

## TWO SYRIAC INSCRIPTIONS FROM THE MIDDLE EUPHRATES

BY

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In the following, we offer a tentative reading of the two Syriac inscriptions discovered by Prof. G. W. Clarke.<sup>1</sup>

The upper inscription (see Pl. 9 and Fig. 1) may be read as follows:

1. ✠ KLHWN. ŠL...YĶRW.. "All of them..."
2. WBŠMH DMRŶM' "and in the name of the  
Most High
3. ' .ŽQYP' ..YN "the cross (?)."
4. MRŶ' M'.. M...N' "the Lord....."
5. 'BDYN LY BYŠ' "do me wrong"

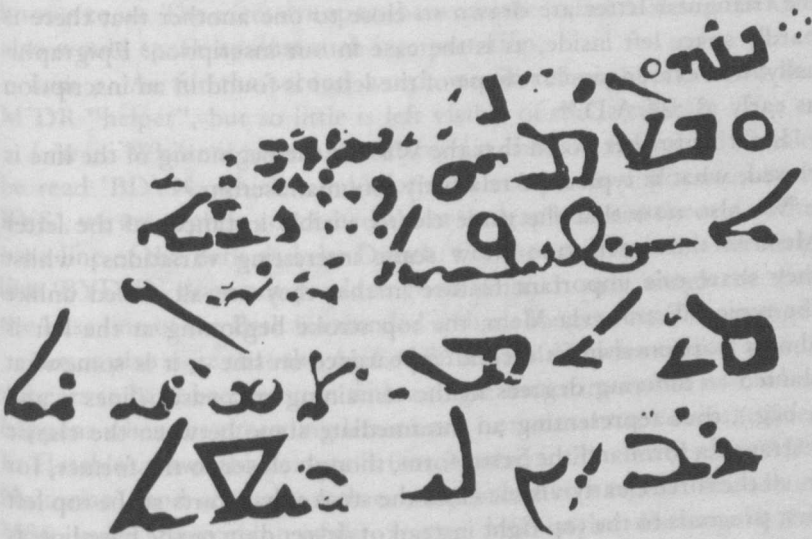


Fig. 1.

### Notes

*Line 1:* The top half of the stroke of the second letter seems to have been chipped away. The letter is unlikely to be a Resh, which in this inscription shows the shape of a reversed C<sup>2</sup> as in lines 2 and 4.

The following letter is difficult to make out; we have assumed that the bottom left of the circle of the letter Heh is missing. The penultimate letter appears to be minuscular for a Waw in comparison with the first letter on the next line.

*Line 2:* Comparison with the penultimate letter of line 5 allows us to assume that the top horizontal bar of the third letter Shin should be restored; because of the form of the letter in the last line one would hardly be justified in seeing in line 2 a forked V shape of the letter as is known from manuscripts written in a style called by Hatch Palestinian<sup>3</sup> in an inscription of 1118-19 AD published by Segal and found at Şuayip-şehri<sup>4</sup> or in an inscription of a much earlier date (278 AD).<sup>5</sup> The shape of the letter as we find it in our inscription, that of inverted triangle with two sides of it so wide apart from each other, is rather unique. What approximates it to some extent may be found in an Estrangela manuscript dated to 1255 AD,<sup>6</sup> in some occurrences of the letter in another manuscript, Nesorian, dated to 1477 AD,<sup>7</sup> in a Nestorian MS of 1544-45,<sup>8</sup> in a Melkite MS of 1222 AD.<sup>9</sup> It must be stressed however that in all these dated manuscripts the three sides of the triangular letter are drawn so close to one another that there is hardly space left inside, as is the case in our inscription. Epigraphically, however, a similar shape of the letter is found in an inscription as early as 748 A.D.<sup>9a</sup>

Let it be further noted that the Waw at the beginning of the line is closed, what is typical of relatively late manuscripts.<sup>10</sup>

We also note that the three clearly visible instances of the letter Mem in this inscription show some interesting variations; whilst they share one important feature in that they are all closed unlike the typical Estrangela Mem, the top stroke beginning at the left is almost horizontal in its second appearance on line 4, it is somewhat slanted to differing degrees in the remaining two cases (lines 2 and 4 beg.), thus representing an intermediate stage between the classic Estrangela form and the Serto form, though closer to the former, for in all the three clearly visible cases the stroke that starts at the top left first proceeds to the top right instead of descending to the base line as in the classical Serto hand.

