

CULTURAL INTERACTION IN NORTH SYRIA IN THE
ROMAN AND BYZANTINE PERIODS
THE EVIDENCE OF PERSONAL NAMES

BY

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One possible entry into the question of cultural interaction in an area (e.g. North Syria) is to examine the onomastics to be found within a circumscribed district.¹ This will not necessarily reveal the precise ethnic origins of the individuals named but it will at least reveal some of the ethnic history of the region which gave currency to the names so chosen. Likewise, theophoric names may not in themselves provide evidence for the religious adherence of individuals but they will, again, at least reveal something of the background religious history of the area which allowed currency to the names so bestowed. The choice of language of the recordings (e.g. Greek, Latin, Syriac) will again have a bearing on ethnic and cultural influences. But it has to be borne in mind as a major *caveat* to the whole enterprise that changing fashions in epigraphic habit, not to mention the chance nature of much survival as well as of discovery, do ensure that such sampling will be far from ideal: it may well indeed be misleadingly unrepresentative.

The eleven items listed below pp. 142-143 record individual publications of inscribed surfaces discovered in the course of surveying the environs of Jebel Khalid in North Syria and of excavating the site of Jebel Khalid itself, a Hellenistic site on the West bank of the Euphrates in the middle of the Big Bend, approximately half-way between Jerablus and Meskene. I shall refer to the texts by item number, leaving detailed references to be found in the relevant items of bibliography. What is here attempted is a survey and analysis of all the evidence for personal names thus accumulated within a three to four kilometre radius of Jebel Khalid. None of the texts can be firmly dated: the earliest may be items 9 and 10 (? third/fourth centuries A.D.), the latest (in item 2) even datable to the twelfth century A.D. but the bulk fall within the (vague) range of the late Roman/early Byzantine period — say, fourth to sixth centuries A.D. They do not all therefore form a chronologically homogeneous set neither are they homogeneous in type (though sepulchral inscriptions predominate) — but they can

¹ I wish to record my gratitude to the authorities of the Syrian Department of Antiquities and Museums, in particular to Dr Adnan Bounni and Dr Sultan Muhsen, over the last decade during which this research in the region of el-Qitar and Jebel Khalid has been carried out. For further studies on the onomastics of the region see the survey of J.-P. REY-COQUAIS, "Onomastique et histoire de la Syrie gréco-romaine", *Actes du IIe Congrès International d'Épigraphie grecque et latine, Costanza, 9-15 septembre 1977*, ed. D.M. PIPPIDI, Bucharest 1979, pp. 171 ff. and the literature there cited.

