
PALAEOGRAPHY IN SYRIAC INSCRIPTIONS AND MANUSCRIPTS



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Calligraphy marks different cultural periods and eras. In Syriac epigraphy, consulting manuscripts for comparing epigraphic scripts and shapes is not the norm. Yet traced and inscribed texts can share the same scripts. There are cases where manuscripts and inscriptions come from the pen of the same calligrapher. This article compares palaeography in stone inscriptions and manuscripts of three cultural periods in Mesopotamia (Iraq) to highlight their common characteristics.¹

9TH CENTURY PALEOGRAPHY

Some inscriptions, mainly business documents, uncovered by Iraqi archaeologists in the citadel of Takrit are not dated. Thanks to manuscripts dated to the 9th century, one

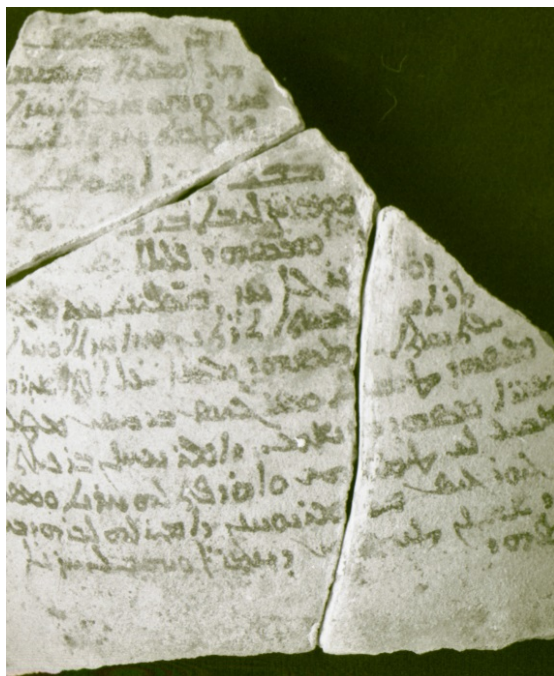


Fig. 1. Inscription from Takrit (Iraq Musum148297)

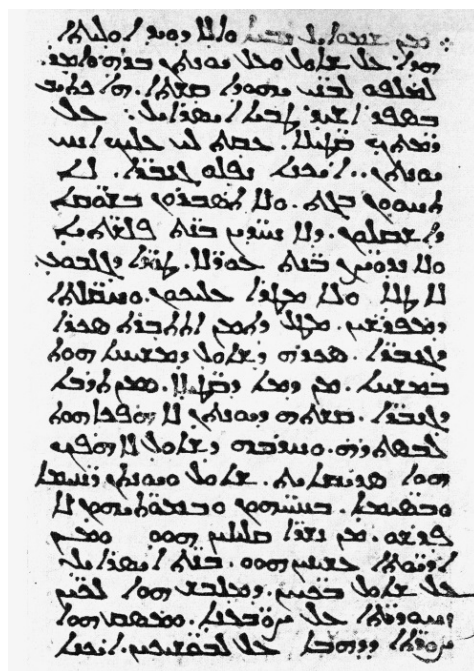


Fig. 2. Manuscript BL 17130

can date the said inscriptions to this century. The following inscription, fig. 1, now at the Iraq Museum² shows a script quite similar to the manuscript in fig. 2, BL 17130 fol. 66v:³

During the 8th and 9th centuries the Serto script shows letter shapes reminiscent of Estrangela, as in the case of final *olaf* and the angular *ṭēt*. The sherd from Takrit and the manuscript share several letter shapes: the independent *olaf* tilts its top rightward while the ligatured one is either a straight line as of the Estrangela or rather the East Syriac type; the *bēt* is still angular; the *gōmal* is made of a single stroke just like its East Syriac counterpart; the *qōf* is a box; the *tāw* is still conservative with its lower hook. The rest of the letters, including the *mīm* and the *semkat* are remarkably similar, confirming the date of the Takrit fragment.

