

Andrea Schmidt, Stephan Westphalen, in collaboration with Sebastian Brock, Mat Immerzeel and Christine Strube, **Christliche Wandmalereien in Syrien, Qara und das Kloster Mar Yakub**. Sprachen und Kultur des Christlichen Orients, Band 14. Verlag Dr. Ludwig Reichert, Wiesbaden 2005. 240 pages, 44 figures, 26 plates, 20 colour plates.

Medieval archaeology of the Levant is still far from becoming an important tool in uncovering the history of

the region, although considerable progress has been made in this field during the past twenty years. From this perspective the fact that wall paintings, as a more spectacular aspect of the culture of that period, attract more attention than architecture or pottery, seems natural. A significant number of wall paintings discovered or rediscovered in several churches of Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, and their exceptional state of preservation, make them an invaluable witness documenting the multi-cultural world of the Crusader-period Levant. Gustav Kühnel (*Wall Painting in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem* [Berlin 1988]) published a significant study on the monuments of Palestine. Lebanon, an important region on the map of monumental Crusader period art, has also benefited from several noteworthy publications, by Lévon Nordiguian and Jean-Claude Voisin (*Châteaux et églises du moyen âge au Liban* [Beirut 1998]), Mat Immerzeel (*Inventory of Lebanese Wall Paintings. Essays on Christian Art and Culture in the Middle East 3*, 2000, 2–19), Nada Hérou, (*Wall Paintings in Lebanese Churches. Essays on Christian Art and Culture in the Middle East 2*, 1999, 13–36), and in particular by Erica Cruikshank Dodd, who published a catalogue of murals known from the churches and monasteries of Lebanon (*Medieval Painting in the Lebanon*, SKCO 8 [Wiesbaden] 2004). For many years Syria was neglected and once research was initiated it focused on the relatively well-preserved monuments from the regions of Homs and Qalamun. For these reasons Erica Cruikshank Dodd wrote in 1982 in her preliminary study of the paintings from the monastery of Mar Musa el Habashi near Nebek in Syria: »When these investigations (sc. Crac des Chevaliers, Marqab, Qara; the reviewer) are completed, the picture of monumental art in greater Syria during the Crusades should become clearer«. More than twenty five years have elapsed since these words were written and the time has come to present the results of some of the announced projects.

The book edited by Andrea Schmidt and Stephan Westphalen and published in an important series, *Sprachen und Kultur des Christlichen Orients*, launched in 1997, is a result of several field projects devoted to the wall paintings of the Byzantine, Early Islamic and medieval periods. Although the main focus is on the project of restoration and study of the murals from the monastery of Mar Yakub in Qara, it also contains important chapters on the results of two other projects conducted almost simultaneously in one region of Syria and devoted to wall paintings dated roughly to the same period, namely those from Ma'arrat Saydnaya and Androna (al-Andarin).

The book is composed of four main chapters completed by shorter but important studies on the technical aspects of conservation and on the Syriac inscriptions.

Andrea Schmidt, a professor of history of the Eastern Medieval Church at the Université Catholique de Louvain, presents in her study the history of the Bishopric of Qara, situated in the mountainous region of Qalamun, between Homs and Damascus, that was, for

centuries, a centre of flourishing Christian culture (*Zur Geschichte des Bistums Qara im Qalamun*, pp. 13–68). Her research is based mainly on colophons in liturgical manuscripts preserved in the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Sinai and in Lebanese monasteries.

Historic sources reveal little about the early history of the bishopric. A bishop was possibly present at Qara (Goaria in antiquity) by the middle of the fifth century, but no further mentions of the bishopric appear after 636 up until the twelfth century, when it regains some of its former importance following the Byzantine reconquest of Northern Syria in the tenth to eleventh century. Several inscriptions preserved in the church at Dair Mar Yakub, as well as manuscripts, suggest that in the second half of the twelfth century Syriac and Arabic prevailed as the common languages of the Christian Melkite population and that Arabic attained the status of the main language during the Mamluk period.

The question of patronage is another discussed and unsolved problem. Only one early source mentions (in 1477) the Persian martyr Saint James Intercisus as a patron of the monastery of Mar Yakub, this information later being repeated in the eighteenth century.

The history of Dair Mar Yakub, as reconstructed by Andrea Schmidt, has several important phases. We cannot preclude, in compliance with the authors' submission, that the tower of the monastery represents the most ancient part of the whole complex. Stephan Westphalen presents one solitary coin of Justin II (569–570) found in the monastery as a possible trace of this early phase. Disaster for the whole Christian community of Qalamun came in 1266, when troops of Sultan Baibars massacred, expelled or sold into slavery the Christian inhabitants of the region. At that time the church of Saint Nikolaos at Qara was transformed into a mosque.

Qara monasteries flourished in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries under the guidance of Bishop Macarios, who founded an important scriptorium involved in the translation of liturgical manuscripts from Greek into Syriac and Arabic, a fact that coincided with the switch of the Melkite Church to the Byzantine liturgy. Manuscripts copied here enabled the author to save from oblivion the families of Abu Salih and Dawud ibn Musa, copyists active at that time.

