MONASTERIES AND CHURCHES OF THE QALAMUN (SYRIA): ART AND PILGRIMAGE IN THE MIDDLE AGES[1]

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The mountainous area to the north of Damascus, known as the Qalamun (Djebel Qalamūn), has long been a Christian stronghold in the predominantly Muslim Middle East (fig. 1; all figures are by the author, unless mentioned otherwise).[2] Traditionally, the majority of the Qalamun's Christians were adherents to the Byzantine Orthodox (Melkite) Church, living in places such as Saydnaya, Maᶜarat Saydnaya, Maᶜalula, Yabrud, Qara and Deir Attiya. The Syrian Orthodox Church was well established in Nebk, Qaryatain and Sadad in the eastern part of the Qalamun, owned two monasteries here (Deir Mar Musa and Deir Mar Elian), and had bishoprics in Damascus[3] and Sadad.[4] With the increasing importance of the Greek Catholic Church in Damascus and its surroundings in the eighteenth century, the denomination of several Melkite monasteries and churches changed from Greek Orthodox to Greek Catholic.[5] In the next century the two West Syrian monasteries were transferred to the Syrian Catholic Church.

This study aims at giving the initial impetus to reconstructing the Christian landscape of the Qalamun through the ages. We do, however, have to realise that this intention is ambitious, as it requires a systematic survey of the area and a detailed analysis of the ancient buildings combined with a study of relevant literary sources. With this limitation in mind, our point of departure will be the situation in the decades before and during the Crusader era (1099-1291), focussing in particular on two interrelated subjects that in recent years have raised scholarly interest: the flourishing of church art in the Qalamun, and the impact of pilgrimage, in particular to the Monastery of Our Lady in Saydnaya.

1. HISTORY

The Christians of the Qalamun lived in the shadow of the events that rocked the Levant from time to time, yet they lived close enough to Damascus and the Crusader states to experience the consequences of political and socio-economic changes, with their advantages or disadvantages. From 970 onwards, Damascus fell under the authority of the Fatamids in Cairo. The foundation of the Latin states around 1100 did not really pose

a threat to the Emirate of Damascus. Nur ad-Din succeeded where the Crusaders had failed; he took Damascus in 1158. Saladin's capture of Jerusalem and the rural areas of the Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1187 resulted in a certain détente between the contesting parties. Under the Ayyubids (1174-1249) commerce and cultural life flourished. Damascus was a junction on the trade routes connecting all quarters of the Islamic world and the Crusader states and apparently the indigenous Christians benefited from these favourable conditions as well.

In Damascus too, the Melkites formed the predominant Christian minority. By contrast, for the Syrian Orthodox this city was of minor importance. The Muslim authorities had imposed restrictions on the number of churches within the city walls, reducing it to a maximum of fifteen. This amount the Christians had to share with the Jews, who had one synagogue. According to Ibn ᶜAsakir (shortly before 1169), most of the Damascene churches were either ruined or turned into mosques.[6] Two buildings were still in use: the Melkite Cathedral of al-Mariamiya (St Mary's), which the Spanish Muslim Ibn Jubayr found decorated with 'remarkable pictures that amaze the mind and dazzle the gaze' in 1184,[7] and a Syrian Orthodox church near Bab Tuma. The restrictions did not apply to churches outside the city walls, like those of St Paul and St George. The latter was mentioned as a property of the Monastery of St Catherine on Mount Sinai in a letter of Pope Honorius III to Abbot Simeon of this convent from 1217.[8]

In the mid-thirteenth century, the political and military balance in Syria changed dramatically due to the Mongol invasions. On 17 February 1260, the Mongol army headed by General Kitbuqa entered Damascus in the presence of its allies, the Armenian king and the Latin Prince of Antioch.[9] Many Mongols were adherents of the East Syrian Church, which helps to explain why the Christians of the cities that they conquered were occasionally spared. Feeling strengthened by this changed state of affairs, Damascene Christians went in public procession through the streets on 31 August. Their joy was premature: three days later the Mamluks defeated the Mongol contingent at Ain Jalud. The Muslims retaliated upon the Christians by demolishing the cathedral and the Syrian Orthodox church.[10] Soon after, the cathedral was rebuilt, but it was destroyed again in 1400. Not a single post-medieval source alludes to adorned churches inside Damascus. If there were any murals left, they must have disappeared during the anti-Christian clashes in the summer of 1860. Many Christians perished when their quarter in between Bab Tuma and Bab Sharqi was sacked and burned down.[11] The houses and churches were reconstructed or replaced in the next years, and this was done so thoroughly that next to nothing of the old architecture survived.

Turning back to the Middle Ages, soon after the defeat of the Mongols, the Mamluks started a series of campaigns against the Crusaders, ending with the fall of Tripoli in 1289 and Acre in 1291. With the favourable attitude of the Damascene Christian population towards the Mongols in mind, the new rulers had good reasons to suspect the indigenous Christians of being the natural allies of their fellow believers from the West and East. The assault of Qara in 1266 illustrates the perceptibly deteriorating situation (see below), and symbolises the end of the flourishing Christian renaissance in West Syria.

2. THE MONASTERY OF SAYDNAYA

The most famous Christian monument of the Qalamun is the Greek Orthodox Monastery of Our Lady in Saydnaya, situated about 30 km to the north of Damascus (figs 1, 2). The main reason for its celebrity was a miraculous icon known as the *Chaghoura*, Syriac for 'The Illustrious', 'Celebrated', or 'Renowned'. The earliest sources on the convent and the cult of the *Chaghoura* are from the final quarter of the twelfth century. From this moment on the information is abundant, since visitors have left us their memories in travel reports, which today are essential for research on the history of the site and the tradition of the icon and its cult.[12] Allegedly, the convent was founded by the Emperor Justinian in A.D. 547. The icon is also said to date from this period, but so far few efforts have been undertaken to substantiate these apocryphal allegations on the basis of literary traditions and the surviving remains of ancient buildings.