THE PALEOGRAPHY OF THE MONGOL PERIOD (13TH–14TH CENTURIES)

It seems that during the Mongol period a specific Estrangela script was used, as in the inscriptions of the monastery of Mār Behnām and in funerary inscriptions recently uncovered in the town of Karamlēs,⁴ both located in the Plain of Nineveh, not far from Mosul. The new Estrangela script is a revival of the ancient type and is particularly



Fig. 3. Inscription from the Monastery of
Mār Behnām, Iraq

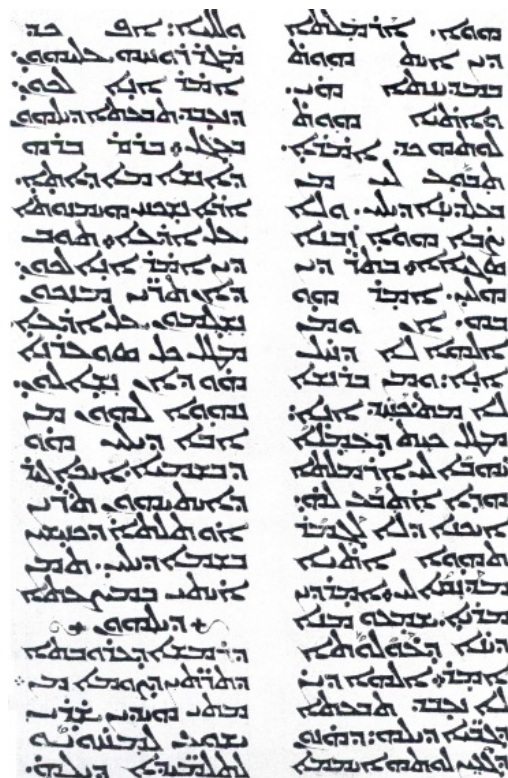


Fig. 4. Manuscript BL 8729

elegant. Interestingly, the script of Mār Behnām, top calligraphy, looks like that in manuscripts produced by a scribe native of Qaraqōsh, a town near Mār Behnām, while he was living at the Monastery of the Syrians in the Skete desert in Egypt.⁵ The pictures in figs. 3 and 4 reflect not only the script known during the Mongol Period, but also the skills of the one scribe who must have produced both of them. The first, fig. 3, comes from the monastery of Mār Behnām; the second, fig. 4, from the manuscript of Bacchus son of Mattai (BL 8729 fol. 65) dated to AD 1230,⁶ the approximate date of the inscription:

Common features include: the *olaf* has a slightly curved horizontal bar, the shoe-like base of the right foot ahead of the foot (as in ܐ); the *ʿayn* slightly slants and ends with a small ball; the *pē* is markedly angular; the *ṣōdē* shows pronounced curvature with an acutely angular lower part ending with a short tail; the *qōf* is a simple box with angular corners; the *šīn* is slightly curved at the top; and the *tāw* is trapezoid with an inclined *hasta*. There are of course other similar letters in both the Skete manuscripts and the Mār Behnām inscriptions, most notably the *semkat* made of two triangles, which look like “cat’s ears.”

THE PALEOGRAPHY OF THE OTTOMAN PERIOD (15TH – 19TH CENTURIES)

During the Ottoman Period, especially the 18th and 19th centuries, an enormous amount of manuscripts were produced, written by masterful calligraphers, mainly from the town of Alqosh in the Plain of Nineveh. Both Estrangela and East Syriac scripts were



Fig. 5. Inscription from the Monastery of Rabban Hormuzd, Iraq



Fig. 6. Iraqi Centre of Manuscripts No. 30536

used. In the case of the former, the shapes were derived from ancient and ‘Mongol’ types and developed by scribes to mark their period. Stone and wood inscriptions that fill the Monastery of Rabban Hormuzd and the Monastery of Our Lady of Seeds also reflect these developed scripts.

The inscription in fig. 5 dates to AD 1804;⁷ the manuscript in fig. 6 to nine years after (1813).⁸ Both reflect a widespread Estrangela-type script: an elongated *olaf* whose right leg ends with a circle; the *bēt* and the *qōf* are angular; the *semkat* in the inscription is angular while in the manuscript one part of it shows this characteristic. All other letters, including the *wāw* and the *tāw* are the same.