The fall of the monastery came with the plundering carried out by Ottoman soldiers in 1645, though even more disastrous was the earthquake of 1759 that destroyed even the wells in the region. The place owes its revival to the creation of the Melkite-Catholic Church in Syria, and especially to the activity in the second half of the nineteenth century of Bishop George 'Ata, who rebuilt the church and constructed the mill and school. At present Dair Mar Yakub is being renovated by the ecumenical community »Les moniales de l'Unité d'Antioche«.

The active presence of the nuns at Dair Mar Yakub paved the way for the wall painting restoration project directed by Stephan Westphalen. The project presented by him in the second part of the book (*Das Kloster Mar*

Yakub und seine Wandmalereien, pp. 69–153) demanded four campaigns and was supported between 1999 and 2001 by the German Archaeological Institute, in close collaboration with the Syrian Direction Générale des Antiquités et des Musées.

The monastery of Mar Yakub occupies a rectangular space (56 x 48 m) enclosed by a wall. It consists of a tower, dwelling structure, church and a mill powered by water from an ancient qanat. All buildings were constructed according to the local tradition, with their lower courses built of stone and their upper sections of sun-dried mudbrick. It is interesting to recall that an almost identical technique was employed at Dura Europos in the Roman period and seems to be deeply rooted in Syrian architecture. The author suggests that all constructions, with exception of the tower, were built after the earthquake of 1759, perhaps even in the nineteenth century.

The monastery church is unique in the context of other examples from Syria or Lebanon and has two storeys: the upper one having possibly been used only by the monastic community. The lack of any additional elements of architectural decoration makes the murals the only chronological criterion chosen by the author. Westphalen is aware of the shortcomings of such a method and underlines that stylistic observations are limited by the state of preservation of the paintings and by their partial displacement to the museums in Damascus and Dair 'Atiya. Nevertheless, careful examination of the remains has led the author to identify two paint layers in the church.

The first one (introduced by Westphalen as Erste Malschicht. Zur Rezeption byzantinischer Bildvorlagen im syrischen Hinterland) represents one of the oldest medieval wall paintings in Syria and Palestine, the style and iconography of which are unique in the region. The Cycle of Christ is the main theme and was composed originally of eighteen representations, of which only ten have survived, for example the Annunciation, Presentation in the Temple, Baptism in Jordan, Miracles of Jesus. The Cycle of Christ is exceptional on the map of the Syro-Lebanese region, where separate figures of the saints dominate. The discussion of the iconography leads to the conclusion that the paintings are linked stylistically to the work of craftsmen from Antioch and Cyprus and are related to Byzantine cultural spheres animated by the renewal of the Antioch patriarchate after the Byzantine reconquest of Northern Syria and the nomination of bishops described by Schmidt. The beginning of the eleventh century also saw the construction of the church at Mar Yakub.

The second paint layer (Zweite Malschicht. Ein Beitrag zum syrischen Stil) was marked by a radical change in decoration: the Christ Cycle was replaced by a row of bishops (an innovation in twelfth century Syria), a Deesis scene, and figures of the prophets and apostles. The triumphal arch and naos were decorated with a scene of Moses receiving the Tablets of Law.

The partially damaged figure of a horseman situated on the southern wall of the naos has incited discussion

about the phenomenon of the Holy Horsemen in the art of the medieval East. Westphalen recalls several similar depictions to conclude that the main problem concerning the localisation of the workshop (Jaroslav Folda and Lucy-Anne Hunt versus Mat Immerzeel) still remains unresolved, although recent discoveries of wall paintings in the Lebanese church of Mar Sarkis at Kaf-tûn offer some new observations in favour of the opinion of the last of these opponents.

There is a clear difference in style between the layers. The hesitant drawing of the small and clear figures is characteristic of the first one, whereas the second layer features large surfaces painted in linear fashion.

According to Dodd, the paintings of the second layer form a group of 'Syrian' style together with paintings from Dair Mar Musa and Krak des Chevaliers in Syria and Mart Shmuni, Dair es-Salib, Wadi Qadisha, Mar Charbel at Ma'ad, and Mar Tadros at Bahdeidar in Lebanon. On the basis of iconographic studies Westphalen proposes 1200–1250 as the period during which the paintings at Mar Yakub were created.

It is now difficult to imagine any iconographic study of the wall paintings without prior conservation work, and from this point of view we are most fortunate that the editors of the book have decided to include two indispensable technical studies of the paintings. Susanne Bosch and Janka Verhey (*Zur Maltechnik, dem Zustand und der Restaurierung der beiden Malschichten*, pp. 124–130) describe the techniques used in the construction of the walls and the stratigraphy of the consecutive layers constituting the paintings. The first layer bears no traces of any tools, but preparatory sketches in red are visible on some parts of the walls. It is difficult to decide whether the second layer was painted using the *al secco* or *al fresco* technique. The authors provide a detailed presentation of the whole process of conservation, including an enumeration of the chemicals used during treatment. The latter information is most useful for those who would like to continue the conservation of paintings at Mar Yakub in the future or to start a new project in another location.

