'Commander of the Faithful', following directly on the suffering of the genuine Messiah, might be the Son of Perdition (II Thess. 2:3ff), often known as the False Messiah. This is suggested to the number-conscious reader by the fact that the coming of al-Mahdī occupies the eighth place in the series, because the 'eighth day' was the day "when He comes to make all things new". Apocalyptic literature envisaged the return of deported peoples to the land of their birth and the reconstruction of ruined churches (see Ps.-Methodius, transl. Alexander 1985, 49; Palmer 1993, 238). The South Wall Inscription at Ehnesh sets the scene for these things to occur by relating the deportation of people and the destruction of churches. Indeed, if the church of St Sergius is itself a late building, as some features of its masonry and design suggest (Hellenkemper hazards a guess at the ninth century, but the longer inscription suggests a date shortly after AD 780, which is compatible with the letter-forms), it may have been a rebuilding of an earlier building pulled down by the Arabs.

As for the apostasy of the Banū Tanūkh, it fits in with I Tim. 4:1 and Luke 18:8 (quoted by Ps.-Methodius, transl. Alexander 1985, 47; Palmer 1993, 235). Even the name Gīḥōn might conceivably have been meant to suggest apocalyptic associations; Gīḥōn at Jerusalem was linked with anointing a king, while the biblical river Gīḥōn encircled the land of Kush, and Byzantium, in the apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius, was identified with Kush for the purpose of applying Psalm 68:31 ("Kush will hand over to God") to the history of the author's time (Palmer 1993, 223f.). "For there is no people or kingdom under heaven that can overpower the kingdom of the Christians as long as it possesses a place of refuge in the life-giving Cross" (transl. Alexander 1985, 42). However, these associations seem far-fetched, when we learn from the Arabic chronicles that al-Mahdī went as far as the river or a place called Jayḥān, and that Jayḥūn is an acceptable variant of that name; for Gīḥōn and Jayḥūn would be written identically in Syriac (gyḥwn).

Although the author was a Jacobite, any hope he may have had of the victory of the Cross through force of arms must have been centred on Byzantium. It is true that the Byzantines had deported the Jacobite population of the Vale of Marᶜash and that this is what is referred to in the inscription, where it says "the Vale of Marᶜash entered into captivity in Byzantine territory"; but it adds "because of our sins" and it does not identify the Byzantines explicitly as the agents of this evil. Perhaps among other sins the author had in mind the sins which had caused Christian disunity and so facilitated the Arab conquest. The Melkites of Marᶜash had been deported by the Arabs for aiding and abetting the Byzantines on whose frontier they lived. It is likely enough that the Byzantines gave a similar pretext for deporting the Jacobites of the area a few years later.

However, it may be that the sins he refers to should be envisaged less on the political level and more on the level of personal morality. It is important to

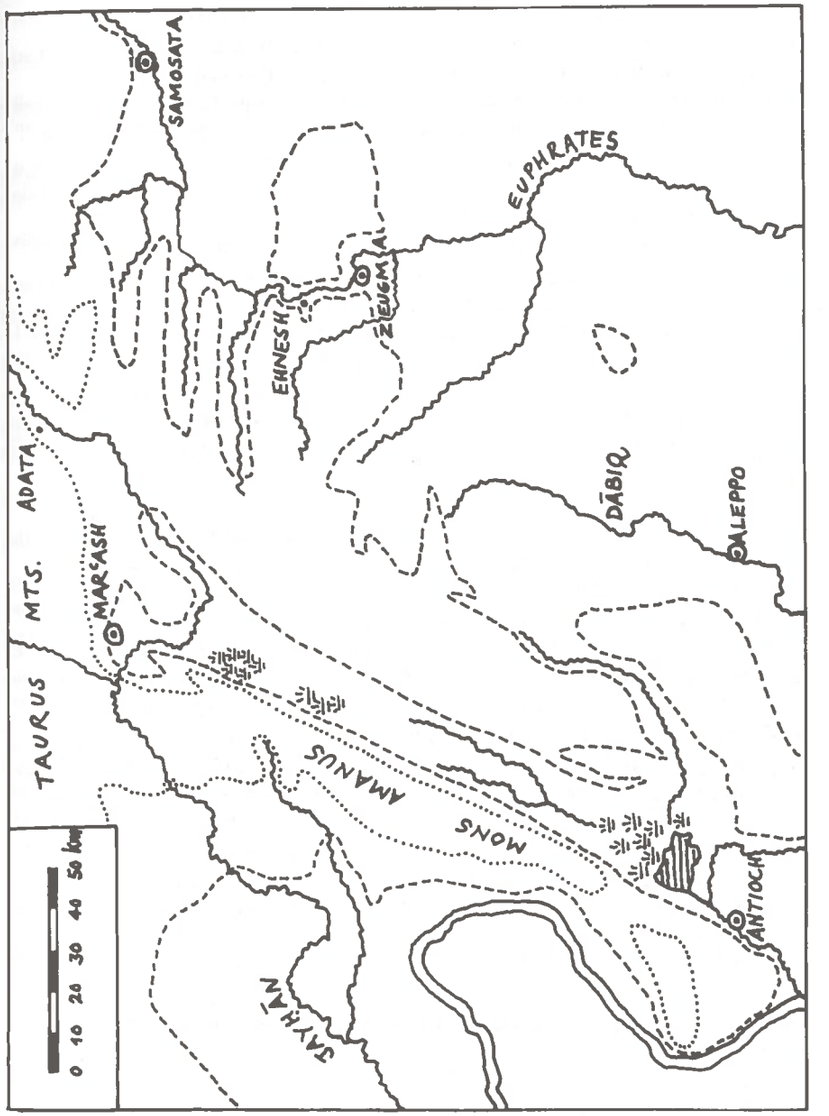
remember the physical context of the inscriptions. They will have been seen by village people when they came to the church of St Sergius, which they will have done *en masse* on the martyr's feast-day. Cumont saw the Armenian villagers enjoying a barbecue by the spring just below the church after the celebration of the Eucharist. Such occasions, when young men and women encountered each other outside the village, drank wine and danced together, were a notorious danger to village morals. It is instructive to read Michael, *Chronicle*, 11.6a, p. 417 of the Syriac text, with reference to the seventh century:

> *Later, when the Arabs heard of the festival which took place at the monastery of St Simeon the Stylite in the region of Antioch, they appeared there and took captive a large number of men and women and innumerable boys and girls. The Christians who were left no longer knew what to believe. Some of them said, "Why does God allow this to happen?" But a discerning person will see that Justice permitted this because, instead of fasting, vigils and psalm-singing, the Christians used to yield to intemperance, drunkenness, dancing and other kinds of luxury and debauchery at the festivals of the martyrs, thus angering God. That is why, quite justly, he punished us with this blow, in order that we might improve our behaviour.*

Perhaps the parish-priest of Ehnesh made the same connection between the degeneracy of his congregation and the successes of the Arabs. Conversely, the verse-homily on St Sergius by Jacob of Serūgh, which was a model for Jacobite homilies on this martyr's feast-day, emphasizes Sergius's connection with the defence of the Eastern Roman frontier and attributes his victorious power to his participation in the Passion of the Messiah.[18] We are constantly reminded that the world can only be saved from pollution if everyone considers the effects of his daily conduct on the environment and acts accordingly. Just so, sin, even if apparently localized, contributes, in the wider theological vision, to the ecological imbalance of the spiritual world. There is something typically Syrian, perhaps, about giving concrete expression to a spiritual metaphor. Sources can evoke deep spiritual and sexual responses from human beings, but in any case a spring outside a village is one of the few places in a 'traditional' society where a young man can encounter a young woman on her own. The priest of Ehnesh may have placed an inscription there, above the spring, to remind his congregation on leaving the church that each piece of 'spiritual rubbish' which they might leave behind them after the festive picnic which followed the Eucharist would befoul the earth in God's sight; and that they should beware, because they "knew not the hour" when the Messiah should return. Like Belshazzar, who mixed the wine for his erotic carousals in the vessels of the sanctuary (Daniel 5), the church-goers would look up from their feasting and see, with an indefinite foreboding, that enigmatic writing on the wall.

18 I am grateful to Elizabeth Fowden for drawing my attention to this text.

Fig. 11. Sketch map of the Vale of Marʿash and the Upper Euphrates, by A.N. Palmer.



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NEUE ERKENNTNISSE ZUR SYRISCHEN TEXTGESCHICHTE DES 'PSEUDO-METHODIUS'

Gerrit J. Reinink

In einem kürzlich erschienenen Aufsatz über das Verhältnis der griechischen zur ältesten lateinischen Fassung der 'Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius' hat Th. Frenz einige Einwände erhoben gegen die in den Jahren 1976/8 von A. Lolos herausgegebene, neue Edition der vier griechischen Redaktionen (Lolos 1976 und 1978) dieses ursprünglich Syrisch geschriebenen Werkes (Frenz 1987). Frenz zeigte an einigen Beispielen, dass in den Versuch, die früheste griechische Fassung wiederherzustellen, nicht nur die Textzeugen der ältesten griechischen Redaktion (*Lolos I*), sondern auch die späteren griechischen Redaktionen (*Lolos II, III* und *IV*) und die lateinische Fassung,[1] die immerhin den ältesten Zeugen des frühesten griechischen Textes darstellt,[2] einbezogen werden sollten (Frenz 1987, 54). Neuerdings hat W.J. Aerts der Frenzschen Kritik an der Lolos-Ausgabe zugestimmt, allerdings mit der Einschränkung, dass auch der von Frenz im weiteren ausser Acht gelassene syrische Text für die Ermittlung des frühesten griechischen Textes von grösster Bedeutung ist. Aerts zufolge wird "die Wahl, die Lolos aufgrund seiner Auffassungen, z.B. der *lectio difficilior* u. dgl., vorge-

1 Herausgegeben von Sackur 1976, 1-96 (Edition der ältesten lateinischen Fassung auf der Grundlage der 4 ältesten bekannten Handschriften). In der gesamten lateinischen Textüberlieferung lassen sich mindestens 4 Redaktionen unterscheiden; siehe Verhelst 1973, 95-7. Inventar der heute bekannten lateinischen Handschriften der 4 Redaktionen von Laureys-Verhelst 1988. Die 2. Redaktion ist heute zugänglich durch die Edition O. Prinz (1985).

2 Die ältesten lateinischen Handschriften stammen aus dem 8. Jhdt, während dagegen die älteste griechische Handschrift aus dem Jahre 1332/3, die übrigen aus dem 15.-17. Jhdt stammen (vgl. Frenz 1987, 52). Kortekaas (1988, 63-79) hat neuerdings nachgewiesen, dass von den beiden ältesten lateinischen Textzeugen [Cod. *Bern, Burgerbibliothek* 611 (s. VIII: A.D. 727?) und Cod. *Paris. lat.* 13348 (s. VIII med.)] der letztere als der bessere Vertreter der ältesten lateinischen Fassung zu betrachten ist.