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Word Translating Image. In search of modern-language equivalents for Syriac and Coptic terminology*

Abstract

In general the iconographic details recorded in the hagiographic literature are pretty meagre. Authors focus on the miraculous properties of icons. The Coptic lives of the saints may be selected as representative for the Early Christian and Byzantine hagiography. *The Martyrdom and Miracles of Saint Mercurius the General* and other lives contain stories about the Saint's icons. We have some information about church decoration in the East, but, it does not look as impressive as John of Gaza's extensive *ecphraseis* of St. Sergius' and St. Stephen's complex decorative programmes. However, we actually find a number of interesting minor descriptions in the church histories, in the theological polemic on icons, and in the hagiographies. A Syriac manuscript from the British Museum preserves a chronicle of the monastery of Qartamin, Mor Gabriel. I focus on a chapter which describes the church's construction and its interior decoration. The essential part of the art terminology, which we know from the Coptic texts, consists of the Greek borrowings. The Syriac texts show an entirely different pattern. The Syriac description compiled by an anonymous monk from Qartamin resembles the hymn on the Edessa Cathedral. The Syriac art description in general evolved along entirely different lines from the Greek *ecphrasis*. Greek borrowings in the discussed Syriac texts are rare, and if they do appear, they are limited to only certain words.

Keywords

Word and image, Coptic hagiographic literature, Early Christian icons, Art description in Early Christian literature, Oriens Christianus, Monastery of Qartamin, Greek rhetorical ecphrasis.

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Kahzdan and Maguire emphasise the difference between the rhetorical *ecphraseis* and hagiographic writings: 'The *ecphraseis* are more concerned with the formal qualities of images, with features of style and iconography and how those features conveyed the Christian story and dogma,'[1] they say, while 'hagiographers were deeply interested in objects of art, primarily those of religious art, including church buildings, icons, holy vessels, and liturgical books.'[2] They write of 'humble hagiographers with their curiosity toward elements of reality – works of art are named and described (if briefly), their locations indicated, their prices mentioned, and so on.'[3] In fact occasionally we even find technical information, e.g. Leontius of Neapolis writes of images as icons (in all likelihood in referring to wooden tablets), or icons on canvas (ἐν εἰκόσι καὶ ἐν σινδόνι) and also of the work of weavers embroidered on garments (ἐν ἱματίοις).[4] In general the iconographic details recorded in the hagiographic literature are pretty meagre. Authors focus on the miraculous properties of icons, and such details are numerous.

The Coptic lives of the Saints may be selected as representative for the Early Christian and Byzantine hagiography. *The Martyrdom and Miracles of Saint Mercurius the General*, a high ranking Roman officer executed during the reign of Decius and Valerianus in AD 250 at Caesarea Mazaca, gives us the circumstances of his martyrdom followed by a series of miracles performed by him.[5] The *Life* contains a number of returning motifs symptomatic of this class of popular literary works: demonic possessions, incurable illnesses, e.g. blindness, black magic practices, hostility to the Christian religion, sometimes love stories concluded with a happy end through the Saint's intervention, and stories about the Saint's icons.

The 7th miracle of St. Mercurius[6] tells the story of Gaipios, a blasphemous Jew, who desecrated the Saint's Church by entering it on a white she-mule. St. Mercurius immediately appeared in his church accompanied by the Archangel armed with a spear and pierced the body of the Jew with it (fol. 13b). In his ordeal the suffering intruder made a promise that if he were pardoned he would offer an icon of the Saint as a votive for his salvation, and he described the icon: 'I will make a stele ⲁⲩⲱ ϯⲥⲙⲓⲛⲉ ⲛ̄ ⲧⲉⲕⲥⲧⲏⲗⲏ ...to your glory

[1] Kahzdan, Magurie 1991, p. 20.

[2] Ibid., p. 1.

[3] Ibid., p. 20.

[4] Cited by John of Damascus *pro imaginibus* III 87, *PG* 93, *c.Iud.*1600B 8–1601C 10; Kotter 1975, p. 179f.

[5] Budge 1915, the date of the Saint's martyrdom at the beginning of the writing: Fol. 1a, Copt. p. 256; Engl.trans.p. 828; the place of miracles identified, fol.20a (Copt. p. 277), trans.p.848; Holweck 1924, Mercurius of Caesarea, p. 706.

[6] Budge 1915, Copt. pp. 268–72, Engl.trans. pp. 840–844.