This study is completed by Dietrich Rehbaum's analysis of the painting materials, pigments and binding material (pp. 130–134).

The chapter on the Mar Yakub wall paintings ends with a catalogue, in which the author presents thirteen fragments from the first layer and another twelve from the second one, giving a detailed and most useful description including, in some cases, Syriac inscriptions.

The third part of the book, by Mat Immerzeel, director of the Paul van Moorsel Centre for Christian Art and Culture in the Middle East at Leiden University, presents the results of a project focused on the decoration of the Chapel of the Prophet Elijah in Ma'arrat Saydnaya, a Greek Orthodox monastery that has played the role of an important religious and cultural centre since the second half of the twelfth century (The Decoration of the Chapel of the Prophet Elijah in

Ma'arrat Saydnaya, pp. 155–182). A study of the wall paintings was accomplished between 1997 and 1999 as part of the Syrian-Netherlands Cooperation for the Study of Art in Syria.

The chapel, as proposed by the author, was initially used as a hermit cell, possibly later becoming the centre of a small monastic community dependent on the monastery of Saydnaya.

Several paintings from Ma'arrat Saydnaya were mentioned by travellers, but only a few have survived in the chapel that initially occupied a cave: Saint George and Saint Demetrios, Saint Nikolaos, Theotokos with Child seated enthroned, the Ascension of Elijah, Bishop Saint Athanasios, probably Saint Andrew of Crete and Saint Stephen, although the iconographical program of the chapel is difficult to reconstruct.

The author believes that the paintings reflect the work of at least three artists. The figure of the prophet Elijah was probably painted in the eleventh century, when most of the representations were created, according to Immerzeel, by a Cypriot painter some time between the last decade of the twelfth century and the middle of the thirteenth century.

The presentation of the discovery in 2003 in the West Hall of the late antique Syrian *kastron* (AD 559) Androna (al-Andarin) of a wall painting and Syriac inscription constitutes the fourth part of the book, written by Christine Strube – an archaeologist and specialist in Early Christian art (*Eine Verkündigungsszene im Kastron von Androna/al-Andarin*, pp. 183–198). The fragmentarily preserved painting represents the Annunciation: Mary, visited by Gabriel, is seated on a throne. Strube compares the style of the painting to examples known from Caesarea Maritima (sixth to seventh century) or from the Rabbula Gospel (AD 586) to propose a relatively broad chronological range for the painting: from 559 (construction of the *kastron*) to the eighth century. In contrast to previous studies, Androna has provided sound archaeological evidence accompanying the discovery that is employed by Strube in a convincing way.

The Syriac votive inscription from Androna, presented by Sebastian Brock, an authority on Syriac culture and language, mentions a certain Abraham fulfilling the role of an administrator (pp. 199–202). Brock, taking into consideration the archaeological and epigraphic evidence, proposes two chronological solutions: the inscription was painted in the late sixth to early seventh century, or in the second half of the eighth century, when a monastery possibly existed in the *kastron* of Androna.

In conclusion, *Christliche Wandmalereien in Syrien, Qara und das Kloster Mar Yakub*, is an important publication which offers new evidence on the artistic heritage left by the Christians of the East. Its weight lies in the fact that the material traces of medieval Christianity in Syria and Lebanon are disappearing irrevocably, and all efforts focused on salvaging this heritage have to be praised. The iconographic study is well founded and in some cases leads to interesting conclusions. Evoca-

tions of Early Christian art are numerous, but in some instances we are left with the impression that the authors, due to limited space, create discussion rather than answer questions.

The technical aspect of the publication is without reproach. Only two minor faults were noted in the whole book (p. 77 and n. 31 on p. 189) – the best measure of the quality of the editing work. Numerous figures, including colour photographs of the paintings, provide a perfect accompaniment to the text. Especially useful are the schematic drawings showing the location of particular fragments of the paintings.

One lesson can be learnt from all of the projects presented in the book. Conservation and study of the wall paintings at Dair Mar Yakub started when the restoration of the church itself had already been completed. The German team was deprived of the opportunity to closely examine its architecture, or to make test trenches that could possibly deliver additional evidence supporting the dating established solely on the grounds of iconography. The photographs, unfortunately, show no architecture, no naos, walls and so on. Equally, the study of wall paintings from the chapel of Elijah is entirely founded on iconographic and stylistic analysis, although the author mentions thirteenth-century pottery spotted at the foot of the cave. Missing evidence, the sad phenomenon seen in so many Syrian and Lebanese medieval churches, is especially disappointing when compared to the encouraging efforts made by the excavator of Androna to marry the archaeological, epigraphic and iconographic evidence.

There is one other troubling question that always arises when we talk about the Early Islamic and medieval periods, as in the case of Qara: what happened to the Christian communities during the long time between the seventh to the eighth and the eleventh to the twelfth centuries?

We should thank the editors of *›Sprachen und Kultur des Christlichen Orients‹* and the authors for this interesting and important publication.

Warsaw

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