2.1. THE CULT OF THE *CHAGHOURA*

The absence of historical sources on the monastery and the icon from before the later twelfth century is all the more remarkable because the earliest writings reveal astonishing details of what appears to be a centuries-old and vibrant tradition of pilgrimage to Saydnaya's convent. The first reference occurs in the account of Burchard of Strassbourg, Emperor Frederick Barbarossa's ambassador at the court of Saladin, who visited Saydnaya around 1175: 'In this church twelve virgin nuns and eight monks devoutly serve God and the Blessed Virgin. In this church I saw a wooden panel measuring one el long and half an el wide, placed behind the altar in an embrasure in the wall of the sanctuary guarded by an iron grille. On this panel a likeness of the Blessed Virgin had once been painted, but now, wondrous to relate, the picture on wood has become incarnate and oil, smelling sweeter than balsam, unceasingly flows from it. By which oil many Christians, Saracens and Jews are often cured of ailments.... To this place on the feast of the Assumption of the glorious Virgin and on that of her Nativity all the Saracens of that province flock to pray together with the Christians, and the Saracens perform their devotions there with great reverence'.[13]

Burchard's account of the inter-religious veneration of the Virgin of Saydnaya during the feasts of the Assumption (15 August) and Nativity (8 September) astonishes, but finds support in 'History of Churches and Monasteries', a fourteenth-century compilation of Arabic texts attributed to the Coptic priest, Abū al-Makārim, and composed of material collected between 1171 and about 1210. The author discusses in detail the icon and its miraculous oil production, and quotes a priest from the monastery: 'On this day gather to this place Christians, Muslims, Nestorians, Melkites, Syrians, and others, approximately four or five thousand people'.[14] Obviously, the incarnation of the icon fascinated believers irrespective of their religion. The persisting attraction that Saydnaya has held for Christians and Muslims until our own times strengthens the credibility of these accounts.

Evidently, these sources bear witness to a tradition of uncertain age, which may at first have been local, but which seems to have expanded to an international level from

the late twelfth century onwards. In 1186, holy oil from Saydnaya was brought to Europe for the first time. In the previous year, an exchange of prisoners of war took place. Among the western prisoners released was the Templar Walter of Marengiers, who, on his way to Jerusalem, had obtained a bottle of oil when passing through Saydnaya. Shortly thereafter, Guido Chat brought a portion of this oil to the Abbey of Altavaux (Haute-Vienne, France), and also revealed all details of the *Chaghoura* and its miraculous workings to the French monks.[15] This was the beginning of the western interest in Saydnaya and the involvement of the Knights Templar in promoting the cult of the *Chaghoura.*[16] By the fourteenth century, the cult was so popular in the West that European travellers continued visiting the place despite the loss of the Crusader states, a tradition that would continue for centuries.

The *Chaghoura* was either held to have been painted by St Luke, or brought by a monk from Jerusalem or Constantinople in the sixth century. In spite of the anecdotal nature of these stories and the obscure history of the cult, the icon itself had already reached a venerable age by the late twelfth century. The arguments for this are testimonies about the eroded appearance of the image reported by Abū al-Makārim and several fourteenth-century westerners. Abū al-Makārim alleges that just a few spots of reddish paint had survived.[17] His words are echoed by Wilhelm von Boldensele, who was in the monastery in 1333: 'Behind the high altar of the church there is on view [set in] the wall a certain panel which is completely black and damp. It is said that the likeness of the glorious Virgin was formerly depicted on it, but on account of its age no trace of a design is visible, except that it seemed to me that in one part of it some vestige of red colouring might be discerned.'[18] Ludolph von Suchem (approx. 1350) also saw the red traces, and left us more details on what had originally been represented: '(…) behind the altar, in a semicircular arch in the wall, there is a figure of the blessed Mary suckling her child, painted from the waist upwards upon a wooden tablet, and fenced with iron bars; but the painting is so black with age and kisses that one can scarce make out that it was a figure, beyond that a little red colour can still be seen in the clothing'.[19]

The suggested depiction of the suckling Virgin should be seen in light of the claim that the healing oil which had made the *Chaghoura* so famous had flowed from her incarnated breasts. This detail was mentioned already in Guy Chat's account and in the inventory of the Abbey of Altavaux, to which he donated a phial of oil.[20] In this matter, Ludolph must have relied on an existing tradition rather than his own observations, since by his own account he did not see more than the same red traces remarked by his predecessors.

The motif of the Virgin suckling the Child is known as Maria *Lactans* or Virgin *Galaktotrophousa*. Westerners such as Ludolph may have been familiar with this variant, since it had become popular in European art from the second half of the thirteenth century onwards.[21] However, the tradition of the suckling Virgin is rooted in the Middle East. A grotto near the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem was believed to be the place where the Virgin fed the Child, and was known as early as the late seventh century.[22] Powdered limestone from this site was said to be dried milk, and found its way to the West in the luggage of returning pil-

grims. The iconography of the suckling Virgin can also be traced back to pre-Islamic times, when it was depicted in Egypt and Palestine.[23] Thirteenth-century representations embellish the Church of Sts Sergius and Bacchus in Qara to the northeast of Saydnaya (fig. 8), and the Cave Chapel of Sayyidat Naya at Kfar Schleiman in Lebanon.[24] Thus on further consideration the interpretation of the *Chaghoura* as a depiction of the Virgin *Galaktotrophousa* may well be less far-fetched than it might appear. Anecdotal stories about the nature of the image may have travelled to the West together with the phials filled with holy oil.

Though the *Chaghoura* is still purported to exist, this claim is nevertheless impossible to verify, since scholars have no access to the icon. It is said to be kept in a metal box inside the Chapel of al-ᶜAdra, an annex at the south side of the apse of the present church. Some believe that the *Chaghoura* was lost centuries ago, a suspicion nourished by the stipulation that only the bishop and the abbess of the monastery are allowed to see it.

2.2. THE CHURCH

None of the medieval sources reveals anything about the presence of wall paintings or other icons inside the church. Naturally, the pilgrims' eyes were mainly focused on the *Chaghoura*, which after all was the reason for their visit. One exception is Niccolò da Poggibonsi, who was on pilgrimage between 1345 and 1350. He furnishes surprisingly accurate details about the churches of the Holy Land and their decoration, and of the church of 'Sardinale' he states that it had three naves with twelve columns. The *Chaghoura* was placed in a window or niche with iron bars, about four feet above floor level, behind the large altar.[25] The same basilical design, with two rows of six columns, was described earlier by Jacopo da Verona (1335).[26]

Two later accounts, however, differ fundamentally from these fourteenth-century observations. The Ukrainian monk, Vasily Grigorovich Barsky, in Saydnaya in 1728, counted four rows of five columns supporting vaults in a church with five naves.[27] Thus the church must have been a basilical construction consisting of a nave with two aisles at each side. One might be inclined to believe that Barsky was referring to an entirely different building than Verona and Poggibonsi, but his words are confirmed by the British traveller, Dean Richard Pococke, who came to Saydnaya in 1737 and also describes the church as being 'ruined and repaired.'[28] Barsky also furnishes interesting details about the eastern part of the church. He noticed a stone altar below a canopy with four marble columns, some large candleholders containing candles, an iconostasis with a veil, and floor mosaics.[29] Since floor mosaics are characteristic of many early Byzantine churches in the Middle East, it may be suggested that the monastery was indeed the Justinian foundation claimed by tradition.

