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Syriac Inscriptions from al Hira

In 1974, the Japanese Archaeological Expedition to Iraq* discovered the site of Ain Sha'ia and the adjacent Dukakin caves 170 km south of Baghdad and 15 km west of Najaf.¹ After preliminary soundings in 1986, two seasons of digging were conducted in 1987-1988 and 1988-1989.² At Ain Sha'ia a church was excavated, which was distinguished by a sanctuary with a straight east wall instead of an apse that is customary in Byzantine architecture. It belongs to a southern Mesopotamian regional style,³ with examples at Hira and Ctesiphon, that also extended into the Gulf, where a church has been discovered at al-Qusur on the island of Failaka, Kuwait.⁴ The building at Ain Sha'ia has been placed within the transitional period of Late Sasanian-Early Islamic, according with the dates assigned to the other sites where churches have been found.⁵

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1 See Fig. 1: *Map of the Kerbala - Najaf region of south-west Iraq - showing the locations of the site of Ain Sha'ia and the Dukakin caves.*

2 Hideo Fujii *et al.*, "Excavations at Ain Sha'ia ruins and Dukakin caves", *Al Rafidan* X (1989), pp. 27-88, for a comprehensive report on the excavations.

3 J. S. Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in pre-Islamic times* (London: 1979), p. 197, n. 114, summarized the architectural style *viz*: "The main body of the church is rectangular, the pillars supporting the arches of burnt brick divide it into a three-aisled edifice. At the south-east end are three chapels (*diakonikon*, *martyrion*?), separated by the main body by massive piers." However, he has not mentioned the salient feature of Mesopotamian churches, i.e. the straight east wall of the sanctuary.

4 Two churches, excavated in 1931 at Hira, are discussed by D. Talbot-Rice, "The Oxford Excavations at Hira, 1931", *Antiquity* VI (1932), pp. 276-291 and in an identically titled article in *Ars Islamica* 1 (1934), pp. 54-73. The church excavated at Qasr bint al Qadi, is described by Oscar Reuther, "The German excavations at Ctesiphon", *Antiquity* 3 (1929), p. 449-50. The most recent and thorough discussion on the subject, collating all previous evidence is by Yasuyoshi Okada, "Early Christian architecture in the Iraqi south-western desert", *Al Rafidan* XII (1991), pp. 71-83. Since his publication, V. Bernard and J.-F. Salles, "Discovery of a Christian church at al-Qusur", Failaka (Kuwait), *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 21 (1991), pp. 7-13, has appeared in print.

5 Fujii, *op. cit.*, p. 61. Talbot-Rice, *op. cit.* (1932), p. 57 dates the church at Mound V to the late 7th century-early 8th century AD. Reuther, *op. cit.*, p. 451 places the second and later stage of the church at Ctesiphon to the middle or end of the sixth century AD. Bernard and Salles, *op. cit.*,

The main body of the church at Ain Sha'ia was divided into three sections in which was found "a considerable amount of fragments of wall plaster bearing Syriac letters" near the mud-brick pier-wall separating the central from the right-hand aisle.⁶ Most of the 48 gypsum pieces only consist of a single or a couple of characters, but several different hands can be detected.⁷ Hence, in the majority of cases it has not been possible to determine the physical arrangement of the different sherds nor to reconstruct any readings. However, amongst this miscellany of fragments are two pieces which were written by the same hand in a cursive Nestorian script.⁸ They belong to the same inscription (*Inscription I*), although their precise relationship is now unclear.

Inscription I. The larger fragment (8.0×5.0 cm) reads:

1.1. <i>r'bdyn wd'ryn</i>	ܐܘܒܪܝܢܐ ܘܘܕܝܢܐ	... works and [enclosures]
1.2. <i>wbwdq̄h wl</i>	ܘܘܒܘܕܩܗܐ ܘܘܠ	... both his [declaration] and
1.3. <i>y šlm' wb</i>	ܘܘܫܠܡܐ ܘܘܒܐ	... [peace] and
1.4. <i>l...y dmk</i>	ܘܘܠܘܕܡܟܐ ܘܘܠܘܕܡܟܐ	... [proscribed/proclaimed]

Sigla: ḥ = uncertain reading, [doing] = tentative translation

1.1 **ܐܘܒܪܝܢܐ ܘܘܕܝܢܐ** "works and enclosures". **ܘܘܒܪܐ** "do make" often occurs in Syriac dedications, denoting physical action as well as acts of patronage,⁹ although the Perfect tense is usually preferred. **ܘܘܒܪܐ** may be the plural absolute of the noun **ܘܘܒܪܐ** "deed, property", but no Seyyame can be detected here or accompanying the next word, ending in a final, unattached Nun, that is tentatively read as the plural absolute of **ܘܘܕܝܢܐ**. The various meanings of this noun centre on the idea of a courtyard, hence "enclosure" may be appropriate, especially in view of the earthworks that surround *Site F*.

1.2 **ܘܘܒܘܕܩܗܐ ܘܘܠ** "both his [declaration] and". The double conjunction Waw could also be interpreted as "and ... and". The reading is tentative arising from difficulties surrounding the penultimate letter, however **ܘܘܕܩܗܐ** "declaration, prediction" might be appropriate.

1.3 **ܘܘܫܠܡܐ ܘܘܒܐ**, "[peace] and". The Mim-Alaph combination is clear, and from the spacing "peace" might be proposed.

p. 11 cautiously assign Level 1 of the stratigraphic sequence at al Qusur to the first half of the seventh century AD.