ϯ…ⲕ ⲧⲉⲛⲟⲩ ϩⲙ̄ ⲡⲉⲕⲉⲟⲟⲩ picturing the moment when you pierced me with your spear ⲉⲣⲉ ⲡⲉⲕⲕⲟⲩⲛⲧⲁⲣⲓⲟⲛ ⲧⲟⲕϭ̄ ⲉ ⲣⲟⲓ, and I will show my own portrait ⲁⲩⲱ ϯⲛⲁⲥⲙⲓⲛⲉ ⲙ̄ ⲡⲁ ⲗⲏⲙ̄ ϩⲱⲱⲧ, lying at your feet helpless ⲉϥⲛⲏϫ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲡⲉⲕⲟⲩⲉⲣⲏⲧⲉ· and filled with great shame ϩⲛ̄ ⲟⲩⲛⲟϭ ⲛ̄ ϣⲏⲡⲉ ⲙⲛ̄ ⲟⲩⲙⲛ̄ⲧⲁⲧϭⲟⲙ· Your image will be made of the best gold, ⲛⲧⲁϫⲣⲩⲥⲥⲟⲩ ⲛ̄ ⲧⲉⲕϩⲓⲕⲱⲛ ϩⲛ̄ ⲟⲩⲛⲟⲩⲃ· ⲉϥⲥⲟⲧⲡ̄ it will look resplendent with jewels of the colour of fire, ⲙⲛ̄ ϩⲉⲛⲛⲱⲛⲉ ⲛ̄ⲁⲩⲉⲓⲛ ⲛ̄ⲕⲱϩⲧ̄· that is of chrysolites, ⲉⲧⲉ ⲡⲉϫⲣⲩⲥⲟⲗⲓⲛⲑⲟⲥ ⲡⲉ and also the image of your spear ⲁⲩⲱ ⲡⲗⲏⲙ̄ ⲡⲉⲕⲕⲟⲩⲛⲧⲁⲣⲓⲟⲛ· ...of the precious stones ϯⲛⲁⲧⲣⲉⲩⲧⲟⲕⲥϥ̄ ⲉⲛⲱⲛⲉ ⲙ̄ ⲙⲉ

ⲁⲩⲱ ϯⲥⲙⲓⲛⲉ ⲛ̄ ⲧⲉⲕⲥⲧⲏⲗⲏ ϯ…ⲕ ⲧⲉⲛⲟⲩ ϩⲙ̄ ⲡⲉⲕⲉⲟⲟⲩ· ⲉⲣⲉ ⲡⲉⲕⲕⲟⲩⲛⲧⲁⲣⲓⲟⲛ ⲧⲟⲕϭ̄ ⲉ ⲣⲟⲓ· ⲁⲩⲱ ϯⲛⲁⲥⲙⲓⲛⲉ ⲙ̄ ⲡⲁ ⲗⲏⲙ̄ ϩⲱⲱⲧ· ⲉϥⲛⲏϫ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲡⲉⲕⲟⲩⲉⲣⲏⲧⲉ· ϩⲛ̄ ⲟⲩⲛⲟϭ ⲛ̄ ϣⲏⲡⲉ· ⲙⲛ̄ ⲟⲩⲙⲛ̄ⲧⲁⲧϭⲟⲙ· ⲛ̄ⲧⲁϫⲣⲩⲥⲥⲟⲩ ⲛ̄ ⲧⲉⲕϩⲓⲕⲱⲛ ϩⲛ̄ ⲟⲩⲛⲟⲩⲃ· ⲉϥⲥⲟⲧⲡ̄· ⲙⲛ̄ ϩⲉⲛⲛⲱⲛⲉ ⲛ̄ⲁⲩⲉⲓⲛ ⲛ̄ⲕⲱϩⲧ̄· ⲉⲧⲉ ⲡⲉϫⲣⲩⲥⲟⲗⲓⲛⲑⲟⲥ ⲡⲉ· ⲁⲩⲱ ⲡⲗⲏⲙ̄ ⲡⲉⲕⲕⲟⲩⲛⲧⲁⲣⲓⲟⲛ· ϯⲛⲁⲧⲣⲉⲩⲧⲟⲕⲥϥ̄ ⲉⲛⲱⲛⲉ ⲙ̄ ⲙⲉ.

Gaipios and his wife were converted to the Christian religion and were baptized taking the name of Zacharias and Elisabeth. He fulfilled his promise and ordered the icon by a craftsman. At this point of the story we find a second description of the icon with some new details: He called a craftsman ⲁϥⲙⲟⲩⲧⲉ ⲉⲩⲣⲱⲙⲉ ⲛ̄ ⲧⲩⲭⲛⲉⲓⲧⲏⲥ and gave him ten pounds of the best gold ⲁϥϯ ⲛⲁϥ ⲙ̄ ⲙⲏⲧ ⲛ̄ⲗⲓⲧⲣⲁ ⲛⲟⲩⲃ·, and authentic precious stones ⲙⲛ̄ ϩⲉⲛⲛⲱⲛⲉ ⲙ̄ ⲙⲉ ⲉⲩⲧⲁⲓⲏⲩ, and he made the portrait of St. Mercurius ⲁϥⲥⲙⲛ̄ ⲡⲗⲏⲙ̄ ⲙ̄ ⲡϩⲁⲅⲓⲟⲥ ⲙⲉⲣⲕⲟⲩⲣⲓⲟⲥ· with the spear in his hand ⲉⲣⲉ ⲡϥ̄ⲕⲟⲩⲛⲧⲁⲣⲏⲟⲛ ⲛ̄ ⲧⲟⲟⲧϥ̄· and studded it with diamonds ⲁϥⲧⲣⲉⲩⲧⲟⲕⲥϥ̄ ⲉⲛⲱⲛⲉ ⲛ̄ ⲁⲧⲁⲙⲁⲥ, and he also commissioned him to make his own portrait with gold and real jewels ⲁⲩⲱ ⲁⲫⲧⲣⲉⲩⲥⲙⲓⲛⲉ ⲙ̄ ⲡϥ̄ⲗⲓⲙⲏⲛ· ϩⲱϥ ⲛ̄ ⲛⲟⲩⲃ· ϩⲏ ⲱⲛⲉ ⲙ̄ ⲙⲉ·, which showed him lying at the feet of St. Mecurius ⲉϥϩⲁ ⲡⲉⲥⲏⲧ ⲙ̄ ⲡϩⲁⲅⲓⲟⲥ ⲙⲉⲣⲕⲟⲩⲣⲓⲟⲥ·, who was piercing him with his spear ⲉϥⲡⲁⲧⲁⲥⲥⲉ ⲙ̄ⲙⲟϥ ϩⲙ̄ ⲡϥ̄ⲙⲉⲣⲉϩ.