The church was damaged during an earthquake in 1759 and restored three years later. More radical changes occurred after the aforementioned riots against Christians in 1860, which left many churches in Lebanon and Syria ruined. It does not seem very likely, however, that the monastery suffered directly from this event. The Prussian consul, Johann Gottfried Wetzstein, summarizes the destructions that occurred in the Damascus area. Concerning Saydnaya he only re-

ports on the attacks on nearby Maᶜalula and Maᶜarat Saydnaya, forcing its populations to find shelter in the Monastery of Our Lady.[30] Because of its fortress-like construction, the convent appears to have been secure enough to be spared the worst. After the situation had calmed down, many damaged churches were restored or completely rebuilt. Apparently this campaign was considered a good juncture to renovate the monastery and replace the church with a new building. In 1883 Emmanuel-Guillaume Rey wrote that the chapel incorporated into the modern building was the only surviving part of the ancient church. Moreover, the mosaics that Barsky saw were still visible at that time.[31] Actually, the Chapel of al-ᶜAdra measures about 6 m wide and 5 m deep, is semicircular and covered over with a semi-dome, and therefore has all characteristics of the apse of a fairly large basilica. Being the most holy place of the site, it was kept in honour and renovated only superficially.

The chapel is not the only part of the church that was spared. Visitors enter the sanctuary through a small apsed room to its south. As with other sections of the outer wall, architectural elements belonging to earlier building phases are discernable from the outside (figs 2, 3). Renovation work in the room in 1999 revealed a Syriac inscription near the south entrance and a painting fragment on the west wall to its left. Unfortunately, with the incorrect association of Syriac with the Syrian Orthodox Church in mind, the convent's nuns had the inscription removed immediately after its discovery, but the painting remained visible until recently. It was possible to pick out details of an archangel (fig. 4).[32] These traces do not allow a reliable stylistic analysis, but a provisional dating to the late twelfth or thirteenth century is plausible. Modest though this surviving fragment is, its presence supports the hypothesis of an integral decoration programme in the first church similar to those in other monastic churches in the Qalamun (see below).

3. OTHER ADORNED MONUMENTS IN AND NEAR SAYDNAYA

It seems that the restrictions on the amount of churches allowed in Damascus did not apply to places outside Syria's capital. In 1697 Henry Maundrell counted no less than sixteen sanctuaries in Saydnaya, but these buildings were already in a bad state by then.[33] Post-medieval reports allude to paintings in the churches of St John, St Barbara, St Saba, the Prophet Elijah, St Babylas, St Nicholas, the Convent of St Thomas near Saydnaya, and in a ruined sanctuary near the road to Damascus.[34] Although these sanctuaries have been modernized, a survey may well be rewarding. Indeed, poorly preserved fragments can be seen in the Church of Saint John the Baptist and the Greek Catholic Church of St Sophia. In the first building two antique columns were embellished, perhaps in the twelfth or thirteenth century. One recognizes Christ holding an open book with a few Greek letters, and traces of the coat of mail of a standing warrior saint.[35] In the modern Church of St Sophia is a niche that is in fact a doorway to its adjoining medieval predecessor, which has fallen into disrepair and is hermetically sealed. The sidewalls of the doorway reveal fragments of a prophet (Elijah?) and Daniel, who is identified by the Greek inscription Δ[ΑΝΙ]ΗΛ (figs 5, 6). A detailed analysis is hampered because in modern times the decayed scenes have been repainted, but by

their style it can be estimated that they were made in the thirteenth century.

The best-preserved decoration is in the Cave Chapel of the Prophet Elijah (Mar Elias) in Maᶜarat Saydnaya, about 6 km to the southeast of the monastery. This cave was held to be the place where Elijah hid in the desert near Damascus from the troops of his persecutor, Queen Jezebel, and where he anointed Elisha (I Kings 19:15). Hoof prints sculpted in the rock recall Elijah's ascension into heaven on his chariot drawn by fiery horses. Here we find a representation of this biblical event, which has been dated to the eleventh century, and a series of paintings from the late twelfth century or first half of the thirteenth century, thus contemporary to the expansion of the cult of the *Chaghoura*.[36] The lower zone shows a procession of prelates with the Virgin and a deacon surrounding the altar, while the upper zone preserves parts of three anonymous saints and the Virgin of the Deisis. A large niche in the north wall is adorned with several saints, including Demetrius, George and Nicholas, and the Virgin Enthroned with the Child on her lap (fig. 7). The style of these paintings reveals the hand of a Cypriot artist, who apparently could work in the Qalamun without any problems, even though this part of Syria was firmly in Muslim hands.

Like the Monastery of Our Lady, the Chapel of Mar Elias is frequented by adherents of different Churches and Muslims, who come here to venerate the enigmatic wise man al-Khidr, identified with the Prophet Elijah.[37] The age of this interconfessional cult is uncertain. Alfred von Kremer witnessed the celebration of St Elijah's feast on 1 August 1850, and describes the massive arrival of Damascene Christians and Muslims. Some stayed overnight to visit the Monastery of Our Lady, others headed home on their donkeys, after consuming their fill of the excellent wine of the region.[38] Yet in view of the interreligious cult of Saydnaya, the tradition of shared veneration may well have been much older.