6 Fujii, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

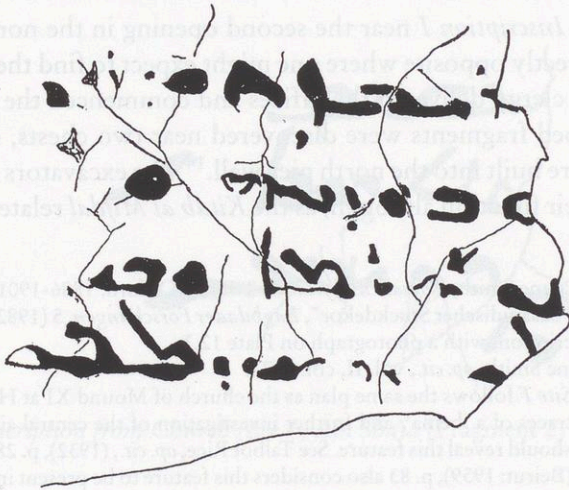
7 See Erica C.D. Hunter, "Report and catalogue of inscribed fragments: Ain Sha'ia and Dukakin caves near Najaf, Iraq", *Al Rafidan X* (1989), pp. 89-108.

8 Cf. W.H.P. Hatch, *An Album of Dated Syriac Manuscripts* (Boston: 1946), Plate CLXII (dated 719-720 AD).

9 Refer Erica C.D. Hunter, "An inscribed reliquary from the Middle Euphrates", *OrChr* 75 (1991), pp. 153-154 for further discussion of the multifarious application of **ܘܘܒܪܐ**.



Plate I: Inscription from Church (site F) Ain Sha'ia [Fragment 1].



Inscription from Church (site F) Ain Sha'ia [Fragment 1] Line drawing

1.4 ܕܗܘܐ, ... ܕ “[proscribed]”. The relative pronoun Dalath may introduce the Pael or Aphel participle, with √ ܕܗܘܐ Pael “proscribe” or Aphel “proclaim”, being a suggested reading.

The smaller fragment of *Inscription I* (5.5×3.5 cm) reads:

1.1. {y}’qwb	ܕܗܘܐܐ	...Jacob
1.2. wṯwm’	ܘܬܘܡܐܐ	...Thomas
1.3. b šy’	ܒܫܝܐ	...[stopped]
1.4. wš	ܘܫ	...and

Sigla: ḥ = uncertain reading, [doing] = tentative translation, {y} = reconstruction

1.1 ܕܗܘܐܐ “...Jacob”. The initial Yodh can be reconstructed of this frequently attested name in Syriac literature,¹⁰ which may have been part of the common concatenation of patriarchal names: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as occurs in an ostracon that was found in the altar-area of the church at Qasr bint al Qadi, at Ctesiphon.¹¹

1.2 ܘܬܘܡܐܐ “and Thomas”. The conjunction Waw mitigates against the epithet, ܘܫ being used, making it unlikely that the renowned name refers in this context to the apostle Thomas.¹²

1.3. ܒܫܝܐ “...[stopped]”. Whilst the elongated stroke confirms the Ayin as a final letter, at first it seemed as though the second word might be read as ܒܫܝܐ “name”. However, there are no traces of the stroke which would form the head of the Mim, even though the fragment has a fissure at this point. ܒܫܝܐ may be conjugated from √ ܒܫܝܐ “daub, stop up”, metaphorically “stop”.

The location of *Inscription I* near the second opening in the north pier-wall of the church is directly opposite where one might expect to find the ‘bema’ or dais from which the clergy delivered the offices and commenced the mass.¹³ Moreover, the inscribed fragments were discovered near two chests, one within the other, which were built into the north pier wall.¹⁴ The excavators offer no explanation about their function although, as the *Kitab al Mijdal* relates, ecclesiastical

10 See entry in R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, 2 vols., (Oxford: 1886-1901), vol. I, col. 1614.

11 Refer J. Kröger, “Sasanidischer Stuckdekor”, *Baghdader Forschungen*, 5 (1982), p. 48 for a translation of the inscription, with a photograph on Plate 12.3.

12 See entry in Payne Smith, *op. cit.*, vol. II, col. 4372.

13 The building at *Site F* follows the same plan as the church of Mound XI at Hira, where Talbot-Rice found the traces of a ‘bema’, and further investigation of the central aisle, which has not been excavated, should reveal this feature. See Talbot Rice, *op. cit.*, (1932), p. 280. J. M. Fiey, *Mos-soul chrétienne*, (Beirut: 1959), p. 83 also considers this feature to be present in the church which was excavated at Mound V and on pp. 76-78 discusses the ‘bema’ in eastern church architecture.