The Estrangela of the Ottoman period is generally a bit rigid, although it does not lack beauty. Nonetheless, the scribes of the same period sometimes took freedom in their calligraphy, as the inscription in fig. 7 from Mosul, AD 1745,⁹ and the manuscript in fig. 8 from Ḥakkāri (Eastern Turkey), AD 1753,¹⁰ show:



Fig. 7.
Inscription from the Chaldean
Church of Al-Ṭahra, Mosul

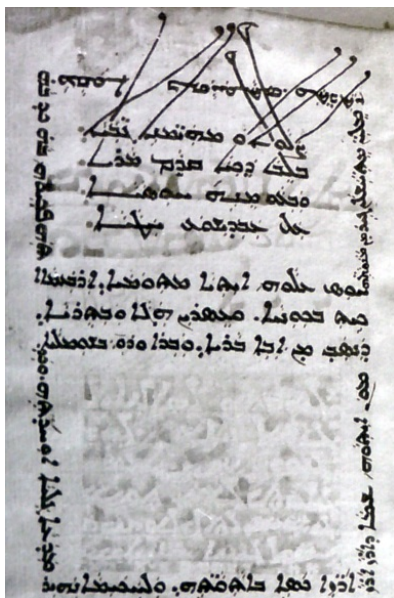


Fig. 8.
Iraqi Centre of Manuscripts
No. 30522

The elongated *olaf* in both cases is striking and calligraphic. All other letters of the East Syriac script found in this church and in contemporary manuscripts are similar, typical during the Ottoman period.

FINAL NOTES

In all ages or cultural periods, palaeography is common to both inscribed stones and manuscripts. Perhaps in one case, the same scribe might be seen to have traced his outstanding calligraphy on parchments as well as on stones to be chiselled by stonecutters. He is Bacchus son of Mattai encountered earlier, native of Qaraqōsh and resident of the Monastery of the Easterners in Edessa, and then at the Monastery of the Syrians in Egypt. His masterful Estrangela script found in several manuscripts produced in Edessa and Egypt is very reminiscent of the equally masterful Estrangela decorating the monastery of Mār Behnām, near Mosul.

The study of palaeography must take into consideration both inscribed stones and written manuscripts. Such combinations help in dating undated documents and shed light on historical calligraphies.

NOTES

¹ In this article the pictures from Iraq are courtesy of the Iraqi Department of Antiquities and Heritage and the Iraqi Centre of Manuscripts, and the pictures from Hatch, *Dated Syriac Manuscripts*, are courtesy of Gorgias Press.

² A. Harrak, *Syriac and Garshuni Inscriptions of Iraq*, Recueil des inscriptions syriaques 2 (Paris: Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, 2010), vol. 1 and 2, no. FA.01.09.

³ W. H. Hatch, *Dated Syriac Manuscripts* (Boston 1946), Plate CVIII.

⁴ Harrak, *Syriac and Garshuni Inscriptions of Iraq*, vol. 2, plate 80: AC.01.04, AC.01.05 and AC.01.06.

⁵ “Bacchus son of Mattay, a Master Calligrapher in the Mongol Period,” in George A. Kiraz and Zeyad al-Salameen (eds.), *From Ugarit to Nabataea: Studies in Honor of John F. Healey*, Gorgias Ugaritic Studies 6 (Gorgias Press: Piscataway, NJ, 2012), pp. 107-122.

⁶ W. H. Hatch, *Dated Syriac Manuscripts*, Plate XCI.

⁷ Harrak, *Syriac and Garshuni Inscriptions of Iraq*, vol. 2, plate 226: AP.01.39, where the picture is entirely placed.

⁸ A. Harrak, *Catalogue of Syriac and Garshuni Manuscripts: Manuscripts Owned by the Iraqi Department of Antiquities and Heritage*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Subsidia, 126 (Peeters: Leuven, 2012), p. 88.

⁹ Harrak, *Syriac and Garshuni Inscriptions of Iraq*, AA.02.01.

¹⁰ On the manuscript see Harrak, *Catalogue of Syriac and Garshuni Manuscripts*, p. 57-60.