The Middle East is blessed with many grottoes claiming to be Elijah's dwelling place, with the Cave of Elijah on Mount Carmel as the best-known instance. All were important pilgrim destinations. In Jewish and Muslim circles in Greater Syria, the cult of Elijah/al-Khidr was very popular, especially in the vicinity of Damascus.[39] The earliest account of his double identity in connection with a sheltering cave here is attributed to Kaᶜb al-Ahbar, a Jew who converted to Islam in 636. At least from the twelfth century onwards, Damascus had a mosque, several oratories and shrines dedicated to al-Khidr. Moreover, the thirteenth-century Muslim theologian al-Harawi writes about a place near Aleppo where many prophets were buried, including al-Khidr. Here votive offerings were made by Muslims, Jews and Christians.[40]

It is doubtful whether Jews participated in the veneration of the *Chaghoura*—as Burchard of Strassbourg suggests—and the Chapel of Mar Elias. They had their own 'Cave of Elijah' in Jubar, less than 2 kilometres from Bab Tuma. It was accessible through the synagogue, the building history of which Jubar's Jews traced back to the prophet himself.[41] The earliest references are to be found in the accounts of Rabbi Pethachia from Regensburg (1178) and Samuel ben Samson (ca 1210). It is significant that Arab-speaking Damascene Jews called their prophet al-Khidr as well.

Concerning medieval Muslim sources

on the Elijah/al-Khidr tradition of the Damascus area, Ibn ᶜAsakir (d. 1176) briefly mentions a cave where the prophet hid in the mountains north of the city.[42] Yet the most intriguing passage can be found in the journal of Ibn Jubayr, who stayed in Damascus in the summer of 1184. He lists a number of holy places near Mount Qasiyūn to the north of Damascus: 'At the edge of this mountain, where the western plain with its gardens comes to an end, is the blessed hill mentioned in the book of God Most High as being the dwelling of the Messiah and his mother (…). It is one of the most remarkable sights of the world for beauty, elegance, height, and perfection of construction, for the embellished plasterwork, and for the glorious site. It is like a towering castle, and one climbs to it by steps. The blessed dwelling is a grotto in its middle, like a small chamber, and beside it is another room said to be the oratory of al-Khidr (…). Men hasten forward to pray at those blessed spots, especially in the blessed dwelling. This has an iron door that closes on it. The mosque encloses the hill, where there are circular paths and a fountain than which no more beautiful can be seen.'[43]

One cannot resist the temptation to relate this admiring description to the Monastery of Our Lady in Saydnaya. An argument for this daring identification is the Chapel of Mar Elias and its inter-religious cult, but there is another potential candidate: the Cave Chapel of St George near the Monastery of St George to the south of the Monastery of Our Lady. St George too is an alter ego of al-Khidr, and this oratory also attracts Christians and Muslims alike seeking for *baraka* ('blessing') up till the present. Be that as it may, even though it is hardly possible to establish which oratory Ibn Jubayr saw, it is reasonable that the al-Khidr cult also flourished in Saydnaya alongside that of the *Chaghoura* for centuries.

3. QARA

In Saydnaya's Melkite hinterland, the urge for renovation has erased almost all murals. Scarce traces testify to the church of the Greek Catholic Monastery of Sts Sergius and Bacchus in Maᶜalula being once decorated.[44] The situation is, however, more favourable in Qara, situated along the ancient road connecting Damascus with Homs. Two embellished Christian buildings testify to this village's thriving Melkite culture in the Middle Ages: the Church of Sts Sergius and Bacchus inside the village, and a few kilometres to the west of the present agglomeration, Deir Mar Yaᶜqub (Monastery of St James the Persian; fig. 1). The most dramatic event in Qara's history occurred in the first years of the Mamluk campaigns against the Crusaders. In September 1266, a Muslim force installed outside the village heard rumours about the inhabitants having sold Muslim slaves to the Crusader contingent of Crac des Chevaliers. When a delegation of monks from Deir Mar Yaᶜqub came to the camp to offer presents and food they were captured. The soldiers did not take half measures: the monastery was destroyed and the monks and a number of villagers were massacred. Others escaped or were led away in slavery, and the early Byzantine Church of St Nicholas was turned into a mosque, which it still is today.[45] Soon a Muslim population filled in the empty village, but in the course of time Christians returned. In 1465 the Russian merchant Basil found Qara populated with Christians again, whereas monks and Qara's metropolitan, Macarius,

were living nearby, presumably in the monastery.[46]

Today Qara still houses Greek Catholics and Greek Orthodox. After the collapse of the Church of St George in the nineteenth century, the only sanctuary with a medieval origin within the city is the Church of Sts Sergius and Bacchus. Its fragmented murals were restored in the 1960s. All that remains is the upper half of five scenes fixed on the north wall.[47] The central image is that of the aforementioned Virgin *Galaktotrophousa* below a decorated arcade, flanked by the equestrian saints Theodore to the left and Sergius to the right (figs 8, 9). To the extreme left remains part of a depiction of a female saint, to the extreme right St John the Baptist. Noteworthy is that the saints' names are written in Greek and vertical *Estrangela* alike. Sts Sergius and Theodore are dressed with a coat of mail (mail hauberk) worn over a long-sleeved tunic, are crowned, and hold a lance and a round shield, which is abundantly beaded and adorned with precious stones. In addition, St Sergius carries a red-crossed white banner, an attribute generally associated with the Crusaders. We will consider this typical element further below.

Although some parts of Deir Mar Yaᶜqub's architecture testify to the antiquity of this monastery, history is silent on this complex until the events of 1266. The age of the dedication to St James the Mutilated remains a question as well; the oldest reference known is to be found in the colophon of an Arabic gospel from 1476/77 written by the Priest Yuwakim from this monastery.[48] Simultaneously, this source confirms Basil's allusion to the return of Christians, but in the next centuries it had its ups and downs. Deir Mar Yaᶜqub was attacked again in the early seventeenth century, and in 1737 Pococke found the convent entirely ruined.[49] With the installation of the Greek Catholic Church in the Qalamun after 1724 it fell under the jurisdiction of the Greek Catholic Patriarchate in Damascus.

In 1970, the prospects of renovation of the then still ruined church were nil. Concerned about the preservation of the visible fragments of murals, the responsible authorities decided upon their detachment. They found new, temporary, homes in the Archaeological Museum of nearby Deir Attyia and the Museum of Antiquities in Damascus. About two decades later, renovation started to make the monastery suitable for the accommodation of a community of nuns. This included the uncovering and restoring of the remaining fragments by the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Damascus and the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums in Damascus. Photographs taken before the detaching of the 'museum fragments' enabled the German scholar Stephan Westphalen to determine their original setting. Recently, these pieces returned to their original home, and, awaiting resettlement, they are exhibited in a room near the church. In anticipation of their future restoration, an additional number of detached and deteriorated fragments are also stored in the monastery.[50]

On a regional level the construction of the church building is unique, inasmuch as it consists of an upper and a lower church sharing the same apse construction. The earliest decoration in the upper apse consists of enthroned apostles with Greek inscriptions, executed in reddish colours on a white background (fig. 10). These figures still have to be studied, but for their simplicity they can be assigned to another artist than the one who decorated the nave of the lower church.