If the fifth letter on the line is to be read as Heh, we should note that its shape departs from the classical Estrangela form, approaching that of the classic Nestorian style with the two left-hand downward strokes joined to form a circle.

If the middle letter of the second word is correctly read as Resh, there seems to be a diacritical dot over it. We can almost see a dot below the Dalath at the beginning of the word.

Noting that the first two lines converge towards each other at the left, we propose to read the penultimate letter of line 2 as a rather squeezed Mem with a relatively short initial stroke beginning at the top left, and we also see a slight "bump" on the line before it; hence our reading MRYM' [= /mraymā/].

*Line 3:* The letter after the typically Estrangela Alaf is difficult to read.

The following letter is clearly Qof, which is noteworthy in its round shape, as "is found in a Şertâ codex written in the last quarter of the eleventh century ... soon became established in the Şertâ script".<sup>11</sup>

What can one make of the word? If the initial Alaf be prostheticum, the word could mean "crucified" or "cross", which would go nicely with the preceding MRYM', *si vera lectio*. However, no case of such Alaf with this word or word of this pattern (Pe. pass. ptc.) is known to us. The excessive space between the initial Alaf and the Qof also would speak against such interpretation.

*Line 4:* As for the second word, we first thought we could see M'DR "helper", but so little is left visible of the latter half.

*Line 5:* Whilst it seems almost certain that the first word should be read 'BDYN, which would form an acceptable collocation with BYŠ', we are slightly concerned about the gap between the end of the base line of the Beth and the Dalath. On the other hand, something like 'BYDYN does not produce good sense. It may simply be that the base line of the Beth is extended a shade longer than the average.

Let us also note that the Alaf of BYŠ' (and likewise on line 4 end) appears to have been written with a single stroke instead of two, what happens when the preceding letter has a horizontal stroke on the line. In Hatch's *Album* this feature is first attested in Pl. clxii (719-20 AD; Nestorian), and after the 13th century becomes a regular feature in MSS styled Nestorian, whilst among MSS styled Estrangela the feature surfaces first in Pl. lxxxi (1138 AD) and is maintained consistently afterwards with the sole exception of Pl. xci (1230 AD), a manuscript executed in an exquisite Estrangela hand.

Palaeographically, the inscription is probably to be dated to the early part of the second millennium. The last line and the mention of

“the Lord” and “the Most High” indicate a Christian execration(?) composition.

The lower inscription (see Pl. 10 and Fig. 2) is pretty much faded, presenting much more considerable difficulties for an epigrapher than the upper one. Palaeographically it is an entirely different hand. The following is little more than a tentative reading.

1. 'TT ŠYRT BRGR ... R..... 'TT ..
2. ..'TN' D'Š'L LŠLMK ... WT..
3. ..'Š'L ŠLWTK ..... 'L
4. ..M.... M..... ŠLHT M..... Š.MT
5. ...HQW PŘŸN' ...WR.....
6. N' MN ... Š'LK BL.....
7. ... ..
8. NŠ'L ŠLMK.....
9. NŠ.... L... DMY...

