

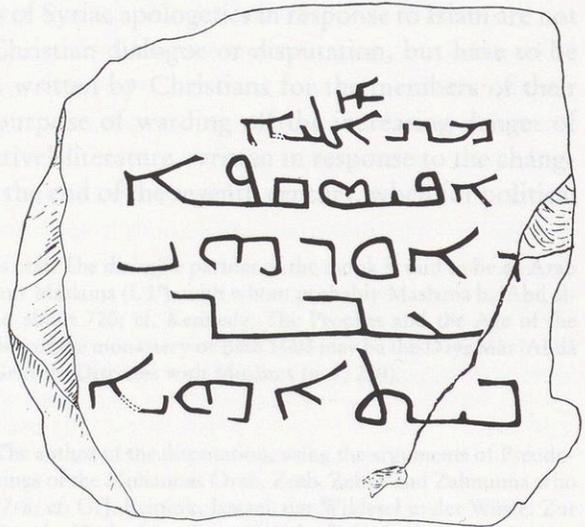
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Mar Elijah, the Bishop of Edessa (768/9 C.E.), on an Inscription from the Monastery of Mar Gabriel at Tur 'Abdin*

In October 1991, while on a tour of the monastery of Qartmin (Mar Gabriel), in the district of Tur 'Abdin, we saw the inscription discussed below, in front of the northern door-post of the conventual church. That the inscription was written on the bottom side of a limestone column-base (ca. 0,5×0,5 m) implies the secondary use of this architectural item. It was unearthed recently, north-east of the above-mentioned church, beyond the contemporary monastery walls.

The inscription was engraved into a somewhat weathered surface. Remnants of red paint are easily discernable on most of the incised letters.

- 1) Mar Elijah
- 2) the bishop
- 3) of Edessa
- 4) made
- 5) this house



Comments and interpretations

The incision above the *olaf* of **ⲕⲗⲕ**, was also painted red. It's meaning is not clear. Could this engraving be a monogram of Elijah the bishop, or of the scribe?

* For Prof. John Marks with appreciation

Or, maybe was it a mistake of the artisan who started to write the  of , for some reason (e.g., an error in transcription) stopped, and then started again in the right-hand corner of the column-base. Most of the letter-forms in the inscription are clearly characteristic of 8th century inscriptions in the Tur 'Abdin area, thoroughly studied by A. Palmer.¹ A considerable part of Palmer's article is dedicated to the history of the scribal arts in Tur 'Abdin. He notes the resemblance of the script used in codices to that used for some inscriptions in the Tur 'Abdin area². The inscription we recorded aptly demonstrates such codical influences. The manner in which the engraved letters are joined together discloses quite clearly the influence of inscribing techniques used for codices. But it is primarily the extending of the short word , over the entire length of the fourth line, which leads us to infer that the artisan employed techniques used in writing codices. Quite often, we come across a manuscript in which the scribe lengthened the bottom bars of letters, in order to attain an elegant and even width, among all lines of a page or a column. In light of the above, we would like to suggest that the artisan who incised the inscription was not only well acquainted with the techniques of writing manuscripts, but was himself a scribe. The same might be true with regard to several other inscriptions in the Qartmin monastery and in the surrounding area³.

In any case, the importance of this inscription lies in the identification of Elijah, bishop of Edessa, as the same bishop Elijah recorded in the chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tell-Mahre, which in turn establishes the exact date of the inscription. According to the records of Ps. Dionysius of Tell-Mahre for 768-769 C.E., we are told that Elijah, a monk from the monastery of Qartmin,

1 A. Palmer, "The Syriac Letter-Forms of Tur 'Abdin and Environs", *OrChr* 73 (1989), pp. 68-89, esp. pp. 86-89. Although not all of the characteristic details appear in our inscription, e.g., the hook at the bottom-right foot of the *olaf*, most letters fit well into 8th century letter-form categories. We feel that one should be very careful in assigning a date to an inscription, based solely on palaeographic grounds. Used vigilantly, however, such evidence can strengthen and enhance a historical written source as we would argue in the case of the present inscription.