Represented in the southwest corner are scenes from the Life of Christ, including the Baptism, the Cleansing of the Temple and some miracles. On the south side of the triumphal arch is a saint holding a circular object in his right hand. Westphalen's stylistic analysis reveals analogies with Byzantine art from the first half of the eleventh century.[51]

At a certain point both churches were repainted, in all likelihood by the same local workshop or artist that decorated the Church of Sts Sergius and Bacchus. In the apse of the upper church remain fragments of frontally depicted saints, of whom St Nicholas is identified by his name written in Greek and vertical *Estrangela* (fig. 11). The 'museum fragments' originated from the lower apse. There, the upper zone contained a Deisis with two archangels, the twelve apostles and two prophets or kings, the one to the extreme right being Solomon. The lower zone bears the images of Church Fathers, such as Sts Gregory, Athanasius, John of Alexandria, and James. In between them was a Virgin *Blachernitissa* (now in storage). The thematic disposition on the triumphal arch focussed on Old Testament scenes with a Eucharistic connotation. To the right is Moses Receiving the Law, and very likely the Sacrifice of Isaac was represented on its opposite. As in the village church, mounted saints dominated the sidewalls of the nave. Recognizable are traces of a reddish horse heading toward the apse in the centre of the south wall and, further to the west, a fragment of a greyish mail hauberk.

The chronology of the most recent paintings follows from their stylistic and iconographic kinship with murals in Deir Mar Musa (see below) and wall paintings and icons made in the Tripoli area in Lebanon. They would have been painted later than the most recent murals in Deir Mar Musa from 1208/9 (see below) but prior to the dramatic event of 1266.[52]

4. THE SYRIAN ORTHODOX

The eastern part of the Qalamun was populated with Syrian Orthodox Christians, who had two monasteries here: Deir Mar Musa (Monastery of St Moses) near Nebk and Deir Mar Elian (Monastery of St Elian) near Qaryatain. Today both are inhabited by Syrian Catholic communities, whereas the population of the village of Sadad is still Syrian Orthodox. For its paintings, Deir Mar Musa belongs to the most important archaeological sites of the Christian Middle East. So far, no murals have been found in Deir Mar Elian, but judging from the remains near the present complex the site has a long history.[53]

Deir Mar Musa is situated in a remote valley across the mountains to the east of Nebk, and is mentioned as early as the sixth century.[54] Building inscriptions in Arabic commemorate the rebuilding of the church in A.D. 1058/1059, shortly after which the walls were adorned for the first time. The convent led a sorry existence until a Syrian Catholic community under the guidance of Father Paolo dall'Oglio re-occupied the site in the 1980s. Their perseverance revitalized the monastery and turned it into a widely reputed spiritual centre. As the renovation of the buildings that had fallen into disrepair also required the restoration of the medieval paintings inside the church, a conservation campaign was set up by the Istituto del Restauro in Rome and the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums in Damascus, whose due intervention brought the images back to life.[55]

The fortress-like complex is built on a protruding rock overlooking the valley. The choice of this isolated place was not haphazard; here rainwater found its way down to the plain from the mountains and the construction of a well gave the inhabitants access to abundant water. The church is located at the north side of the complex. Its decoration appears as a puzzling patchwork of scenes and inscriptions on successive plaster coverings or directly on older images, and extends over the nave, the apse, and the two aisles. Arabic inscriptions furnish clues to the chronology of three main layers and the names of two artists. The first layer was painted shortly after the renovation of the mid-eleventh century (Layer 1), the second dates from A.D. 1095 (Layer 2), and the third from A.D. 1208/9 (Layer 3).

Part of Layer 1 can still be seen in both aisles and includes Samson Killing the Lion (south aisle; fig. 12), the angel of the Baptism of Christ (north aisle) and colourful ornaments, all painted in reddish and yellowish colours mainly on a white background. Inside the nave, details of this layer are visible on spots where later paintings have flaked off. On the side elevations one distinguishes the Ascension of the Prophet Elijah and fragments of the mounted saints George and Theodore. Traces of half-naked figures on the triumphal arch have been identified as the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste with the bust of the Archangel Michael (fig. 13). In A.D. 1095 an artist called Hunayn (diminutive of John) repainted several earlier New Testament scenes on the extremities of the aisles: the Baptism of Christ, the Presentation in the Temple (fig. 14), and the Three Women at the Empty Grave (Layer 2). The third painting campaign took place in A.D. 1208/9 (Layer 3). In a dated Arabic inscription the artist presented himself as Sarkis (Sergius). He decorated the entire nave and the apse. Noticeable are the Annunciation and Christ between the apostles on the triumphal arch, a Deisis-Vision and the Virgin *Blachernitissa* in between Church Fathers in the apse, and six mounted saints and the four evangelists on the sidewalls. Sarkis' masterpiece is a huge Last Judgement scene according to Byzantine fashion on the west wall. Among the represented riders are Sts George and Theodore as well as Sts Sergius and Bacchus. As in Qara, both hold a crossed banner, which is white with a red cross in the case of St Sergius and red with a white cross in that of St Bacchus (figs 15, 16).

As for this standard, direct Latin influence can be excluded since the Qalamun was never incorporated in any of the Crusader states. Rather, it demonstrates the significant interaction between Qalamun's Christians and their fellow believers within the neighbouring County of Tripoli (Melkites, Maronites, and to a lesser extent Syrian Orthodox). There, mounted banner-carriers are also depicted in churches in Deddé and Eddé al-Batrun, whereas two icons representing St Sergius with the banner in St Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai are attributed to artists working in this Crusader state.[56] Deir Mar Musa's Layer 3 also shares striking formal characteristics with murals in the County of Tripoli and the paintings in Qara. This 'Syrian style' typifies the indigenous art of West Syria, and gives proof to flourishing artistic activities aiming at the embellishment of churches used by local communities. Inspiration for the iconography was found in the persisting oriental tradition, and contemporary Byzantine and Crusader art.