14 Fujii, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-39 and Fig. 7.

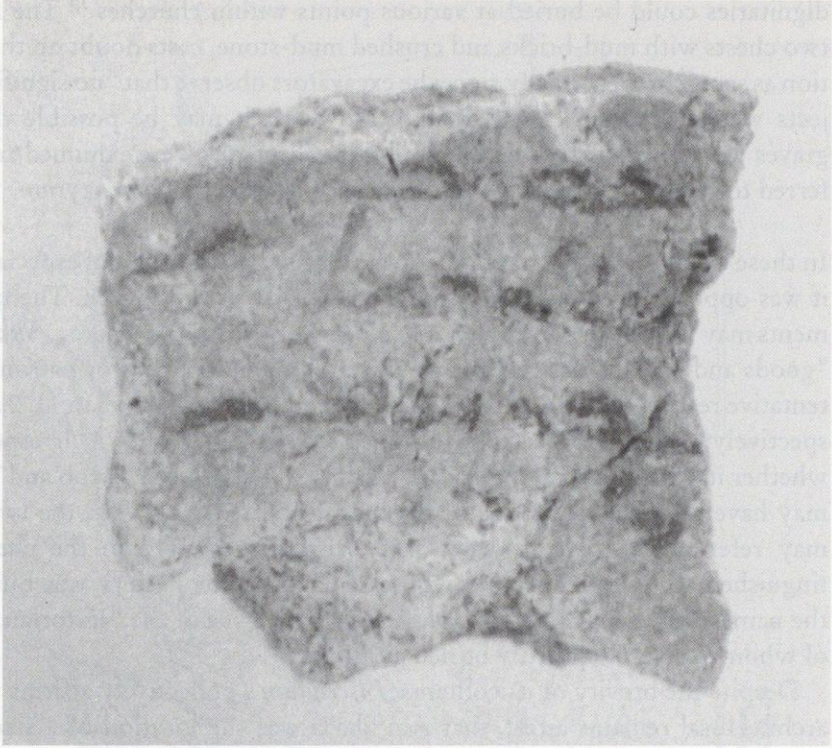
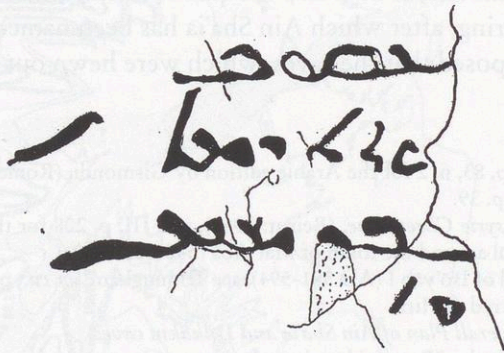


Plate II: Inscription from Church (site F) Ain Sha'ia [Fragment 2]



Inscription from Church (site F) Ain Sha'ia [Fragment 2] Line Drawing

Excavations at Ain Sha'ia in 1983 and 1984, *Al-Rafiqat* X (1983)

dignitaries could be buried at various points within churches.¹⁵ The filling of two chests with mud-bricks and crushed mud-stone, casts doubt on their function as sepulchres especially since the excavators observe that “no significant objects were unearthed” from them.¹⁶ However, it may be possible that such graves were filled in after the bones of their occupants were exhumed and transferred to reliquaries which would have been housed in the *martyrion*.

In these events, a plaque might mark the original place of burial especially since it was opposite the focal point in the main body of the church. The two fragments may have been part of a commemorative inscription, where **ܒܚܝܒܐ ܕܗܝܪܐ** “goods and enclosures” referred to an action of endowment or patronage. The tentative readings **ܕܘܚܘܪܐ** “declaration” and **ܘܠܘܐ** “peace” in 11. 2 and 3 respectively might also be compatible, as would **ܘܠܘܐ** in 1. 4, irrespective of whether it is read as a Pael or Aphel. The two cited persons, Jacob and Thomas, may have been the dedicands of the inscription. Alternatively, the two names may refer to the persons who were originally interred in the chests, distinguished ecclesiastics around whose remains the monastery was built.¹⁷ Or, the names may refer to bishops of Hira or patriarchs of the Nestorian Church, of whom six were reputedly buried at Hira.¹⁸

Despite the brevity of its contents, *Inscription I* collectively affirms what the architectural remains attest, that Ain Sha’ia was the location of a sizeable religious community in which the church, enclosed within the ramparts of *Site F*, formed the focus.¹⁹ Plaster ‘icons’²⁰ which were found at the buildings of *Site B*, 200-400 metres northwest of *Site F*, suggest that these were cells occupied either by pilgrims or by monks who were attached to the monastery.²¹ An adjacent pool built for water storage indicates the technological sophistication and organisation of the site, as does also the qanat system, which conducted water from the nearby spring, after which Ain Sha’ia has been named.²² In this connection, it may be supposed that the caves, which were hewn out of the marlstone at the

15 Fiey, *op. cit.*, p. 83, n. 2 for the Arabic edition by Gismondi, (Rome: 1896).

16 Fujii, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

17 J.M. Fiey, *Assyrie Chrétienne*, (Beirut: 1968), vol. III, p. 208 for the growth of the monastery Dayr al-Askūl around the tomb of Mar Abā (540-552 AD).

18 For the burial of Išō’yāb I (AD 581-594), see Trimmingham, *op. cit.*, p. 199. Dādīšō’ (AD 420-455) was also interred at Hira.

19 See Fig. 2: *Overall Plan of Ain Sha’ia and Dukakin caves*.

20 Yasuyoshi Okada, “Reconsideration of plaque-type crosses from Ain Sha’ia near Najaf”, *Al Rafidan XI* (1990), pp. 103-112 for the most recent discussion, with particular emphasis on the iconography, of the plaster ‘icons’.

21 Fujii, *op. cit.*, p. 67 sqq. for the excavation report of *Site B*.

22 *Ibid*, pp. 70-72 for a report on the underground water storage facilities, whilst the qanat system is detailed on p. 62 sqq.