2 A. Palmer, "The Syriac Letter-Forms . . .", *OrChr* 73 (1989), pp. 70-82.

3 Cf. A. Palmer, *Monk and Mason on the Tigris frontier: The Early History of Tur 'Abdin* (Cambridge, 1989) pp. 222-224. Unlike Palmer, who refers to the men who executed the inscriptions in the Tur 'Abdin area as masons, we prefer to call them, artisans or craftsmen. As far as we could observe, both the engraved letters, and the moulded plaster letters in quite a number of inscriptions, though definitely not all of them, must have been rendered by men with some artistic skills. Such skills are not necessarily required for masonry work. In this context, it is worth noting A. G. Woodhead's book, *The Study of Greek Inscriptions*, (Cambridge, 1981²), at pp. 86-93. Discussing the place of inscriptions in the general setting of Greek art, Woodhead claims that "... the artistry involved in setting out and inscribing a stele deserved to take its place among the minor arts of the classical world . . . We ought, however, to look more closely at epigraphy as representative of the art of its time . . . the artistic composition of an inscription, and the historical development of epigraphy as an art-form should all be considered as necessary to the proper study of the subject." (pp. 86-87) Woodhead's remarks are equally valid for Syriac inscriptions; but this intriguing subject merits a separate paper.

replaced a certain Zechariah as the bishop of Edessa⁴. In all available sources on the bishops of Edessa, there is only one Elijah the Qartminite. We are told by Ps. Dionysius of Tell-Mahre that Elijah was vicious, heartless, and had a Godless cast of mind; that he was not accepted (by the people of Edessa), nor did he complete the term of his episcopacy. We are not informed for how long he held the see of Edessa, but after his dismissal the city was left without a bishop for sometime⁵. The precise nature of Elijah's project in the monastery of Mar Gabriel, and whether he ever accomplished it, are not easy to determine from the inscription. The verb **ܘܚܒܐ** as Palmer rightly pointed out, could mean "he initiated / funded / supervised the making / building (unlikely in this case) even renovation...". For the type of building involved Palmer argues, "**ܘܚܒܐ** covers both liturgical and non-liturgical buildings"⁶. Unfortunately, as far as we know, the exact place from which the column-base was removed, is not recorded. Still, even if we knew where it was taken from, it is not certain we could have gained more information.

To sum up, the recently unearthed inscription in the Qartmin Abbey can be dated quite safely to ca. 768/9 C.E. The palaeographical parallels from the Tur 'Abdin area and, more importantly, the identification in the inscription of Elijah as the bishop of Edessa in 768/9 C.E., makes this date highly conceivable.⁷

4 J.-B. Chabot (ed.), *Incerti auctoris Chronicon Pseudo-Dionysianum* vulgo dictum, vol. II, Louvain 1952 (réimpression) [= CSCO 104], p. 252 [Hereafter = PD II]. French translation by R. Hespel, under the same title, vol. II, Louvain 1989 (= CSCO 507), p. 197.

5 PD II, p. 252 lines 2-8 [Syriac]. For a general survey of the history of Edessa and its episcopacy during the relevant period, see J. B. Segal, *Edessa 'The Blessed City'* (Oxford, 1970), esp. pp. 207-213. For a meticulous study of the events preceding and following the election of Elijah, see A. Palmer, *Monks and Masons*, pp. 174-181. See also W. Witakowski, *The Syriac Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre* (Uppsala, 1987) p. 99.

6 A. Palmer, "The Diction of Tur 'Abdin and Environs", *OrChr* 72 (1988), p. 116 (**ܘܚܒܐ**), p. 118 (**ܘܚܒܐ**). The various possible meanings of this expression can be found in the identical Greek formulation "epoiesen touton ton oikon".

7 The date is set to 768/9 on the basis of the "year entry" for Elijah in the Chr. Ps.Dio. of Tell-Mahre. We do not know, however, how long he stayed in his episcopal post before being deposed by the Edessians. Palmer's remark that Elijah, was appointed to Edessa in 769, only to be driven out with abuse, gives the impression that he was driven out immediately after he was appointed. The text however does not shed light on the matter. According to the source Elijah did not finish the term of his episcopacy, however, he was there long enough to initiate some building activity at Qartmin Abbey. Prof. H. Kaufhold has rightly pointed to us that it is possible that the inscription (and even the building itself) could have been executed after the deposition of Elijah, since he held his bishopric title even after his deposition. On the palaeographical theme, it is worth noting inscription A. 6 in A. Palmer, "A Corpus of Inscriptions from Tur 'Abdin and Environs", *OrChr* 71 (1987), pp. 64-67. This inscription, dated to 776/7, found in the monastery of Mar Gabriel, has many characteristics highly similar to those of Elijah's inscription, as in the letter-forms, and the pointing of text in the same distinctive "arrowheads". We will have to examine the originals before reaching a definite conclusions. At this stage, based only on a photograph and written description, we would like to hypothesize that in light of the very close similarities between these two inscriptions, they were both engraved by the same artisan.