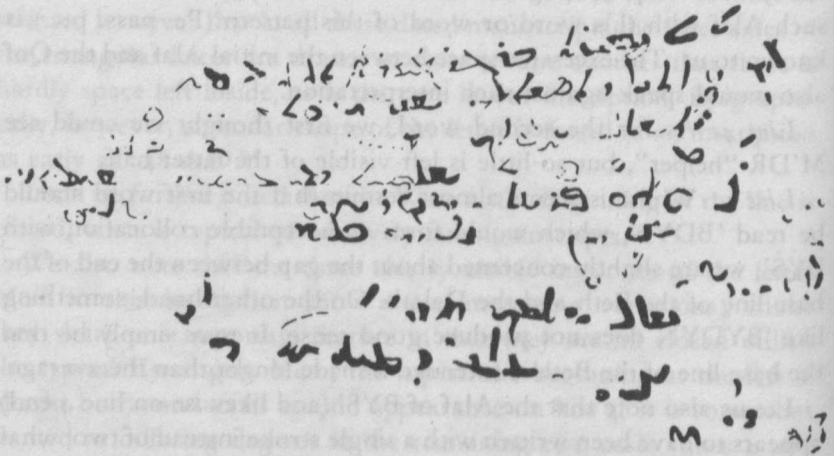


Fig. 2.

#### Notes

*Line 1:* The first two words, if read correctly, could provide an important clue to the context of the whole inscription. Should one restore an Alaf right at the beginning of the line, the phrase could be made to mean “the caravan of BRGR has come here” (= ‘eṭāṭ šyāraṭ BRGR). For the restoration we seek support in 'TT later in the line, noting that the author seems to have a repetitive style in view of the

high frequency of the verb Š'L in the inscription. It may then be possible to conjecture that some itinerant tradesman came to the area, expecting to meet up with an associate with whom he had agreed to rendezvous at the spot, who however did not turn up, which led the former to begin to worry about his associate's safety. For a modern-day equivalent, one thinks of a written message left at a main-line railway station.

The tracing shows that the Shin of ŠYRT is pretty close to the letter as it appears in the upper inscription. Also perhaps in line 4 Š'LT. The other occurrences of the letter however are different, being pretty much like the classic Estrangela Shin.

We are totally puzzled as to what to make of the curved, thick oblique line immediately before this cluster of letters. On the photo (black and white) its colour is distinctly pale compared with most other letters of the inscription.

Furthermore, it is not impossible that there is another letter preceding the Shin (a minuscule Beth?). If Beth, the sentence would mean "she (or: some commodity the Syriac for which is a feminine noun) has come with the caravan of ..."

The letter Resh is always provided with a diacritical dot above: BRGR (1), WR (5).

The letter Taw in the inscription is of distinctly Serto style. So unmistakably at the beginning of the first line. The letter in 'TN' (2) has at its lower part two downward projecting prongs, as in some Serto and Melkite codices.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, 'TT' (1), if read correctly, presents another variation in that the form of the letter used is that which the more orthodox scribe would use when it is joined to the letter to the right, which is however occasionally found in some manuscripts, e.g. Pl. clxxiii in Hatch's *Album*, a manuscript dated to 1259-60 AD.

*Line 2:* The first three words, if read correctly, would mean: "may I once again enquire after you?" The syntax of the sentence is doubly atypical. Firstly, Brockelmann writes that the verb *tanni* (Pael) meaning "iterum fecit" may be followed by participle, but not by a proclitic *d-* and an Imperfect.<sup>13</sup> But a number of verbs such as *eškab* "be able to" and *šarri* "begin" allow both constructions (plus the use of the infinitive). Hence we are probably dealing with a case of incomplete lexicographical documentation. Secondly, the idiom "to inquire after (someone's health)" is *š'el bašlām*.<sup>14</sup> As the same idiom seems to recur in line 7 without any preposition, the idiom in the

idiolect of the author of the inscription must have been *š'el šlām-*, the Lamadh in line 2 being the direct object maker.

It must be admitted that there is considerable space between the initial Alaf and the following Shin, although we like to point out that for some reason or other some words on this particular line appear to be generously spaced: note the first word and the space between the D and the following Alaf of the second word. It is also well known that the length of the initial horizontal stroke of a Shin not joined to the letter to the right is often exaggerated.