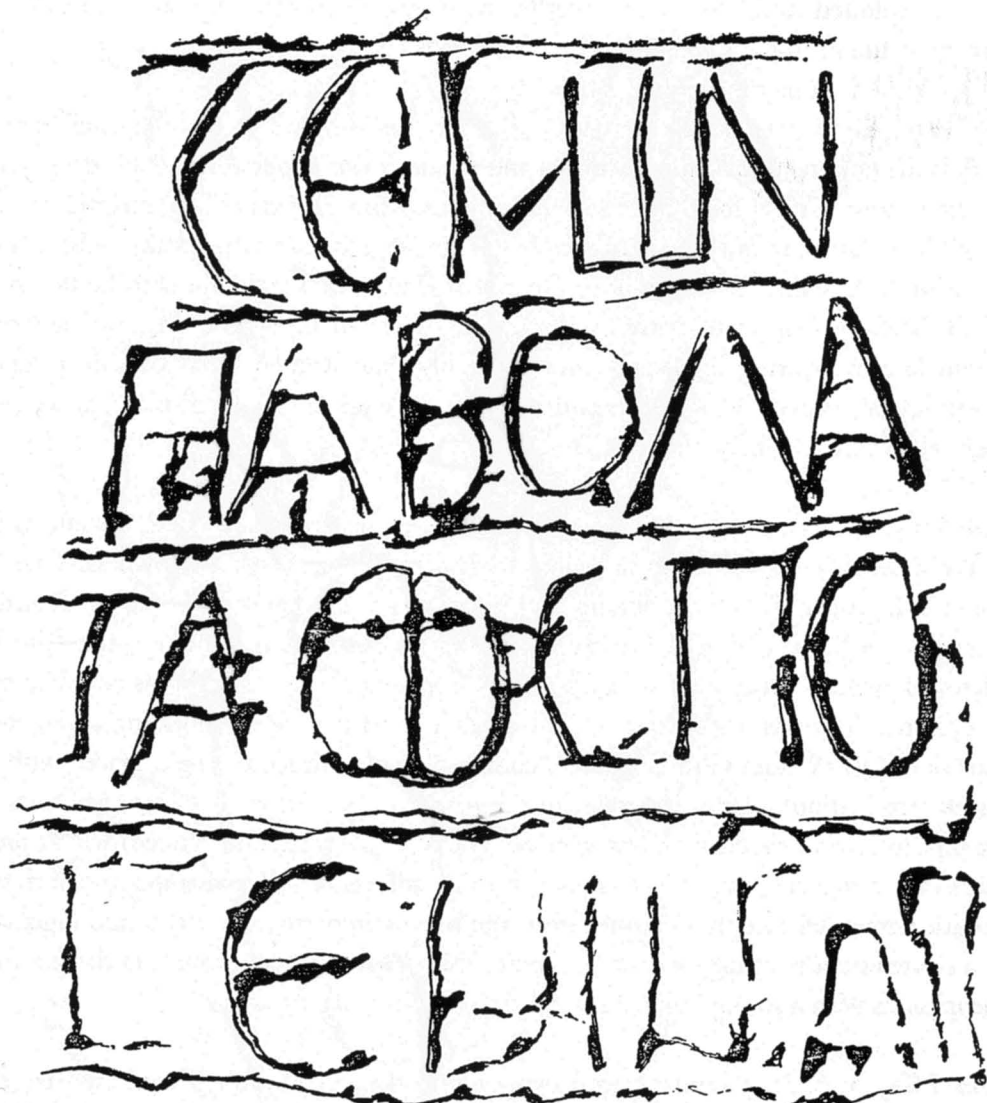
still be exploited to disclose something of the changing ethnic, cultural and religious history of life in this rural region of the Middle Euphrates.

I take the funerary monuments first.

Item 4 (fig. 1), a reused *stele* in the graveyard of the present village of Joussef Pasha, records the honorand as Semon (Semitic) and the dedicator as one Abola (? his daughter) — the nearest parallel for the name being Abolus, from Phrygia. The inscription is in large Greek lettering but the control over the language is somewhat shaky (false tense to the verb, mistaken case-ending to the noun). There are what appear to be touches of Christianity (e.g. cross within a phi). This looks to be a monument of a local Syrian family, aspiring to display (not very ably) late Roman levels of culture and Greek literacy (Greek being still regarded as the language for public display), as well as their adherence to Christianity.

Item 5 (fig. 2, 3, 4), a trefoil *hypogeum* near Joussef Pasha, records in Greek outside each of the three *arcisolia* what appear to be the names of their respective owners. One is Hermes (a pagan Greek theophoric), the second is Barachathas (a pagan Semitic theophoric = Blessed of Athē, but assimilated to a standard Greek ending), the third is Marcos Thymos Akebas (that is to say, one Latin praenomen [Marcus] plus two Semitic theophorics, Thymus = TYM [Servant], but assimilated to a Greek-sounding word, and Akebas = 'QB [Whom God Guards], a common Aramaean name, again graced with a Greek termination). If these three names belong to one person, is it a rather bizarre attempt to imitate the Roman *tria nomina*? The MA (? = makarios, blessed) which precedes this third inscription may indicate Christian adherence. All told, a mixture of three Semitic names (all theophoric), one Greek and one Latin personal name, found together in a contemporary setting, written in Greek with Greek terminal forms and despite the theophorics with a strong indicator of Christianity in at least one case.