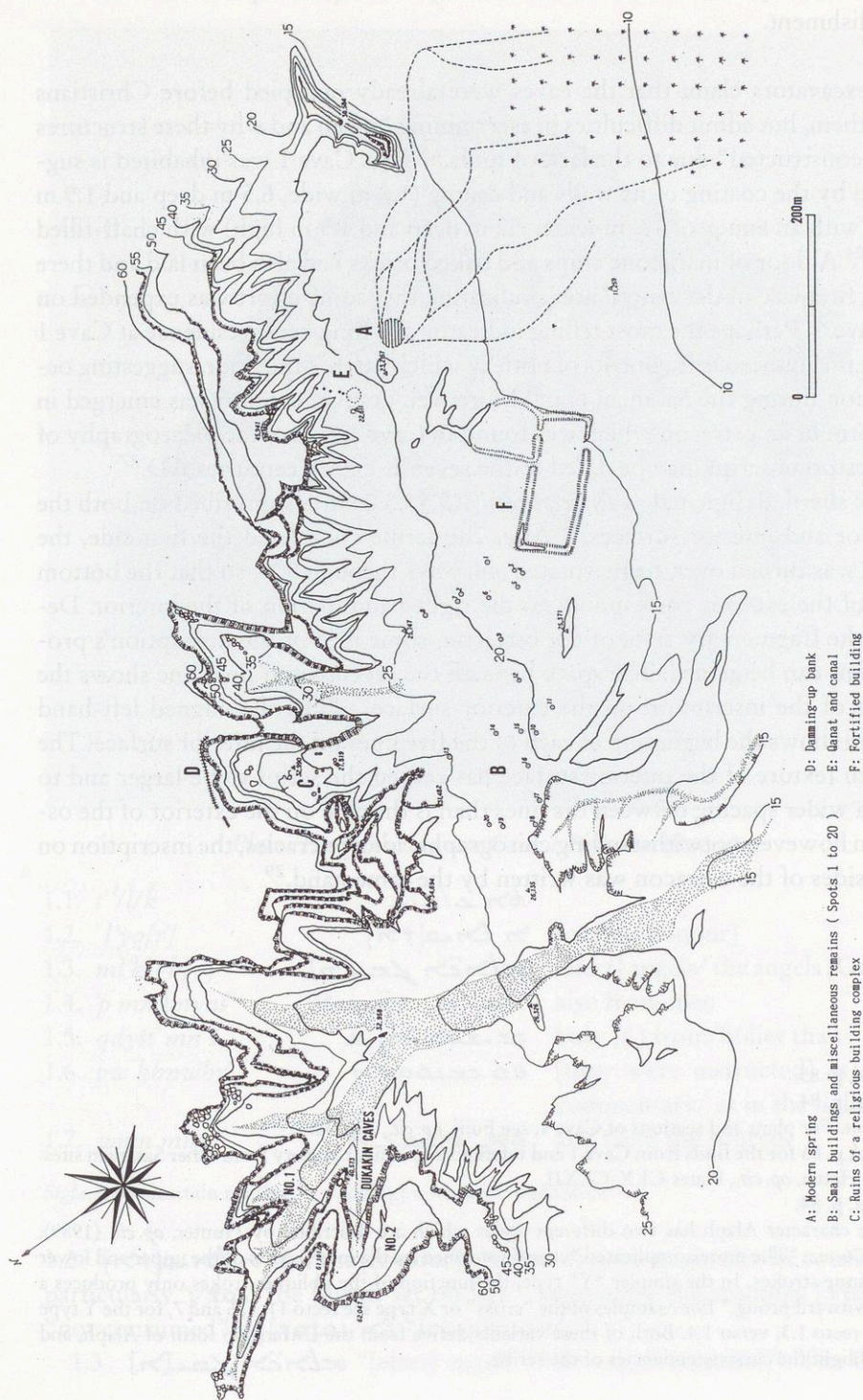


Fig. 2: Overall Plan of Ain Sha'ia and Dukakin caves.

[Reproduced with kind permission, H. Fujii *et. al.*, "Excavations at Ain Sha'ia ruins and Dukakin caves", *Al Rafidan X* (1989).]

Dukakin complex, located 500 metres north of *Site B*, were part of the monastic establishment.

The excavators claim that the caves were already occupied before Christians used them, but admit difficulties in ascertaining “when and why these structures were constructed” due to the lack of finds.²³ That Cave 1 was inhabited is suggested by the coating of its walls and ceiling (1.8 m wide, 6.5 m deep and 1.9 m high, with an annex of 1.0 m wide, 2.2 m deep and 1.9 m high) with chaff-filled mud.²⁴ A floor of marlstone chips and baked bricks had also been laid and there was a fireplace in the central area, indicating that some effort was expended on the cave.²⁵ Perhaps the most telling indicator of a long-term residence at Cave 1 lies in the numerous fragments of pottery which littered the floor, suggesting occupation during the Sasanian era.²⁶ Moreover, graphic support has emerged in the form of an ostrakon which was found in Cave 1, where the palaeography of its Nestorian script may be dated to the seventh-eighth centuries AD.²⁷

The sherd, designated as *Inscription II* (5.5×5.0 cm), is inscribed on both the exterior and interior surfaces.²⁸ After the scribe completed the first side, the sherd was turned over, being rotated sideways through 90°, so that the bottom edge of the exterior corresponds to the right-hand margin of the interior. Despite the fragmentary state of the ostrakon, some idea of the inscription’s proportions can be gained. The space beneath the seventh and final line shows the extent of the inscription on the exterior surface, whilst the aligned left-hand margin shows the beginning of each of the five lines on the interior surface. The uneven texture of the interior surface has caused the script to be larger and to have a wider spacing between the lines than is the case on the exterior of the ostrakon however, notwithstanding chirographic idiosyncracies, the inscription on both sides of the ostrakon was written by the same hand.²⁹

23 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

25 *Idem.* For plans and sections of Cave 1, see Fujii, *op. cit.*, Fig. 38.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 85 for the finds from Cave 1 and references to similar pottery from other Sasanian sites.

27 Cf. Hatch, *op. cit.*, Plates CLX-CLXII.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

29 The character Alaph has two different styles which are described by Hunter, *op. cit.* (1989), p. 106 *viz.*: “The more complicated “cross” is formed by the intersection of the upper and lower oblique strokes. In the simpler “Y” type, the junction of the oblique strokes only produces a downward prong.” For examples of the “cross” or X type see recto 11. 1, 6 and 7, for the Y type see recto 1.3, verso 1.4. Both of these variants derive from the Estrangelo form of Alaph, and highlight the cursive tendencies of the scribe.