The final Lamadh, typical of the classical Serto style, is not different from the initial or medial one, which is also the case in Nestorian manuscripts.

The letter Mem in the inscription is always closed, and the stroke beginning at the top left is oblique.

*Line 3:* "May I beg for your prayer".

*Line 4:* ŠLHT "I (or: you) sent". The second letter of Š.MT is hardly legible. The tracing suggests something like ŠLWHY, but there is clearly a loop on the line, which rules out a Lamadh although the oblique stroke begins unusually high for a Mem, and between the loop and the Shin there appears to be some letter. The letter following the loop cannot be anything other than a Taw.

*Line 5:* The first visible letter is H rather than W. The following letter could be a Qof, but is a shade too angular, when the palaeography of the whole inscription shows signs of a relatively late period. It may be a clumsily formed Waw, making HWW "they/there were". Both the second and third letters of the following word are rather obscure. The second is most likely D or R, but no diacritical point is visible. The meaning of the word, whichever reading of the second letter is adopted, escapes us.

*Line 7:* That there is a line of writing between lines 6 and 8 is beyond doubt. There are traces of a letter or letters mid-way; the space between the two lines would be too large for no writing to be there; one can see some faded writing in the left margin. As can be seen from Fig. 2, it does appear that there was a considerable amount of writing to every line to the right, but it is now hardly legible nor it is certain whether it was part of the inscription to the left under discussion.

*Line 8:* NŠ'L ŠLMK "may we enquire after your health".

*Line 9:* One could plausibly restore at the beginning NŠLŠ "may we pray".

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For the archaeological context, see an article in this volume by Prof. Clarke, "Syriac Inscriptions from the Middle Euphrates", pp. 73-82. The reading is based on the photos taken and a tracing prepared by members of the Melbourne University archaeological expedition to El-Qitar. The author is indebted to Miss A. M. Porter for drawing the figures and offering some useful comments.

<sup>2</sup> But it is not so markedly semi-circular as in some Nestorian manuscripts of the 14th-16th centuries, as one can see in William H. P. Hatch, *An Album of Dated Syriac Manuscripts* (Boston, 1946), Pls. clxxv, clxxvi, for example.

<sup>3</sup> Hatch, op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> BSOAS, 30 (1967), 302-4.

<sup>5</sup> J. B. Segal, *Edessa 'The Blessed City'* (Oxford, 1970), Pl. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Hatch, op. cit., Pl. xciii, a MS written in the Convent of St Mary Deipara in Nitria.

<sup>7</sup> Hatch, op. cit., Pl. clxxvii, a MS written in the village of GRYH' in the diocese of Mosul.

<sup>8</sup> Hatch, op. cit., Pl. clxxxi, a MS written in the city of Gazarta near Mt QRDW and Mt DKL'L' on the bank of the Tigris.

<sup>9</sup> Hatch, op. cit., Pl. clxxxvii; it is not known where the manuscript was written.

<sup>9a</sup> See H. Pognon, *Inscriptions sémitiques de la Syrie* etc. (Paris, 1907), Pl. xxvi, no. 56. Mr R. G. Jenkins has called my attention to E. Littmann, *Syria. Publications of the Princeton University Archeological Expeditions to Syria...*, Division IV, *Semitic Inscriptions, Section B, Syriac Inscriptions* (Leiden, 1934), where further inscriptions from NW Syria dating from the 6th and 10th cents. and showing our letter in the same shape are published.