Item 6 (fig. 5, 6, 7), a similar trefoil *hypogeum* in the same locality, manifests sixteen naming elements (six being repeated), recording presumably the names of inhabitants of the various *loculi*. They range from being Latin in origin, Flavius, Longinus (both twice), through Greek, Gleki(o)s (twice), Stephana, to four Semitic, Vaklios (twice), Vabaios, Baroiaros, Kousatos, plus two that appear to be Iranian in origin, Kareigar, Kamiste(s) (both twice), perhaps a legacy traceable to the Persian period (pockets of Iranizing populations surviving until late Antiquity in Eastern Anatolia, being called Magusaioi by Basil of Cappadocia). Given the intermingling and repetition of the various naming elements this *hypogeum* would appear to have functioned as a family vault — and, as such, reveals some of the ethnic amalgam and political history of the region. The script is in Greek but with a number of orthographical slips (the various hands are not very practised) and with some shaky Greek grammar. There is, in this case, no sign of Christianity.



Transcription

1. ζ ε μ ω ν
2. Ἡ Ἀ β ο λ α
3. τ α φ ο ς π ο
4. ! ε ι [- - - -]

Σεμῶν / π(α)τρ(ι) Ἀβόλα / ταφος πο/σει - - - -

Translation (tentative only):

+Abola makes this tomb + for her father Semon

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

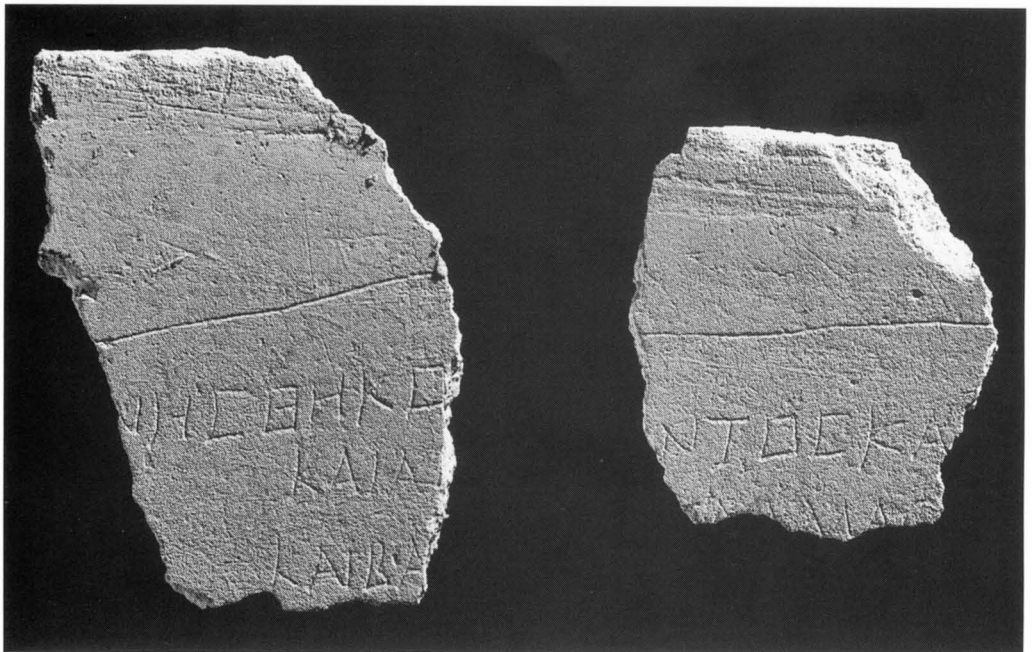


Figure 8

Item 9 (fig. 8, 9) reports Greek graffiti found on plaster fragments in the course of excavating the Acropolis Palace on Jebel Khalid. Given the heavy pillaging of this building after it was left derelict and the location of the graffiti themselves (they come from wall blocks originally high up near the ceiling and are most likely to have been inscribed after the blocks had already fallen), they are more likely to be datable to the looting period rather than to that of the Hellenistic inhabitants of the Acropolis. (Some looting can be dated by coin finds in robbed areas to the fourth century A.D.). Only one name, Latin in origin, can possibly be reconstructed, ko[i]ntos, Quintus.

Item 10 (fig. 10, 11) is a fragmentary limestone altar block found at the base of the North face of Jebel Khalid, dating to the middle to late Roman Empire. Its dedicatory inscription, in Latin, may record one Roman name IUST? (?-us, -ius, -inus, -inius etc.). More likely than not this may be the name of a Roman official, Latin texts being relatively rare in this region. The dedication is pagan (to I[uppiter] O[ptimus] M[aximus]).