Inscription II (exterior surface) reads:

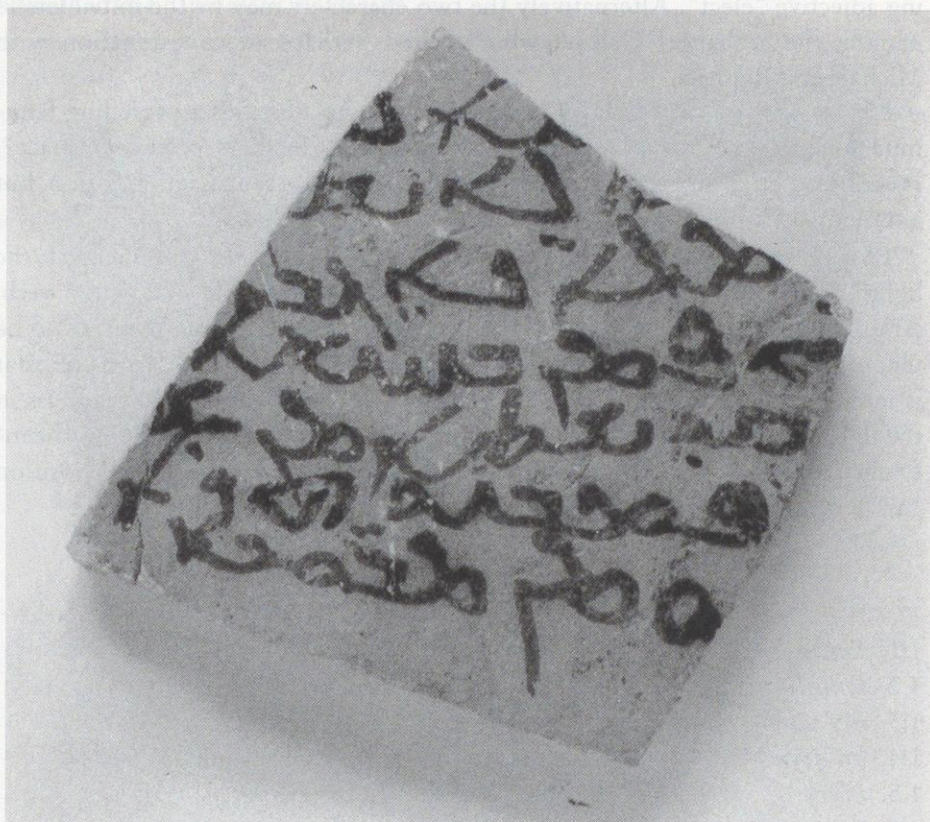


Plate III: Ostracon from Cave 1 Dukakin [Recto].

1.1. $t^{\circ}/l/k$	ܐܠܐ ܕܐܠܐ	
1.2. $l'yq[r]$	[ܐܠܐ] ܐܠܐ ܐܠܐ	for the [honour]
1.3. $ml'k' gb[y]$	[ܐܠܐ] ܐܠܐ ܐܠܐ	[elect] angels/ the angels [Gabriel]
1.4. $p mn bnynt'$	ܐܠܐ ܐܠܐ ܐܠܐ	also from men
1.5. $qdyšt' mn š$	ܐܠܐ ܐܠܐ ܐܠܐ	holy (f.) from/holier than
1.6. $pw kbntwbr'$	ܐܠܐ ܐܠܐ ܐܠܐ	[they were instructed] as in the commentary/ as in the light
1.7. $wmn mbw'$	ܐܠܐ ܐܠܐ ܐܠܐ	and from the sources

Sigla: ḥ = uncertain reading, [doing] = tentative translation

1.2 [ܐܠܐ] ܐܠܐ ܐܠܐ “for the [honour]”. Other options might also be considered, particularly $\sqrt{\text{ܐܠܐ}}$ “be burnt, set on fire”, suggesting the readings [ܐܠܐ] ܐܠܐ “not consumed” or [ܐܠܐ] ܐܠܐ “incombustible”.

1.3 [ܐܠܐ] ܐܠܐ ܐܠܐ “[elect] angels”/“the angels [Gabriel]”. The Gimel-

Beth combination presents various possible combinations including the qualifying adjective “elect”. Alternatively the two characters may be the initial letters naming the archangel Gabriel who is cited perhaps in concatenation with Michael and Raphael.

1.5 ז ה קדש “holy from”. If קדש qualifies a preceding feminine singular noun, considered readings could include קדשה “place”, קדשה “city” and קדשה “faith”. Here ה is read as a preposition, but alternatively it might signify the comparative, “holier than...”.

1.6 פ בבבבבבבב “[they were instructed] as in the commentary/the light”. The initial letter of the line may be the third radical of a plural verb. Amongst the various options that might be proposed, Ethpeal $\sqrt{\text{פ}}$ “to be taught, instructed” would be an appropriate accompaniment to בבבבבבבב , if it is interpreted as “as in the commentary”. Equally, the word might read, “as in the light”. The combination of the prefixes Kaph and Beth may point to the influence of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, rather than Syriac where the preposition “as” would normally be rendered by the separate preposition כא .

Inscription II (interior surface) reads:

1.1. wmtb	הבבב	and...
1.2. l'mthb	בבבבבב	[uncorrupt]
1.3. my'whw	הבבב	water and
1.4. kd qryn	בבבבבב	whilst proclaiming
1.5. mkry	בבבב	[recognising]

Sigla: h = uncertain reading, [doing] = tentative translation

1.1 הבבב “and...”. The Mim-Tau combination suggests an Ethpeal/Ethpaal participle of a verb whose first radical is Beth.