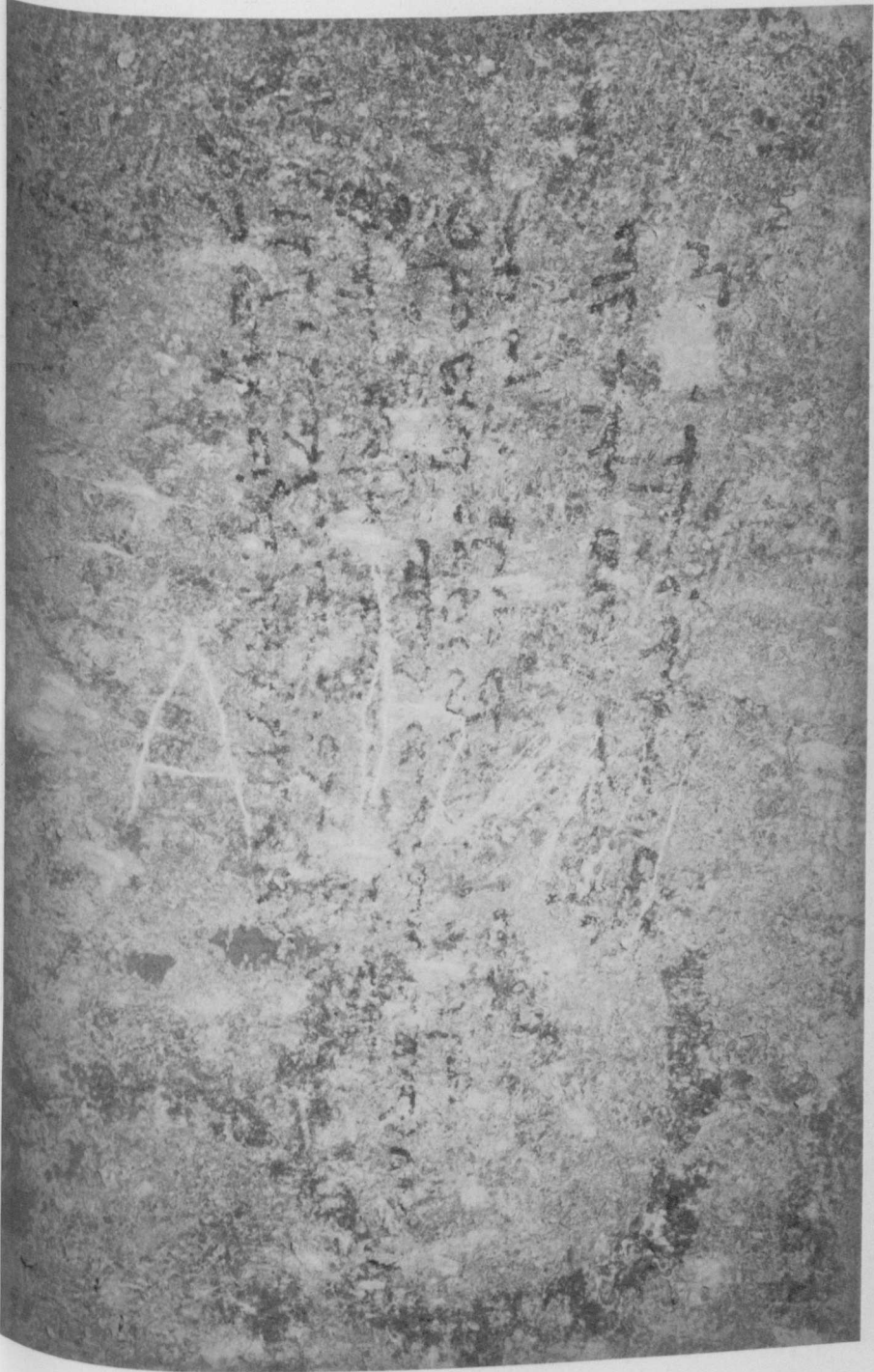
<sup>10</sup> Hatch, op. cit., p. 33: "in the twelfth century it was the dominant type".

<sup>11</sup> Hatch, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> The earliest dates MS showing this feature in Hatch's *Album* is found in Pl. xciv (of 731-32 AD).

<sup>13</sup> C. Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum*<sup>2</sup> (Halle, 1928), p. 829a.

<sup>14</sup> See Brockelmann, op. cit., p. 748a.



Syriac inscription from Middle Euphrates