Turning to the inscription languages in Deir Mar Musa, the many contemporary dedicative and commemorative inscriptions are in Arabic, the *lingua franca* of the time. Surprisingly, the names of saints and scenes of Layer 1 are not in Syriac but in Greek, except for the name of the Archangel Michael on the triumphal arch, which is also written in vertical *Estrangela*. Layer 2 contains some Greek abbreviations, but Layer 3 is inscribed in Syriac (vertical *Serto*). The Syrian Orthodox shared this linguistic shift with their neighbouring Melkite fellow believers, even though the inscriptions in Qara are bilingual and the only Syriac inscription of Saydnaya has been erased. As a liturgical language, Syriac certainly gained ground in thirteenth-century West Syria. It is true that from the late twelfth century onwards, paintings in the Melkite churches of the County of Tripoli bore Greek inscriptions, but those in the Church of Sts Sergius and Bacchus near the Monastery of Kaftun, are in both horizontal *Estrangela* and Greek.[57] On the other hand, Syriac predominates in contemporary Maronite churches as well as in the Church of St Theodore in Bahdeidat near Jbeil, which had a Syrian Orthodox priest in 1256.[58]

Two of Sadad's churches, dedicated to St Sergius and the Archangel Gabriel respectively, were adorned in the eighteenth century.[59] In the first church one finds, among others, images of equestrian saints, patriarchs, the Last Judgement, and the Virgin enthroned with the Child, and in the second equestrian saints, the Nativity and the Dormition of the Virgin (fig. 17), all with Syriac inscriptions. Theodore Ouspensky's photographs of the murals inside the Church of St Sergius from 1902 show a situation different from the present one.[60] After his visit all backgrounds were painted in light blue and some scenes were entirely repainted or covered over. Johann Georg Herzog zu Sachsen came to Sadad in 1927, and was much displeased with the results of this intervention.[61] In 2004, this church was being restored, resulting in damage to the bottom zone of the representations. This allowed confirmation of the absence of older decorations underneath. In the Church of the Archangel Gabriel, however, one discerns traces of a blue background and red borderlines on the north wall, which, in view of our experience with other adorned monuments in the area, are probably medieval. Noticeable is the discovery of a small sarcophagus-like reliquary in a niche in the east wall of the Church of St Sergius. This object is made of Proconnesian marble and on stylistic grounds can be dated to the fifth or sixth century (fig. 18). Certainly Sadad is to be a more than interesting field of research on the material history of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the Qalamun.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This brief overview reveals the predominant position of Saydnaya as a reputed centre of inter-religious pilgrimage and therefore the Qalamun's gateway to the outer world. In all probability, this city had more chapels, churches and monasteries than Damascus ever had, and there are enough testimonies to these buildings being decorated to conclude that it was a major centre of art production. In the case of the Chapel of Mar Elias near Maᶜarat Saydnaya, which must have been frequented by Christian and Muslim pilgrims as well, the artist came from Cyprus. One imagines that the presence of such an important centre of pilgrimage had a

impact on the entire region. Its art may have inspired artists in their design of church embellishment in other places.

A striking feature of the paintings from the early thirteenth century in Syrian Orthodox Deir Mar Musa is their kinship with the art of the County of Tripoli and contemporary Byzantine traditions. Obviously, from an artistic point of view the gaze of its monks was turned towards the West rather than the Syrian Orthodox homelands in Tur Abdin and North Mesopotamia. Many of its iconographic subjects can also be found in Qara and the indigenous churches of the Tripoli area irrespective of their denomination, accentuating the uniformity of Christian art in West Syria. In this matter too, Saydnaya may have played a key role in the transition of concepts of embellishment. However, the eleventh-century murals in Deir Mar Musa, Deir May Yaʿqub and the Chapel of Mar Elias prove that the Qalamun had a thriving artistic tradition in the pre-Crusader period already. It was the combination of the old and the new that shaped the thirteenth-century art of the Qalamun. With the Mongol invasions and the Mamluk reactions in the 1260s, the flourishing of church adornment art was halted. Nevertheless, Saydnaya's cultic importance persists up to the present, and therefore is a shining example of continuing religious traditions going beyond political and military realities.

[1] This research has been funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) and Leiden University.

[2] For the history of the Qalamun in the Roman and Early Byzantine periods, see: J. Nasrallah, "Le Qalamoun à l'époque romano-byzantin," *Les annales archéologiques de Syrie* 6 (1956) 63-86; for traveller's accounts, see: J. Nasrallah, "Voyageurs et pèlerins au Qalamoun," *Bulletin d'Etudes Orientales* 10 (1943-44) 5-38.

[3] L. Pouzet, *Damas au VIIe/XIIIe siècle: vie et structures religieuses d'une métropole islamique* (Beyrouth: Dar El-Mashreq; Recherches T. A 15, 1991), 306-10.

[4] J.-M. Fiey, *Pour un* Oriens Christianus *novus: répertoire des diocèses syriaques orientaux et occidentaux* (Beyrouth: Orient-Institut der deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, 1993), 261-62.

[5] A. Schmidt, "Zur Geschichte des Bistums Qara im Qalamun," in *Christliche Wandmalereien in Syrien: Qara und das Kloster Mar Yakub*, ed. A. Schmidt, S. Westphalen (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag; Sprachen und Kulturen des Christlichen Orients 14, 2005), 13-68.

[6] N. Elisséef, *La description de Damas d'Ibn ᶜAsākir (historicien mort à Damas en 571/1176* (Damas: Institut Français de Damas, 1959), 213-25.

[7] R.J.C. Broadhurst, *The travels of Ibn Jubayr: being the chronicle of a mediaeval Spanish Moor concerning his journey to the Egypt of Saladin, .. Arabia, Baghdad .. Jerusalem and .. Sicily* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952), 296.

[8] D. Pringle, *The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. A Corpus*, 2 Vol., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993-1998), Vol. 2, 52.

[9] S. Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, Vol. 3 (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 305-314.

[10] Pouzet (1991), 329-31; R. Burns, *Damascus. A History* (London/New York: Routledge, 2005), 197-98.

[11] I. Huhn, *Der Orientalist Johann Gottfried Wetzstein als preußischer Konsul in Damaskus (1849-1861): dargestellt nach seinen hinterlassenen Papieren* (Berlin: Schwarz; Islamkundliche Untersuchungen 136, 1989); L.T. Fawaz, *An Occasion for War: Civil Conflict in Lebanon and Damascus in 1860* (London: Centre for Lebanese Studies, 1994); Burns (2005), 251-54.

