
EPIGRAPHIC AND ICONOGRAPHIC FRAGMENTS FROM THE CHURCH OF AḤUDEMEH IN MOSUL



AMIR HARRAK
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

On 27 November 2018, the website *Ankawa.com*¹ published several pictures of epigraphic and iconographic fragmentary stones, which originally were part of the sanctuary gate inside the Syriac Orthodox Church of Aḥudemeh in Mosul (plan 1). The infamous Islamic State, which invaded Mosul and the Plain of Nineveh, destroyed all the churches, some very old, including this church. Rain cleared dust accumulating over these fragments, bringing them to light among the ruins and debris near the Syriac Orthodox Church of Upper Tahira—this church was razed to the ground by the same culprits. One picture (figure 1) shows these ancient stones among bullets, echoing the atrocities that this State perpetrated against people and monuments. The epigraphy² and iconography³ of the sanctuary gate date to the brilliant Atabeg period (13th century), and although they are both published, it is worth discussing them again to keep them in record.



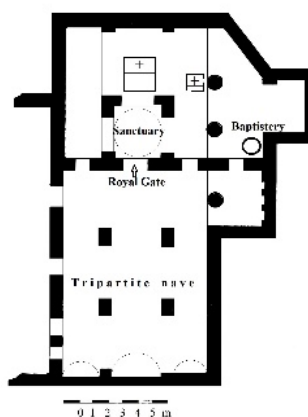
Figure 1: Scattered stones of the Royal Gate.

CHURCH OF AḤUDEMEH

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

The tripartite nave is demarcated by two sets of square pillars which must have supported arches. Inside the tripartite sanctuary, the Holy-of-Holies is accessed by the magnificent Royal Gate, a masterpiece of Atabeg art. It consists of double lintels surmounted by a lion's head; the lower side ends with stylised flowers hanging like stalactites. The lower lintel is decorated with figures in relief: the central figure is effaced, and the figures on the

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



far sides represent cavaliers, each holding an eagle. An Arabic inscription, of *thuluth* calligraphy, commemorates its building, although the Royal Gate is not complete. The fragments include the stalactites, a cavalier holding an eagle, and an Arabic inscription of *thuluth* calligraphy in vogue during the 11th-13th centuries.

THE ROYAL GATE (FIG. 2)

The middle gate of the sanctuary is called Royal, for in the Eucharistic Liturgy a psalm is chanted: *Lift up your heads, you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord*

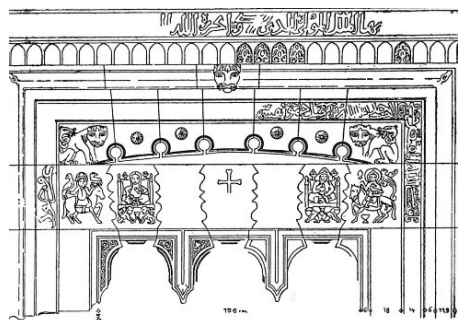


Figure 2: Royal Gate; inscribed and decorated double lintels.

mighty in battle.⁴ It is therefore highly decorated, consisting of double lintels, the upper one surmounted by a lion's head, and the lower one ends with stylised flowers hanging like stalactites. The lower lintel is also decorated with figures in relief: the central figure is effaced, and the figures on the far sides represent cavaliers, each holding an eagle. An Arabic inscription in *thuluth* calligraphy commemorates its building, although it is not complete: "A gate plated not with iron but with boundless nobility..." The fragments include the stalactites, a cavaliers holding an eagle, and the Arabic inscription.

STALACTITES (FIGURES 3-4)

The Atabeg architectural style includes stalactites found in churches and mosques of the 13th century, a style adopted by the mid-18th century Jalili architecture of the same region. Stalactites hung from the lower lintels and play mere decorative roles. The surfaces and sides of the stalactites are always decorated with arabesques in low relief as those located at the mosque of 'Awn-al-dīn in Mosul indicate.



Figure 2: Stalactites; mosque of 'Awn-al-dīn; Mosul



Figure 3: Fragmentary Stalactite of Aḥudemeh.

When Sarre and Herzfeld visited the church at the beginning of the 20th century and drew the Royal Gate, only one stalactite was extant, and this too was obliterated by the Islamic State (figure 3).