ⲁϥⲙⲟⲩⲧⲉ ⲉⲩⲣⲱⲙⲉ ⲛ̄ ⲧⲩⲭⲛⲉⲓⲧⲏⲥ ⲁϥϯ ⲛⲁϥ ⲙ̄ ⲙⲏⲧ ⲛ̄ⲗⲓⲧⲣⲁ ⲛⲟⲩⲃ· ⲙⲛ̄ ϩⲉⲛⲛⲱⲛⲉ ⲙ̄ ⲙⲉ ⲉⲩⲧⲁⲓⲏⲩ· ⲁϥⲥⲙⲛ̄ ⲡⲗⲏⲙ̄ ⲙ̄ ⲡϩⲁⲅⲓⲟⲥ ⲙⲉⲣⲕⲟⲩⲣⲓⲟⲥ· ⲉⲣⲉ ⲡϥ̄ⲕⲟⲩⲛⲧⲁⲣⲏⲟⲛ ⲛ̄ ⲧⲟⲟⲧϥ̄· ⲁϥⲧⲣⲉⲩⲧⲟⲕⲥϥ̄ ⲉⲛⲱⲛⲉ ⲛ̄ ⲁⲧⲁⲙⲁⲥ ⲁⲩⲱ ⲁⲫⲧⲣⲉⲩⲥⲙⲓⲛⲉ ⲙ̄ ⲡϥ̄ⲗⲓⲙⲏⲛ· ϩⲱϥ ⲛ̄ ⲛⲟⲩⲃ· ϩⲏ ⲱⲛⲉ ⲙ̄ ⲙⲉ· ⲉϥϩⲁ ⲡⲉⲥⲏⲧ ⲙ̄ ⲡϩⲁⲅⲓⲟⲥ ⲙⲉⲣⲕⲟⲩⲣⲓⲟⲥ· ⲉϥⲡⲁⲧⲁⲥⲥⲉ ⲙ̄ⲙⲟϥ ϩⲙ̄ ⲡϥ̄ⲙⲉⲣⲉϩ.

In his conclusion the author added that the icon was still to be seen in the sanctuary. The story looks like a chapter cited from a guide's repertoire at a pilgrimage centre. In the above-cited passages we have one of the finest pieces of icon descriptions in the extant literary lore of the early Byzantine period. It contains details which we generally miss in other instances of descriptions or

references to the icons. The icon was richly studded with jewels and adorned with golden leaf (ⲙ̅ ⲙⲏⲧ ⲛ̅ⲗⲓⲧⲣⲁ ⲛⲟⲩⲃ· ⲙⲛ̅ ϩⲉⲛⲛⲱⲛⲉ ⲙ̅ ⲙⲉ ⲉⲩⲧⲁⲓⲏⲩ), the kind of decoration which we certainly know well from the later Russian or Greek Orthodox or Western Catholic traditions. The icon showed the critical moment of the Saint's intervention and the subsequent conversion of the sinner. The icon resembles the class of the Coptic icons, which picture a saint piercing a demon, dragon or magician, as on the icons of St. Pisentios or St. George.

The 8th Miracle of St. Mercurius brings a colourful story of a man who wanted to have a son, and also of a young boy who fell in love with a young girl, who was closely guarded by her father. Kuris (or Kyrios?) Hermapollo, the hero of the story, promised a votive offering to St. Mercurius: 'if the God of St. Mercurius fulfils my petition I will make a bier for the martyr, the bier will be of precious ivory, and will look like the biers of the Roman emperors' (Fol. 17a, Budge p. 274).

A large part of the story is missing. St. Mercurius appeared before the archon as a cavalry general (ⲙ̅ ⲡⲉⲥⲙⲟⲧ ⲛ̅ ⲥⲧⲣⲁⲧⲩⲗⲁⲧⲏⲥ) and apparently all the wishes of those who prayed to St. Mercurius asking him for assistance were eventually fulfilled. At the end of the 8th miracle we find a more detailed description of Hermapollo's votive offering.