1.2 בבבבבב “[uncorrupt]”. Whilst the third radical is lost, the Heth-Beth combination may suggest Pael $\sqrt{\text{בב}}$ “corrupt”, producing the reconstructed reading בבבבבב .

1.3 הבבב “water and...” The word בבב can be clearly read, although the customary Seyyame is absent. The Heth-Waw combination which follows allows a wide range possibilities to be considered, including בבב “love” and בבב “atonement/pardon”.

1.4 בבבבבב “whilst proclaiming”. The reading from $\sqrt{\text{בב}}$ “proclaim, summon, read”, is contextually compatible, although the Resh is noteworthy for two reasons. Firstly, the absence of the upper diacritical point and secondly the ligature to the following Yodh.

1.5 בבבב “[recognising]”. The second letter, which is read as a Kaph might be expected to be joined to the Resh. Various options can be considered, includ-

ing Pael/Aphel Passive participle of $\sqrt{\text{ܚܝܬ}}$ “shorten, sadden” or the Aphel participle of $\sqrt{\text{ܚܝܬ}}$ “polluted/detestable”.

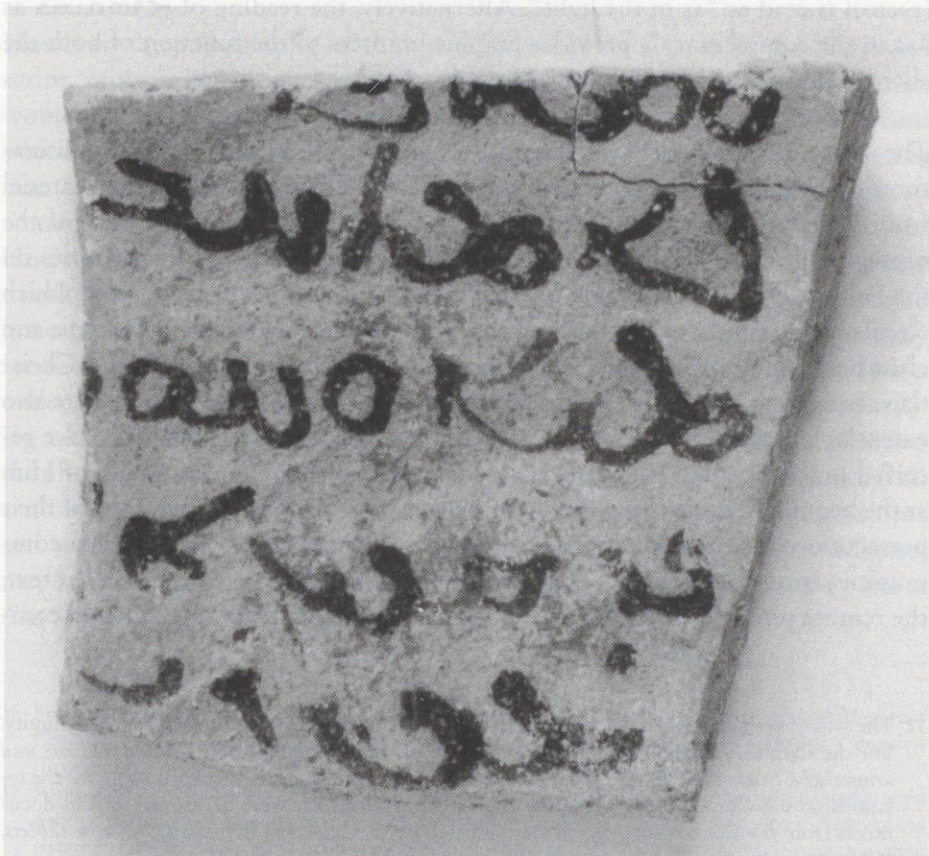





Plate IV: Ostrakon from Cave 1 Dukakin [Verso].


The size of the ostracon imposes constraints on its interpretation, but much of the phraseology is reminiscent of the Pauline Epistles. ܠܗܘܢ “for the [honour]” {1.1 (recto)} occurs in Romans 9:21, 1 Timothy 5:17 and 2 Timothy 2:20, 21.³⁰ ܥܠܦܘܠܝܢ “elect angels” {1.2 (recto)} are mentioned by 1 Timothy 5:17 (ܥܠܦܘܠܝܢ , whilst 1 Corinthians 4:9 (ܥܠܦܘܠܝܢ ܠܥܠܦܘܠܝܢ also juxtaposes men and angels. Similarly, corruption is an oft-mentioned theme in the Pauline Epistles and the phrase ܠܗܘܢ “uncorrupt” {1.2 (verso)} is found in Romans 1:23, 1 Corinthians 9:25 and Timothy 1:17, 6:16.³¹ The participle ܚܝܬܘܢ “whilst proclaiming” {1.5 (verso)} appears in

30 G. A. Kiraz, *A Computer-generated Concordance to the New Testament*, 6 vols., (Leiden: 1993), vol. II, p. 1367.

31 *Ibid*, vol. II, p. 906.



Ephesians 3:4. Moreover,  “water” {1.3 (verso)} is a common motif in both the New Testament and wider gnostic literature, as is light; if  {1.6 (recto)} is read as “as in the light”. Alternatively, the reading of  as “as in the commentary”, provides graphic pointers to the function of both the sherd and the cave in which it was found.