Christian presence in the region is well attested, both in the reused Classical building material in the cemetery of the village of Joussef Pasha (see item 4) and in the funerary decoration of tombs in its environs (see item 3: no names are discernible in the fragmentary and largely illegible Greek inscription). This is also the case with Jebel Khalid itself and the village to its immediate North, Kirbet Khalid. Both on the Jebel and in the village Christian graffiti have been found (items 1, 5, 7, 8), largely consisting of a variety of crosses but there are other Christian symbols (e.g. alpha and omega, N : *nikē* = Greek 'victory', IXC = Jesus Christus, all suggesting ultimate Greek origins for Christianity in the region) (fig. 12). But more significantly three Christian Syriac inscriptions have been found, two inside a (?reused) tomb on Jebel Khalid (items 2, 7) and one on a reliquary in Kirbet Khalid (items 8, 11).

The tomb inscriptions are by different hands, one being in mixed Serta-Estrangela style (fig. 13), the other can be accommodated within the Serta tradition. The first may yield the incomplete personal name 'ŠYP', possibly a corrupt spelling of YWSYP', Josephus, whilst the second appears to be written by one ŠYR', Shira (the word is also attested as the title of a convent, which according to Bar Hebraeus, was situated on the banks of the Euphrates). That is to say, two names in the Semitic tradition. The reliquary, in clear Estrangela script (fig. 14), records, unusually, not the names of the saint(s) whose relics lie within nor that of the cleric or patron who sponsored its making but rather of the local craftsmen who fashioned the receptacle. They are KRSTPRWS, that is Christophorus, a Christian-Greek theophoric, displaying a Semitic adaptation with an internal reduction of vowels, and SKLWN', a Semitic name, variations such as Saikul being recorded by Littman and Wuthnow and the Hellenic — *ona* ending being often attested in North Syria (cf. Sacona, Dadona at