'And they also made a bier of pine wood logs ⲁⲩⲱ ⲟⲛ ϩⲉⲛⲡⲉⲩⲕⲓⲟⲛ ⲁⲩⲥⲙⲛ̅ⲧⲟⲩ ⲙ̅ ⲡⲟⲃⲉ· and carved ivory plaques ⲁⲩϣⲉⲧϣⲱⲧⲟⲩ ⲙ̅ ⲡⲉⲧⲁⲗⲟⲛ ϩⲓⲗⲉⲫⲁ[ⲛ]ⲧⲓⲛⲟⲛ·, and thus made the bier ⲁⲩⲱ ⲧⲁⲙⲓⲟ ⲙ̅ ⲡⲙⲁ ⲛ̅ ⲙ̅ⲕⲁⲧⲕ̅ and fixed to it the Martyr's icon ⲁⲩⲱϥⲧ̅ ⲉϩⲟⲩⲛ ⲉⲣⲟϥ ⲛ̅ ⲑⲓⲕⲱⲛ ⲙ̅ ⲡⲙⲁⲣⲧⲩⲣⲟⲥ adorned with jewels (sparkling beautifully? beautiful and sparkling?) ϩⲛ̅ ϩⲉⲛⲛⲱⲛⲉ ⲛⲁⲩⲁⲛ ⲉⲛⲓⲃⲉ· together with three crosses of gold ⲙⲛ̅ ϣⲟⲙⲧ ⲛ̅ⲥⲧⲁⲩⲣⲟⲥ ⲛ̅ⲛⲟⲩⲃ· and three *sphrageis* (seals) of silver ⲙⲛ̅ ϣⲟⲙⲧ ⲛ̅ⲥⲫⲣⲁⲅⲓⲥ ⲛ̅ ϩⲁⲧ.

ⲁⲩⲱ ⲟⲛ ϩⲉⲛⲡⲉⲩⲕⲓⲟⲛ ⲁⲩⲥⲙⲛ̅ⲧⲟⲩ ⲙ̅ ⲡⲟⲃⲉ· ⲁⲩϣⲉⲧϣⲱⲧⲟⲩ ⲙ̅ ⲡⲉⲧⲁⲗⲟⲛ ϩⲓⲗⲉⲫⲁ[ⲛ]ⲧⲓⲛⲟⲛ· ⲁⲩⲱ ⲧⲁⲙⲓⲟ ⲙ̅ ⲡⲙⲁ ⲛ̅ ⲙ̅ⲕⲁⲧⲕ̅ ⲁⲩⲱϥⲧ̅ ⲉϩⲟⲩⲛ ⲉⲣⲟϥ ⲛ̅ ⲑⲓⲕⲱⲛ ⲙ̅ ⲡⲙⲁⲣⲧⲩⲣⲟⲥ ϩⲛ̅ ϩⲉⲛⲛⲱⲛⲉ ⲛⲁⲩⲁⲛ ⲉⲛⲓⲃⲉ· ⲙⲛ̅ ϣⲟⲙⲧ ⲛ̅ⲥⲧⲁⲩⲣⲟⲥ ⲛ̅ⲛⲟⲩⲃ· ⲙⲛ̅ ϣⲟⲙⲧ ⲛ̅ⲥⲫⲣⲁⲅⲓⲥ ⲛ̅ ϩⲁⲧ.

'And they also made a bier of pine wood logs and carved ivory plaques, and thus made the bier and fixed to it the Martyr's icon adorned with jewels (sparkling beautifully? beautiful and sparkling?) together with three crosses of gold and three *sphrageis* (seals) of silver.'

Budge's rendering by-passed the difficulties in the interpretation of the 'jewels' described as ⲛⲁⲩⲁⲛ ⲉⲛⲓⲃⲉ. They are actually given a characteristic feature, probably as very beautiful or sparkling (from ⲛⲁⲩ to see?), but I am not sure of the exact meaning (see Crum, ⲱⲛⲉ). The Coptic text does not mention 'three crosses of gold and three crosses of silver' ⲙⲛ̅ ϣⲟⲙⲧ