The ostracon appears to have accompanied another, now perished piece of literature,³² possibly a commentary on the Pauline Epistles. The extracted material from Ephrām and other fathers, which is incorporated into the works of the ninth century exegete, *Išoʿdad* of Merv, highlights a series of commentaries on the Pauline Epistles, extending back to the third century AD and earlier, which circulated amongst Syriac-speaking communities throughout Mesopotamia and elsewhere.³³ The ostracon appears to be part of this tradition, although a Christian association cannot be automatically assumed, since Paul’s writings were also extensively used by the Manichæans.³⁴ Moreover, the sect appears to have received protection and gained a foothold in the poly-religious kingdom of Hira at the beginning of the fourth century, following a temporary abeyance of their persecution due to negotiations with the Sasanid monarch.³⁵ Manichæan communities were still present in Mesopotamia in Islamic times and in this context, the remote physical location of the Ain Shaʿia settlement and the Dukakin com-

32 The widespread custom of complementary hard and soft records was widespread in antiquity. For the sixth century B.C. Lachish letters, see H. Donner and W. Rölling, *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften*, Band 2 (Wiesbaden: 1966), p. 194 specifically the word  for the relationship between ostraca and papyri. Cuneiform tablets that were tied to parchment documents from the Achaemenid period are discussed by G. Cameron, *Persepolis Treasury Tablets*, (Chicago: 1948), pp. 27–28.

33 M. Dunlop Gibson, *The Commentaries of Išoʿdad of Merv*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: 1911), vol. 1, p. xv, also recording that a copy of his commentary on the Acts and the Pauline Epistles, written in 1893, was deposited in Library of the Semitic Museum at Harvard University. See M. Goshen-Gottstein, *Syriac Manuscripts in the Harvard College Library. A Catalogue*, (Missoula: 1979), p. 64 (Syr 70).

34 For the rôle of Paul in Manichæism see, J. Ries, “Saint Paul dans la formation de Mani” in J. Ries, *Le Epistole Paoline Nei Manichei I Donatisti E Il Primo Agostino* (Rome: 1989), pp. 7–26. Also C. Bammel, “Pauline Exegesis, Manichæism and Philosophy in the Early Augustine” in L. R. Wickham *et al.* (ed.), *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Leiden: 1993), pp. 2–8. D. Montserrat in S. N. C. Lieu, *Manichæism in Mesopotamia and the Roman East* (Leiden: 1994), p. 88, notes amongst the recent discoveries at the oasis of el-Dakhleh (Kellis) in Egypt a text of Romans 2: 6–29 that is possibly a lectionary.

35 C. Schmidt and H. J. Polotsky, “Ein Mani-Fund in Ägypten. Originalschriften des Mani und seiner Schüler”, *Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* [philos.-hist. Klasse] 1933, pp. 28–29. H. H. Schaeder, Review of C. Schmidt and H. J. Polotsky, “Ein Mani-Fund in Ägypten”, *Gnomon* IX (July 1933), p. 345, identifies the Sasanid monarch as Narsai (293–302 AD), although Lieu, *op. cit.*, p. 76 cautiously cites the king as *Vābram* II (276–293 AD) in his note of this event which was recorded by the Coptic *Acts Codex* (P15997) from Medinet Madi citing king  or ‘Amr () of Hira (272–300 AD) as the intermediary.

plex, bordering on the desert stretching to Arabia, would have been the ideal place for a cell.³⁶

However, the paleography of the ostrakon, which is written in the Nestorian script, mitigates against such an association. Presumably a Manichæan scribe would have preferred instead to use the distinct 'Proto-Manichaean' Syriac font which became the hallmark of the sect, especially if it was developed by Mani as many scholars have suggested.³⁷ On the other hand, the association of script and community may not have been fixed or intractable in the pluralist society of Hira during the Late Sasanid period and Manichæans may have made recourse to other scripts as a camouflage in difficult times. Since to date, no Manichæan material written in Estrangelo Syriac has come to hand, the ostrakon probably formed the notes of a pilgrim or a monk who repaired for study and instruction under a *malpānā*, an esteemed teacher at the Dukakin complex, the caves providing a kind of retreat that was affiliated with the monastery.³⁸ Indeed, following the phenomenon which arose in the Byzantine realms during the fourth and fifth centuries AD, where acolytes visited holy men and women who lived in remote and wild locations, the Dukakin complex, centring around a renowned figure, may have been the impetus for the development of the nearby monastery site at Ain Sha'ia.

36 For further details see S. N. C. Lieu, *Manichæism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: 1992), pp. 112-113. Also M. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton: 1984), pp. 407-408.

37 See Joseph Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet* (Leiden: 1982), p. 151. Mani undoubtedly used a script that already was in circulation in Mesopotamia, having reached there from Palmyra via commercial enterprise, as is proposed by Mark Lidzbarski, "Die Herkunft der manichäischen Schrift", *Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* [philos.-hist. Klasse] 1916, pp. 1213-22. It was through Mani's missionary efforts that the script subsequently became associated with the Manichæan religion, in the same way that Arabic became the vehicle for Islam. The discovery of incantation bowls, which can be dated between the fifth and eighth centuries AD written in this Syriac font lends further support for Mani's adoption of a local script. Given their persecution, it would be unlikely that, had this script been solely a Manichaean manifestation, it would have still continued to be used at Nippur or other sites in Mesopotamia several centuries later. See J. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* (Philadelphia: 1913), p. 32, referring to texts 31-37 and J. Teixidor, "The Syriac incantation bowls in the Iraq Museum", *Sumer* XVIII (1962) p. 62 who designate this script as the "Palmyrene-Syriac" type.