Figure 9a

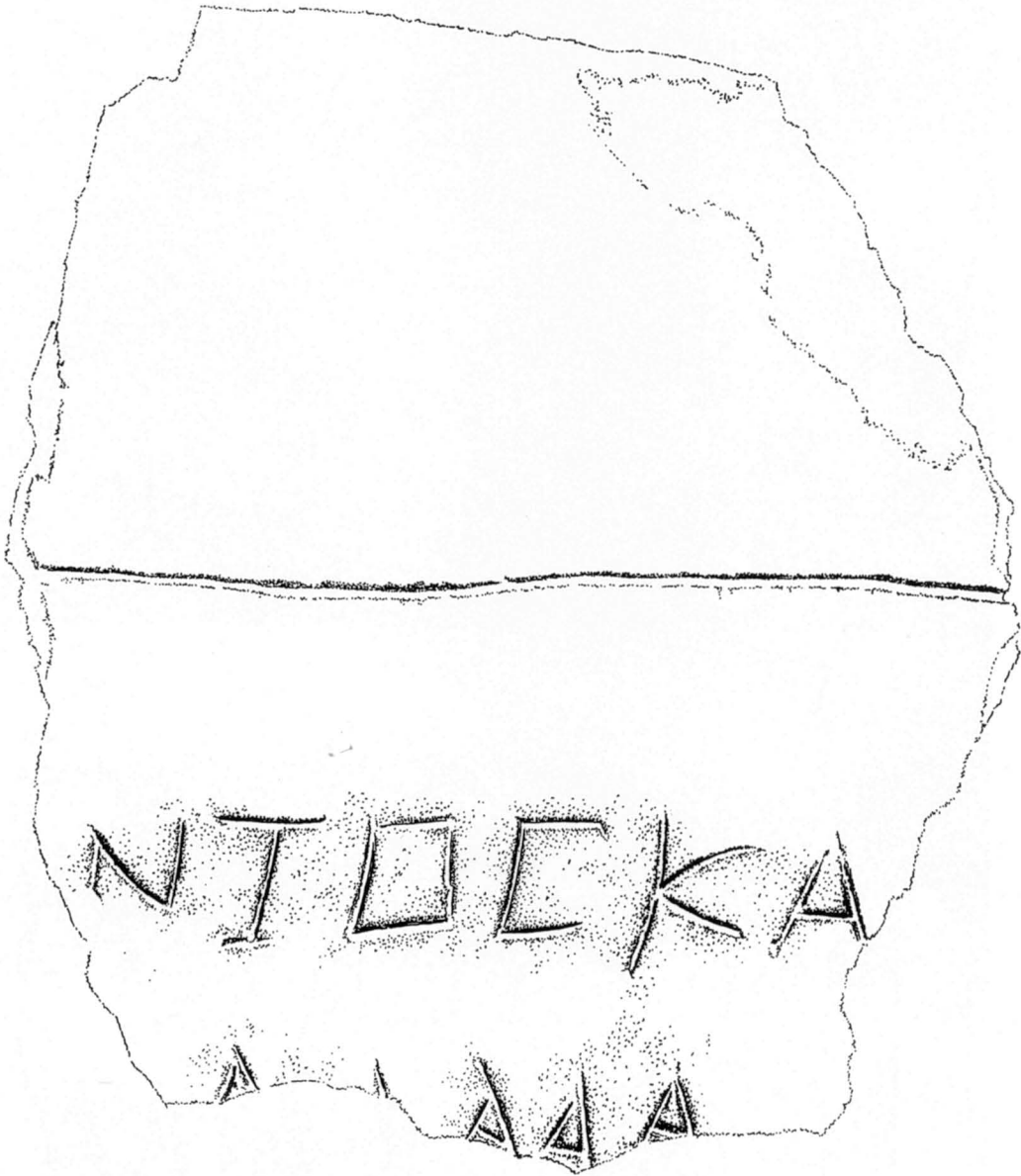


Figure 9b



Figure 10

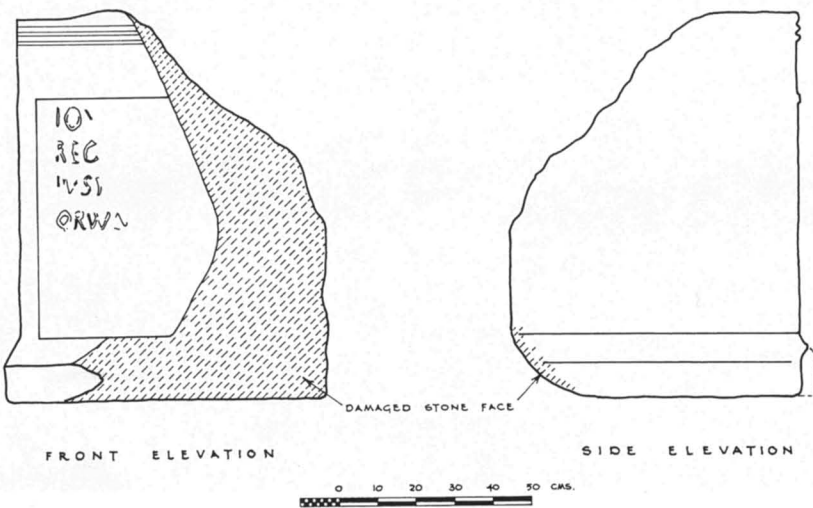


FIG. 3 • INSCRIBED STONE • JEBEL KHALID • MAY 1990

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Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14

Dura Europos). That is to say this Christian liturgical vessel was made by two local villagers bearing names one Greek, one Semitic but each modified by the other language and they recorded their labour in their local tongue, Syriac.

To summarize, this (very small) sample has produced 30 naming elements, 4 being in origin Iranian, 6 Greek, 7 Roman and 13 Semitic. Or to put this in rough percentage terms 13% are Iranian, 20% Greek, 23% Roman whilst over 43% are Semitic. It needs also to be borne in mind that there is but one inscription in Latin: there are three in Syriac whereas all the rest, the vast majority, are written, with varied degrees of competency, in Greek. Taken together, this may help to give some impression of the racial admixture, political forces, religious traditions and cultural dominances that became fused together to create Syrian culture in this region in late Antiquity.

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