CAVALIERS HOLDING AN EAGLE (FIGURE 5)

Atabeg iconographic repertoire included fantastic figures such as intertwined dragons, lions in different positions, birds whose tails end with heads of snakes, seated emirs and horse-riding cavaliers. The latter, in the form of St. George, are found in the Church of the Monastery of Mar-Behnam, also dated to the Atabeg period.



Figure 5: Royal Gate; cavaliers holding a falcon.

There are two such cavaliers in the church of Aḥudemeh, one survived as a fragment (fig. 5), but both hold falcons in their hands, strange and difficult to explain depictions. Bas Snelders discussed at length these falcon-holding cavaliers, concluding that these “were simply a variant of the tradition of placing apotropaic riders at the entrance of the sanctuary.”⁵

EPIGRAPHIC FRAGMENTS (FIG. 6 AND 7)

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

THE CHRISTIAN ARABIC INSCRIPTION



Figure 6C: Inscription in *Thuluth*.



Figure 6B: Inscription in *Thuluth*.



Figure 6A: Inscription in *Thuluth*.

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

يا ايها الملك المولى الذي شرفت بجوده امرنا الشر<ق> اذ
تفتخر ابواب د[ا]رك لا زالت مفتحة بالعز والنذر
باب [من كرم] مفيض مصفح لا من حد[يد] (6A) ترميك
حمرة نقشه مجراه من كيد الحسود [لا زال مفتوحا به]
...التأييد (6B) في عز وجود
(6C)

“O Lord King who honoured the princes of the Eas<t> through your goodness, the gates to your dwellin[g] are proud to be still opened with honour and lig[ht].”

“A gate plated not with iron [but with boundless nobility. The red colour of its ornamentation keeps you away] of the trap of the jealous. With might and generosity, [it will still open ... for support’]”.

Figure 6A contains decorative motifs all typically *thuluth*, as is seen in the following drawing.

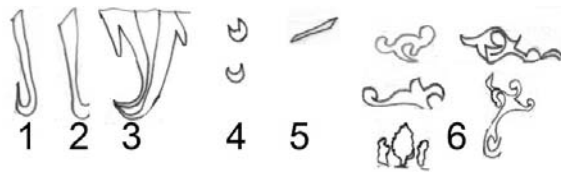


Figure 7: Decorative elements in *Thuluth* Calligraphy

THE SYRIAC INSCRIPTION

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



Figure 8: Syriac commemorative inscription.

- | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| (1) The Church of Mār Ahḥudemeh | 1. حبل و صنب ائسه و امدیه |
| (2) [of the Syrians] Orthodox. | 2. [و صنب و صنب] ل و صنب و صنب |
| (3) [It was renovated in the ye]ar 1971 of Netivity. | 3. [ال و صنب و صنب] ل و صنب و صنب |

There were two other Arabic commemorative inscriptions inside the church. One of them, dated to 1896 and located to the left side of the old church's gate, says: “(The church) was rebuilt out of the grants of our greatest lord and illustrious Sultan-Khaqan ‘Abd-al-Ḥamīd Khan al-Ġāzī—may God preserve his glorious days with might and power, and may He grant his fundamental rule good fortune and expansion!” Another says: ““The church of Mār Aḥudemeh was renovated during the time of his Holiness Mār Ignatius Afrām the First, Patriarch of Antioch and the rest of the East, and Mār Athanasius Tūmā Qaṣīr, Bishop of the Archdiocese of Mosul and its suburbs. Deacon Jamīl Ḥannā *afandī* Ḥāwā took care of the restoration—may God reward him. It was in the first of March, the year 1950, corresponding to the year 1369 of H(egira).”⁸ The fate of these two inscriptions is unknown.

NOTES

¹ <http://www.ankawa.com/>.

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

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

⁴ Psalm 24:7-8

⁵ Snelders, *Identity and Christian-Muslim Interaction*, p. 354-359, esp. 359.

⁶ On this subject, see A. Harrak, *Le Monastère de Mar-Behnam à la période Atabeg - III^e S.* (Paris : Geuthner, 2018), p. 128-134.

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