38 Abd Aziz Hamid, آثار مدينة الحجر العربية [“Archaeological Remains of the Arabic Hira City”], *Bayn al Nahrayn* 17, No. 57-68, (1988), p. 9, viz: “regarding the *Dakākīn* Caves, it is possible that they were some sort of the *Qalāyāt* of monks, i.e. the secluded chapels which the noble monks took as residences for themselves.” (أما كهوف الدكاكين فربما كانت بعض القلايات الخاصة بالرهبان أي الصوامع المتعزلة التي كان يتخذها بعض الرهبان المتبتلين ما والههم).

The author extends her thanks to Prof. Farouk N. H. Al-Rawi for translating this quotation and that referred to by n. 43.

The inscriptions from Ain Sha'ia and Dukakin Cave 1 reflect the intense Christian activity in Hira during the sixth and seventh centuries AD which culminated in the conversion of king *Nu'mān* IV (583-602 AD).³⁹ Many female members of the ruling family were Christian and the royal patronage which was extended to the emergent Church of the East resulted in the foundation of many monasteries.⁴⁰ Long after their decline, the fame of institutions like Dair Hind al-Aqdam, named after the Christian wife of Mundhir III (506-554 AD) and Dair Al-Lajja, named after the daughter of the Sasanid monarch Nu'man, still lingered.⁴¹ Medieval Arabic literature, particularly the *Mu'jam al-Buldān* of *Yaqūt al-Ḥamawī*, upheld the memory of this tradition by quoting excerpts from a wide variety of sources, including the now lost treatise, *Churches and Monasteries of al Hira and the genealogies of the Ibadites* by *Hišām b. Muḥammad b. al-Sā'ib al-Kalbī* (obiit AD 821).⁴²

The *Mu'jam al-Buldān* includes an extract, attributed to the eighth century AD poet *Ismā'īl ibn 'Ammār al-Asadī*, which cites one of Hira's most famous monasteries, that of Allaj:⁴³

ما انسى سعدى والزرقاء لو مهما بالبح شرقية من فوق الدكاكين

The second half of the couplet which translates, "I will not forget *Su'dā* and *Zarqā*, their criticisms ... in the *Al-Lağğ*, to its east from above the *Dakākīni*", has led Abd Aziz Hamid to suggest Ain Sha'ia as the specific site of Dair Allaj.⁴⁴ Although its reputed founder, Bar Sahlé, is said to have lived in the early sixth century AD,⁴⁵ a date which is compatible with the chronology of Ain Sha'ia, there are differences of opinion surrounding its location.⁴⁶ J.-M. Fiey, citing the *Liber Castitatis*, claims that the royal monastery was "[a] sud du désert de Ḥīra, près du village de *Bārōqa* ... où passa R. *Ḥūdāhwi* en venant du sud."⁴⁷ The juxtaposition of terms in the *Mu'jam al-Buldān* is tantalising, but any positive

39 Trimingham, *op. cit.*, pp. 188-202 for the relations of the Lakhmid dynasty with Christianity, pp. 198-199 discussing *Nu'mān* IV.

40 Fiey, *op. cit.*, pp. 211-21 for an encyclopaedic listing of the monasteries at Hira and its surrounds, which has been largely compiled from Arabic primary sources.

41 Note the discrepancy between Fiey, *op. cit.*, p. 115 who quotes *Nu'mān* II, while Trimingham, *op. cit.*, pp. 191-192 claims that the monarch was *Nu'mān* III.

42 Fiey, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

43 F. Wüstenfeld, *Jacut's Geographisches Wörterbuch*, 6 vols., (Leipzig: 1867), vol. 2, p. 691, line 16 *sqq.* The author wishes to thank Mrs. Jill Butterworth (The University Library, Cambridge) for locating this reference to the quotation.

44 Hamid, *loc. cit.*

45 Fiey, *op. cit.*, p. 215, Trimingham, *op. cit.*, p. 192 quoting the "Chronicle of Seert" in *Patrologia Orientalis* VII (1911), p. 155.

46 Fujii, *op. cit.*, p. 61 for discussion of the church's chronology.

47 Fiey, *loc. cit.* and n. 1.

identification of Ain Sha'ia with Dair Allaj remains conjectural until more conclusive inscriptional evidence comes to hand.

The excavations at Ain Sha'ia and the Dukakin caves has brought to light one of the many monastic institutions which dotted the region of Hira in the fifth-eighth centuries AD. The church can be accommodated within the tradition of ecclesiastical architecture in south-west Iraq that was first identified by Talbot-Rice and Reuther at Hira and Ctesiphon respectively. Moreover, the overall findings of the Japanese Archaeological Expedition to Iraq have augmented and embellished this situation by presenting, for the first time, a composite picture of the physical complexity and organisation of a Christian site in southern Mesopotamia.

The two inscriptions which were discovered during the course of excavations supplement a small corpus of epigraphic materials which hail from various sites in south-west Iraq.⁴⁸ The contents of Inscription I, possibly a commemorative plaque, indicate the presence of an established community at Ain Sha'ia. The ostracon points to pedagogical activities and is particularly important in highlighting the uses of Cave 1, but also recalls the exegetical traditions of the Church of the East. Although their contents are divergent, both inscriptions are graphic testimony of the vigour of Christianity at Hira during the Late Sasanian-Early Islamic eras.

48 For bibliographic references to the ostracon found at Qasr bint al Qadi, Ctesiphon see n. 13. This ostracon is being re-published by, Erica C.D. Hunter, "A Syriac ostracon from Ctesiphon", *Al-Rafidan* (1997). Another sherd, written in an Estrangelo script was found at *Tulūl al-Uḥaidir*, near Hira. See Barbara Finster and Jürgen Schmidt, "Sasanidische und frühislamische Ruinen im Iraq", *Baghdader Mitteilungen* VIII (1976), p. 140 and Plate 65.