ⲛⲥⲧⲁⲩⲣⲟⲥ ⲛ̅ⲛⲟⲩⲃ· ⲙⲛ̅ ϣⲟⲙ̅ⲧ ⲛ̅ⲥⲫⲣⲁⲅⲓⲥ ⲛ̅ ϩⲁⲧ as translated by Budge, but 'three crosses of gold and three silver *sphrageis*': perhaps medallions? Probably ⲛ̅ⲥⲫⲣⲁⲅⲓⲥ stand for the equivalent of the Syriac word ܨܦܪܓܺܝܣ translated by Nau as *sceaux*, *sphrageis*, seals, the meaning which we find in the description of the church in Qartamin, where they pictured the story of Salvation, an Evangelical narrative presented as a series of small images set on a large vase. We also know of a cross alternating with a rosette decoration on the cancelle of Qirqbize, which may probably be taken as an illustration of the obscure word in both the Syriac and Coptic texts.[7] Let us collect together other words and phrases in the above-quoted text, which refer to the fine arts and craftsmanship: ϩⲉⲛⲡⲉⲩⲕⲓⲟⲛ…ⲙ̅ ⲡⲟⲃⲉ I understand as 'the bier of pine wood logs', τὰ πεύκινα, pine logs; ⲡⲟⲃⲉ Teil, Stück, Tafel (Westendorf); broken piece, *BMis* 2755 bier of ϩⲉⲛⲡⲉⲩⲕⲓ(ⲛ)ⲟⲛ ⲁⲩⲥⲙⲛ̅ⲧⲟⲩ ⲙⲡ(ⲟⲃⲉ) wood-inlay? ⲁⲩϣⲉⲧϣⲱⲧⲟⲩ ⲡⲉⲧⲁⲗⲟⲛ ϩⲓⲗⲉⲫⲁ[ⲛ]ⲧⲓⲛⲟⲛ refers to 'carved ivory plaques'. ⲡⲙⲁ ⲛ̅ ⲙ̅ⲕⲁⲧⲕ̅ the bier, literally the place of sleep; ⲑⲓⲕⲱⲛ ⲙ̅ ⲡⲙⲁⲣⲧⲩⲣⲟⲥ ϩⲛ̅ ϩⲉⲛⲛⲱⲛⲉ the martyr's icon studded with precious stones.

We have some information about church decoration in the East, but, it does not look as impressive as John of Gaza's extensive *ecphraseis* of St. Sergius' and St. Stephen's complex decorative programmes. However, we actually find a number of interesting minor descriptions in the church histories, in the theological polemic on icons, and in the hagiographies.

I am going to collect together dispersed information, which may help us to imagine and in a way to restore a mental picture of the appearance of the church interiors in one or another of the Oriental churches, their original splendour, the glory which has been lost forever, the glory of their mosaics and painted adornment together with their liturgical utensils and other works of craftsmanship in bronze, gold, silver, wood and stone.

A Syriac manuscript from the British Museum, catalogued by Wright as *Additional 17265*[8] and subsequently translated and published by Nau,[9] preserves a chronicle of the monastery of Qartamin, Mor Gabriel, concluded in 784/5 by an anonymous writer, and continued until 818 (–48?) by another anonymous monk. The extant version was copied in the 13th century.[10] I would like to focus on a chapter which describes the church's construction and its interior decoration. The church with its 6th-century mosaics is still frequented by visitors from Europe (Fig. 1–2).

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[7] Lassus, Tchalenko 1951, Pl. II, 2.

[8] Wright 1872, p. 1140, 2.

[9] Nau 1907.

[10] Leroy 1956, p. 76; Baumstark 1922, pp. 273f.

Figure 1. Mor Gabriel

Figure 2. Mor Gabriel

The restoration of the church and monastery was carried out on Anastasius' order. The Emperor commissioned the work to his engineers Theodorus and Theodosius, sons of Shufnay.[11] They sub-contracted goldsmiths, silversmiths, bronze workers, blacksmiths, besides painters, sculptors, mosaicists and stonecutters. This particular passage resembles the one we know from St. Gregory's description of St. Theodore's martyrion in Euchaita. The construction work was completed in 512, as confirmed by the anonymous chronicler with the usual exactness so admired by Baumstark.[12] The chronicler praises the opulence of Anastasius' donations for the newly built church's interior (Fig. 3–4).

The Syriac text is unique in the integrity of its description. It is worth reading in its full extent.

Figure 3. The Interior of Mor Gabriel

[11] Vollkommer 2007, s.v. Theodorus, p. 887.

[12] Baumstark 1922, p. 273; cf.Ihm 1960, p. 56, 234; Bell 1910, p. 234; Monneret de Villard 1940, pp. 55–60.

Figure 4. The Chancel

ܐܝܟܢܐ ܕܡܢ ܗܘܐ ܡܫܬܡܥ ܠܬܠܬ ܫܢܝܢ. ܐܚܪܝܢ ܡܢܗܘܢ ܡܬܝܠܝܢ ܠܡܕܝܢܬܐ ܕܡܕܝܢܬܐ ܕܐܪܡܢܝܐ ܕܒܝܬ ܡܠܟܘܬܐ ܕܐܪܡܢܝܐ. ܐܝܟ ܕܐܝܬ ܠܗ ܫܘܠܛܢܐ ܕܥܠ ܟܠ ܡܕܝܢܬܐ ܕܐܪܡܢܝܐ. ܐܦܠܐ

Three interiors were built on the eastern side of the church.

ܘܦܠܓܗ ܡܢ ܗܝܟܠܐ ܐܐܟܣ ܠܡܕܢܚܐ ܬ̈ܠܬܐ ܒܬܐܡ.

The Holy of Holies was in the middle. ܘܒܝܬܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܐܝܬܘܗܝ ܡܨܥܬ ܦܛܘܪܝܢ.

The altar was made of marble. ܘܛܪܘܢܘܣ ܕܡܠܟܘ ܐܝܬܘܗܝ ܟܐܦܐ ܕܫܝܫܐ

It was six and half cubits long and four and half broad.