[12] Main publications: G. Raynaud, "Le Miracle de Sardenai" *Romania* 11 (1882), 519-37; P. Peeters, "La légende de Saïdnaya," *Analecta Bollandiana* 25 (1906), 137-57; H. Zayat, *Histoire de Saidnaya* (Harissa, 1923) (in Arabic); P. Devos, "Les premières versions occidentales de la légende de Saïdnaia," *Analecta Bollandiana* 65 (1947) 245-78; D. Baraz, "The Incarnated Icon of Saidnaya goes West," *Le Muséon* 198 (1995) 181-91; B. Hamilton, "Our Lady of Saidnaiya; An Orthodox Shrine Revered by Muslims and Knights Templar at the Time of the Crusades," in *The Holy Land, Holy Lands, and Christian History* ed. R.N. Swanson (Woodbridge/ Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 2000), 207-15; M. Immerzeel, "The Monastery of Saydnaya and its Icon," *Eastern Christian Art* 4 (2007), forthcoming.

[13] Translation: Hamilton (2000), 207.

[14] S. Al-Syriany (ed.), *Ta'rīk̲ al-kanā'is wal-adyirah fī al-qarn al-t̲ānī 'ašar al-mīlādi li-'Abī al-Makārim* Vol. 3 (Cairo, 1981), 47-48, fol. 142a-143a; translation: Baraz (1995), 189, and Hamilton (2000), 209, n. 10.

[15] Devos (1947), 272-78; Hamilton (2000), 211.

[16] K. Ciggaar, "Painters, Paintings and Pilgrims in Medieval Jerusalem: Some Witnesses from East and West," *Eastern Christian Art* 2 (2005), 127-38.

[17] Al-Syriany (1981), 48.

[18] Translation: Hamilton (2000), 208.

[19] A. Stewart (transl.), *Ludo van Suchem: Description of the Holy Land, and the way thither* (London: Palestine Pilgrim's Text Society 12, 1895), 132.

[20] Devos (1947), 272-73; for the inventory, see: Hamilton (2000), 211.

[21] E. Cruikshank Dodd, "Christian Arab

Sources for the Madonna Allattante in Italy," *Arte Medievale* II/2 (2003), 33-34; idem, "Jerusalem: "Fons et Origo": Sources in "Outremer" for the Development of Western Medieval Art," in *Interactions. Artistic Interchange between the Eastern and Western Worlds in the Medieval Period*, ed. C. Hourihane (Princeton: The Index of Christian Art Occasional Papers IX, 2007), 11-27, esp. 22-24. For the tradition of this theme, see: A. Cutler, "The Cult of the Galaktotrophousa in Byzantium and Italy," *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 37 (1987) 335-50; G.P. Bonani, S.B. Bonani, *Maria Lactans* (Rome: Scriptae Pontificiae Facultatis Theologicae "Marianum" 49, nova series 21, 1995), 24-28.

[22] Pringle (1993), no 62, 156-57. See also H. Leclercq, 'Galactite,' in *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, T. 6/1, ed. F. Cabrol, H. Leclercq (Paris, 1924), 38-46.

[23] For Egypt, see: Cruikshank Dodd (2007), 33; for a sixth-century description of this scene in the Church of St Sergius in Gaza, see: F.-A. Abel, "Gaza au VI[e] siècle d'après le rhéteur Charikios," *Revue Biblique* 40 (1931) 5-31, esp. 14; Immerzeel (2007).

[24] Qara: Cruikshank Dodd (2003); idem (2007), 22-23, Figs 13, 14, with further references.

[25] Fra Niccolò of Poggibonsi, *A Voyage Beyond the Seas (1346-1350)*, ed. T. Bellorini, E. Hoade (Jerusalem: Studium Biblicum Franciscanum Collectio Maior, 2, 1945), 78.

[26] Pringle (1998), 220.

[27] V.G. Barsky, *Stranstvovaniia Vasilia Grigorovicha Barskago po sviatym mestam Vostoka s 1723 po 1747* (Travels of Basil Grigorovich Barsky in the Holy Places of the East from 1723 to 1747), 4 vols, 1885-1887, vol. 2, 101-108.

[28] R. Pococke, *A Description of the East, and some other Countries*, Vol. II,1; *Observations on Palaestine or the Holy Land, Syria, Mesopotamia, Cyprus, and Candia* (London: Bowyer, 1745), 133.

[29] Quoted in Zayat (1932), 224.

[30] Huhn (1989), 183, 216, 227.

[31] E.-G. Rey, *Les colonies franques de Syrie au XIIe et XIIIe siècles* (Paris: Picard, 1993), 292.

[32] M. Immerzeel, "The Decoration of the Chapel of the Prophet Elijah in Ma[c]arrat Saydnaya," in Schmidt/Westphalen (2005), 155-82; Immerzeel (2007), Pl. 6.

[33] T. Wright, *Early Travels in Palestine, comprising the narratives of Arculf, Willibald, Saewulf, Sigurd, Benjamin of Tudela, Sir John Maundeville, de la Brocquière, and Maundrell* (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1968), 498.

[34] Immerzeel (2005), 155-56; idem (2007).

[35] Immerzeel (2007), Pls 10, 11.

[36] Immerzeel (2005).

[37] P. Franke, *Begegnung mit Khidr: Quellenstudien zum Imaginären im traditionellen Islam* (Stuttgart: Steiner; Beiruter Texte und Studien 79, 2000); J.W. Meri, "Re-appropriating Sacred Space: Medieval Jews and Muslims seeking Elijah and al-Khadir," *Medieval Encounters: Jewish, Christian and Muslim culture in confluence and dialogue*, 5/3 (1999) 243-64.

[38] A. von Kremer, *Mittelsyrien und Damaskus: geschichtliche, ethnographische und geographische Studien während eines Aufenthalt daselbst in den Jahren 1849-1851* (Wien, 1853), 182-84.

[39] Meri (1999).

[40] Meri (1999), 255-26.

[41] Meri (1999), 244-52; Immerzeel (2007).

[42] Elisséeff 1959, 185.

[43] Broadhurst 1952, 285-86.

[44] J. Nasrallah, "La peinture monumentale dans les patriarcats Melkites," in *Icônes Melkites. Exposition organisée par le Musée Nicolas Sursock, 16 mai - 15 juin 1969*, ed. V. Cândea (Beyrouth, 1969), 67-92, esp. 80, n. 2.

[45] Schmidt (2005), 27-37.

[46] Baronesse de Khitrowo, *Itinéraires russes en orient* (Genève: Fick; Publications de Société de l'Orient latin, Série géographique 5, 1889), 248.