ܐܘܪܟܗ ܐܡܐ ܫܬ ܘܦܠܓܗ. ܘܦܬܝܗ ܐܪܒܥ ܘܦܠܓܗ

There were also images carved in relief on its sides: the figures of a lion, ox, eagle and a man. ܘܐܝܬ ܠܗ ܐܪܒܥ ܐܦ̈ܝܢ ܘܨܝܪܝܢ ܒܓܠܝܦܘܬ ܕܡ̈ܘܬܐ.

ܐܪܝܐ ܘܬܘܪܐ ܘܢܫܪܐ ܘܒܪܢܫܐ.

A splendid imperial vase stood on a pediment.

ܘܥܠ ܟܐܦܐ ܩܐܡ ܡܐܢܐ ܦܓܝܐ ܡܠܟܝܐ.

The vase was surrounded by a crown, cast in silver.

ܘܟܠܝܠܐ ܡܩܦܠ ܡܢ ܟܣܦܐ ܡܣܘܪܗ.

300 seals (*sphrageis*) were set in it. They show the economy of the Incarnation.

ܘܐܝܬ ܒܗ ܬܠܬܡܐܐ ܛܒܥܝܢ ܕܪܡܙ ܒܠܗܘܢ ܡܬܒܪܢܫܢܘܬܐ.

A Cherub and the ciborium were located above the altar.

ܘܠܥܠ ܡܢ ܬܪܘܢܘܣ ܟܪܘܒ ܘܩܘܒܐ ܕܢܚܫܐ.

A canopy rested on four columns.

ܘܗܘ ܛܠܠܐ ܘܡܪܟܒ ܥܠ ܐܪܒܥܐ ܥܡ̈ܘܕܐ.

There was also a chandelier of pure gold hanging on a silver chain on the eastern side ܘܒܡܕܢܚܐ ܩܢܕܝܠܐ ܕܕܗܒܐ ܕܟܝܐ ܘܬܠܝܐ ܒܫܫܠܬܐ ܕܟܣܦܐ.

The floor of the chancel was paved with marble tiles of different colours:

ܘܐܪܥܗ ܕܡܕܒܚܐ ܪܨܝܦܐ ܒܦܠܛ̈ܝܐ ܕܫܝܫܐ

white, black, red, yellow, purple, gold, making different patterns.

ܚܘܪܐ. ܘܐܘܟܡܐ. ܘܣܘܡܩܐ. ܘܫܥܘܬܐ. ܘܐܪܓܘܢܐ. ܘܕܗܒܐ ܨܝܪܐ ܡܫܚܠܦܬܐ.

The surrounding walls were covered with plaques of marble.

ܘܐܣܬܘܗܝ ܒܗ ܡܚܕܪ. ܦܪܝܣܢ ܠܘ̈ܚܐ ܕܫܝܫܐ.

There were also gilt mosaics on the ceiling,

ܘܠܥܠ ܒܡܛܠܠܗ ܦܣܝܦ̈ܣܐ ܕܟܐܦ̈ܐ ܡܕܗ̈ܒܐ.

and two bronze trees on either side of the entrance to the chancel (alternatively: of the main gate to the church).

ܠܘܬ ܕܝܢ ܒܗܝܟܠܐ ܡܢ ܬܪܝܢ ܣܛܪ̈ܘܗܝ ܘܐܪܙܐ ܕܡܕܒܚܐ ܡܫܡܫܝܢ ܬܪܝܢ ܐܝ̈ܠܢܐ
ܕܢܚܫܐ

They were 20 cubits in height. ܘܪܘܡܐ ܕܟܠ ܚܕ ܡܢܗܘܢ ܥܣܪܝܢ ܐܡܝܢ.

A hundred and eighty lamps shone in the foliage of each of the trees

ܘܒܛܪ̈ܦܝܗܘܢ ܘܐܝܠܢܐ ܐܝܬ ܗܘܐ ܘܡܐܬܢ ܠܩܢ̈ܕܝܠܐ ܕܢܚܝܢ. ܡܐܐ ܘܬ̈ܡܢܝܢ ܒܟܠ

ܐܝܟܐ and fifty silver chains were hanging from them down to the floor.

ܡܬܥܒܕܝܢ ܒܫܘܪܐ ܕܐܝܟ ܒܝܨܐ ܘܥܦܪܐ ܘܡܠܟܐ ܘܥܢܒܐ ܘܟܠܝܠܐ ܘܦܓܪܐ

They were adorned with ornaments of bronze in the shape of red eggs, vessels, animals, birds, crosses, crowns, grapes, figurines and rings.

ܒܚܕܐ ܘܒܟܣܦܐ. ܐܝܬ ܕܬܡܢ ܗܘܘܢ. ܐܠܦܬܐ ܡܬܩܠܐ ܡܢܗܘܢ ܡܟܠܐ ܡܩܕܐ ܘܡܬܩܠܐ

Some of them were made of gold, others of silver, and yet others of bronze.

ܡܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܘܢ ܘܡ ܘܘܡܕܐ. ܡܫܘܝܡ ܘܡܫܘܝ. ܡܫܘܝܡ ܘܒܟܣܦܐ.

It is impossible to count their number or compare their value to anything else.'

ܐܝܟ ܘܐ ܕܝܢ ܘܒܝܡܐ ܡܬܩܢܐ ܡܫܬܢܐ ܘܒܝܡܐ.

The plan of the church is by far not unique with its three interiors along the eastern wall: the chancel (ܒܝܡܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܢܐ) between two *pastoforia*. The altar (ܡܕܒܚܐ) made of marble was actually not very big. As it seems, the four images (ܕܡܘܬܐ) carved in relief on its sides. ܦܠܛ actually means *représentés* (Leroy), but basically ܦܠܛ is usually rendered by *insculpsit*, *incidit* i.e. in this particular usage: carved in relief in the marble stone of the altar. They showed the four symbols of the Evangelists. The fourth took a human shape (ܒܪܢܫܐ). We may infer that it was an angel, however, this is not clearly specified e.g.by a ܡܠܐܟܐ. A magnificent vase (ܩܢܝܢܐ), large judging by the description, stood on a column, a pediment or a base (ܟܐܦܐ literally means a rock; *sur la pierre* as rendered by Leroy). The attributive 'imperial' (ܩܣܪܝܢܐ), of the 'imperial vase', refers in all likelihood to Anastasius' gifts, sent by the Emperor to the church for the opening celebrations. The gifts are praised by the chronicler time and again. There were also 300 medallions (ܚܬܡܐ) around a silver crown which surmounted the vase (ܟܐ ܕܐܝܟ) (Leroy: *médaillons*; Nau: *sceaux, sphrageis, sigles*, from ܚܬܡ: *signavit, sigillo munivit*). They showed the economy of the Incarnation, or in other words the Evangelical cycle of the life of Christ: the childhood, miracles and Passion. Were they painted on gold? Were they enamels, as suggested by Leroy's translation (*peinte*, ܨܒܥ pinxit, depinxit, delineavit)? It is difficult to decide. The number of 300 seems by far too many for a conceivable repertory of 6th-century Christian art. They probably alternated with decorative medallions or panels adorned with different geometrical or floral patterns, frequently combined with Greek crosses. The analogies gathered in the Syrian churches are numerous. Let us only recall the '*sphrageis*' from the chancel of the church in Qirqbize. It shows a cross and rosette combined in one impressive decorative pattern.[13] The altar was shaded by a canopy (ܩܘܒܠܐ; Leroy: un ciborium d'airain; Nau: tabernacle), which rested on four columns (ܥܡܘܕܐ) and adorned with a cherub, probably represented as an angel-like creature. Where

[13] Lassus, Tchalenko 1951, Pl. II, 2.

did the splendid golden chandelier hang? Nau read ܒܡܕܒܚܐ as 'à l'Est', 'in the eastern part of the church.' Leroy on his part interpreted the characters as 'sur l'autel' ܥܠ ܡܕܒܚܐ, above the altar, that is in the chancel. The word ܡܕܒܚܐ appears in the passage for the first time in the narrow meaning of an altar or the space of the chancel, and secondly in a more general meaning, which is synonymous with the church as a whole. Leroy chose to translate ܡܕܒܚܐ ܘܐܪܥܐ as denoting the floor of the whole church. If his speculation is not right, then we are obliged to read 'the floor of the chancel (ܡܕܒܚܐ; Nau: *le sol de l'autel*) was paved (ܦܝܣܬܐ) with the marble tiles (ܐܒܢܐ ܕܫܝܫܐ) of different colours arranged in different patterns', the sort of decoration which can still be seen in some of the oldest Byzantine churches. Paul Silentiarius also speaks of 'marble meadows' in his *ecphrasis* of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. The marble meadows of the Hagia Sophia were composed of 'the green flanks of Carystus... the speckled Phrygian stone, sometimes rosy mixed with white, sometimes gleaming with purple and silver flowers... a wealth of porphyry stone, besprinkled with little bright stars... the bright green stone of Laconia and the glittering marble with wavy veins... exhibiting slanting streaks of blood-red and livid white; the pale yellow with swirling red...the glittering crocus-like golden stone (Lybian marble)... glittering black... vivid green or darker green, almost blue. It has spots resembling snow next to flashes of black so that in one stone various beauties mingle' (vv. 620–646).[14]

The interior walls of the church in Qartamin were covered with marble tiles (ܐܒܢܐ ܕܫܝܫܐ), which is also usual for the Byzantine churches. The ceiling was gilt with mosaics (ܐܒܢܐ ܕܫܝܫܐ ܕܕܗܒܐ). I follow Leroy, who corrects Nau's ܒܟܐܢܐ (*dans les pierres*, from ܟܐܢܐ – *saxum, rupes*) into ܒܫܡܝܐ that is 'dans le ciel', in the skies, which means 'on the ceiling' (la voûte). ܟܘܒܐ is a Greek borrowing of κύβος, *tesselae*, mosaic cubes or stones.[15] The illuminating reading of ܕܡܙܗܒܢܐ ܟܘܒܐ ܕܕܗܒܐ as 'adorned with golden mosaics' put forward by Dupont-Sommer[16] in his translation of the Syriac hymn to the Cathedral Church of Edessa presents us with a picture of a spacious cupola adorned with golden mosaics spangled with stars which shone mysteriously in the semi-dark church interior. The previous reading offered by Goussen 'geschmückt mit vergoldeten Höhlungen (Cassetten)',[17] and followed by Schneider[18], is still being reproduced in the good faith by modern authors.[19] In fact it had always caused confusion for archaeological reasons. Dupont-Sommer read ܟܘܒܐ as a borrowing from the Greek κύβος (lat. cubus, capsa – cube), which is the Greek

[14] Mango 2004, pp. 85f.
[15] Cf.Leroy 1956, p. 80.
[16] Dupont-Sommer 1947, pp. 30f.
[17] Goussen 1925, p. 120.
[18] Schneider 1941, p. 162.
[19] 'zdobne w złote kasety' Kania 1973, p. 165; id.1991–2, p. 235.

equivalent of the mosaic *tessela*, and *pars pro toto* ‘a mosaic’. This meaning had already been attested by Brockelmann *LS* p. 685b.

ܒܥܕܬܐ ܕܝ ܠܘܡ ܡܫܟܢܐ ܘܠܘܚܐ ܘܡܒܚܡܐ

can be rendered as follows: in the church (ܥܕܬܐ) on both sides of its entrance (ܠܘܚܐ), ‘dans la nef des deux côtés de la porte du sanctuaire’(Leroy). ܠܘܚ ܘܡܒܚܡܐ was rendered by Nau as ‘porte de l’autel,’ i.e. the entrance to the chancel. However (ܡܫܟܢܐ) is also suggestive of *velum, secretum, tegumentum, latibulum, occultum*. It is not clear if the chronicler actually had in mind two curtains hanging on either side of the chancel. Personally I am inclined to believe that Nau’s rendering was correct.

Two bronze trees (6–7 m high) adorned with many lamps sparkling through the foliage make up one of the most impressive pictures in the Syriac description. ܘܡܬܬܐ ܕܩܢܝܐ means ‘places for lamps’ (*place pour les lampes*, Leroy). It must be a technical term, however, of obscure meaning to us (lamp stands, lamp holders, candelabra arms?). The next passage I understand in the following way: the fifty silver chains hung from the tree down to the floor. ܕܚܠܝܢ also refers to the second part of the passage, that is both to the lamps as well as to the chains. ܟܠܝ should be rendered as vessel, crater, or hydria. ܦܫܐ as vitis, surculum, grapes, a bunch of grapes, vine scrolls and grapes (*cloches, grappes, vitis*, ἄμπελος, Leroy). ܨܦܪܐ – different sculptures, figurines? (*objets sculptés*, Nau; *objets ciselés*, Leroy). What does it exactly mean? What kind of objects? It is impossible to tell. The manuscript ܕܩܩܐ from ܕܩ might have been related to ἄλφιτα, polenta, sweet cakes? ܫܩܠܐ – rings, discs (*des sphéres, des anneaux*, Leroy).

In conclusion let us collect up the chronicler’s terminology referring to the arts and crafts: ܡܕܒܚܐ *altar*; ܩܕܫܐ ܩܕܫܝܢ the Holy of Holies, chancel; ܫܫܐ ܘܫܫܐ marble; ܕܡܘܬܐ *imago*; ܫܫܐ here probably a column, podium, basis; ܐܢܐ *vas*, *crater*; ܨܪܝܪܐ *sigilla, gemmae, signa, species*; ܟܪܘܒܐ cherub; ܡܫܟܢܐ *tabernaculum, ciborium*, canopy; ܥܡܕܐ *columnae*; ܡܢܪܐ *candelabrum*; ܘܡܒܚܡܐ ܠܘܚ chancel (?), the Holy of Holies (?), the floor of the church (?); ܫܫܐ ܡܫܟܬܐ mosaics of marble plaques; ܡܫܟܬܐ ܘܡܪܩܐ ܕܕܗܒܐ *tesselae* covered with gold leaf, mosaics of a golden colour; ܫܫܐ ܘܫܫܐ marble tiles; ܘܫܫܐ ܡܫܩܐ ornaments, adornments made of bronze; ܩܢܝܐ lamps.

The essential part of the art terminology, which we know from the Coptic texts, consists of the Greek borrowings. The Syriac texts show an entirely different pattern. The Syriac description compiled by an anonymous monk from Qartamin resembles the hymn on the Edessa Cathedral composed by an anonymous poet of the Justinianic period. The Syriac art description in general evolved along entirely different lines from the Greek *ecphrasis*. Greek borrowings in the discussed Syriac texts are rare, and if they do appear, they are limited to only certain words (ܩܘܒܘܣ κύβος, ܩܢܝܐ φανός).

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