[47] M. Immerzeel, "Holy Horsemen and Crusader Banners. Equestrian Saints in Wall Paintings in Lebanon and Syria," *Eastern Christian Art* 1 (2004) 29-60, esp. 47, 56; S. Westphalen, "Das

Kloster Mar Yakub und seine Wandmalereien," in Schmidt/Westphalen (2005), 69-153, esp. 117-18, 121-22, 124, 173, Taf. 12a/b 15b3-5; Cruikshank Dodd 2007, 22, 24, Fig. 13; with further references.

[48] Schmidt (2005), 43.

[49] Pococke (1745), 139.

[50] Westphalen (2005).

[51] Westphalen (2005), 91-95.

[52] Westphalen (2005), 120-24.

[53] For the history of both monasteries, see: H. Kaufhold, "Notizen über das Moseskloster bei Nabk und das Juliankloster bei Qaryatain in Syrien," *Oriens Christianus* 79 (1995) 48-119.

[54] Kaufhold (1995), 60; (Cruikshank Dodd) 2001, 10-11.

[55] For the monastery and its paintings, see: E. Cruikshank Dodd, *The Frescoes of Mar Musa al-Habashi. A Study in Medieval Painting in Syria* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies; Studies and Texts 139, 2001). Forthcoming: M. Immerzeel, "Some Remarks about the Name of the Monastery and an Enigmatic Scene;" S. Westphalen, "Deir Mar Musa: Die Malschichten I – III;" J. den Heijer, B. ter Haar Romeny, M. Immerzeel, S. Westphalen, "The Inscriptions," all in *Eastern Christian Art* 4 (2007).

[56] Immerzeel (2004); idem, "Icon Painting in the County of Tripoli of the Thirteenth Century," in Hourihane (2007) 67-83; N. Hélou, "A propos d'une école syro-libanaise d'icônes au XIIIe siècle," *Eastern Christian Art* 3 (2007) 53-72.

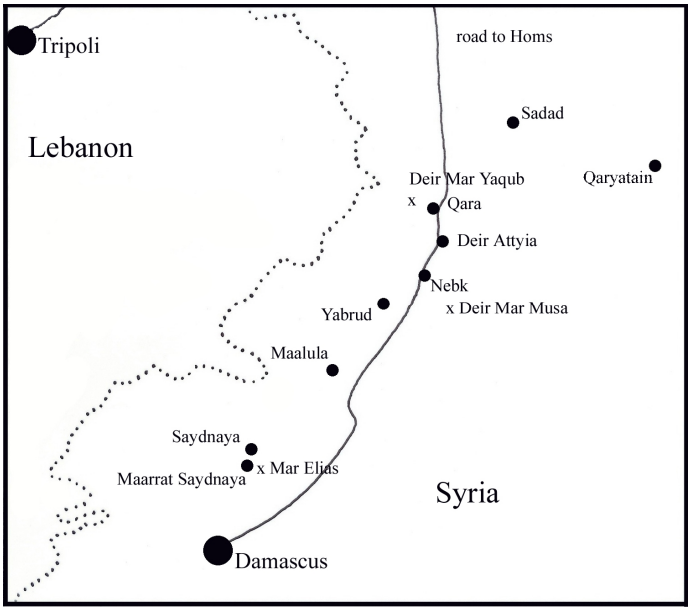
[57] N. Hélou, M. Immerzeel, "Kaftun. The Wall Paintings," *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean* 16 (2005) 453-458.

[58] E. Cruikshank Dodd, "Mar Tadros, Bahdeidat. Paintings in a Lebanese Church from the Thirteenth Century," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 1 (2001) 61-83; esp. 61; idem (2004), 20.

[59] J.G. Herzog zum Sachsen, "Sadat, Karjeten und Harawim," *Oriens Christianus*, Ser. 3, 2 (1927) 233-42; E. Littmann, "Die Gemälde der Serjios-kirche in Sadad," *Oriens Christianus*, Ser. 3, 3-4 (1928-29) 288-91.

[60] Th.I. Ouspensky, "Archeologiskjetskie pamyatniki Sirii," *Izvestija* 7,2 (1902) 133-39, Pls 17-21.

[61] Sachsen (1927), 235.



1. Map of the Qalamun

2. Monastery of Saydnaya: entrance and outer walls

3. Monastery of Saydnaya: Outside of the Chapel of al-ᶜAdra and annex room

4. Fragment of an angel; Monastery of Saydnaya

5. Prophet Elijah; Church of St Sophia; Saydnaya

6. Daniel; Church of St Sophia; Saydnaya

7. Virgin with the Child
Chapel of Mar Elias
Ma^{c}arat Saydnaya

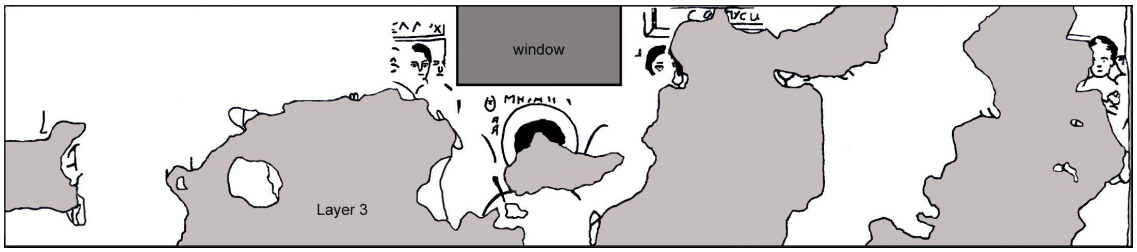
8. Virgin Galaktotrophousa; Church of Sts Sergius and Bacchus, Qara (Bas ter Haar Romeny)

9. St Sergius; Church of Sts Sergius and Bacchus, Qara (Bas ter Haar Romeny)

10. Enthroned apostles; Deir Mar Yaʿqub, Qara

11. St Nicholas; Deir Mar Yaᶜqub, Qara

12. Samson killing the lion; Deir Mar Musa



13. Triumphal arch with the Forty Martyrs; Deir Mar Musa

14. Presentation in the Temple; Deir Mar Musa

15. St Sergius; Deir Mar Musa

16. St Bacchus; Deir Mar Musa

17. Dormition of the Virgin; Church of the Archangel Gabriel, Sadad

18. Lid of a reliquary box; Church of St Sergius, Sadad