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Cursive and Monumental Writing in Syriac Epigraphy: Some Reflections on Inscriptions and Graffiti from Turkey

Simon Brelaud, Jimmy Daccache, Flavia Ruani

Abstract: This paper aims to refine our present understanding of the use of cursive and monumental scripts in Syriac by approaching a hitherto uncharted territory for palaeography, namely epigraphy. Our reflections derive from our collective ongoing projects “E-Twoto - Digital Paleography of Syriac Inscriptions” and “Recueil des Inscriptions Syriaques de Turquie”. The selected corpus consists of inscriptions and graffiti from the provinces of Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, and Mardin, dated between the fifth and the thirteenth centuries. The examples are analysed according to the shape of the letters and other palaeographic elements such as the layout of the inscriptions, including the setup of the lines of writing and line-justification. They are then compared to earlier evidence, namely Edessan inscriptions (first-third centuries CE) as well as administrative documents, in order to retrace the evolution of the cursive writing over time and space. Attention will be paid to media (mosaics and stone) and an analysis of two particular letters, *ʿolaf* and *he*, will be presented as case studies. Finally, this chapter addresses the scripts used in paratextual elements and graffiti to offer a comprehensive overview of Syriac cursive and monumental scripts.

Keywords: Syriac epigraphy, Syriac palaeography, monumental and cursive scripts, mosaics, graffiti, colophons.

For nearly two millennia, Middle Eastern Christians have developed various scripts to write Syriac.¹ In the present paper, we aim to study Syriac scripts which appear in epigraphy. This focus allows us to retrace the evolution of writing, date undated inscriptions, and assess the mastery of writing. Through our concentration on Syriac, we intend to establish some methodological standards that can be useful for other epigraphic traditions, to assist future comparative studies of concomitant epigraphic cultures.

We began by being intrigued by the coexistence of two major writing styles in the same inscriptions, namely a cursive (or current) and a monumental (or formal) one. In fact, the distinction between the cursive and monumental scripts of Syriac is not obvious, as most of the letters are connected within the same word (as in Arabic) which produces a cursive effect. Nevertheless, Syriac cursive script can be more precisely defined as a flowing, deft, fast, and simplified form of writing, which implies a certain degree of writing competence. The best example of this style is offered not by inscriptions on stone or mosaics but by the third-century Middle Euphrates parchments and, to a lesser extent, the writing on Syriac *ostraca*.² On the other hand,

¹ This paper presents one of the first outcomes of our project *E-Twoto*, funded by IRIS Scripta-PSL (<https://scripta.psl.eu/en/projets/e-twoto-digital-paleography-of-syriac-inscriptions/>). It also benefits from the program “Recueil des Inscriptions Syriaques” (RIS Turquie), initiated by Alain Desreumaux and including Andrew Palmer.

² P1 = Document of sale of a female slave, 243 CE, found in Dura-Europos (Charles Cutler Torrey, “A Syriac Parchment from Edessa of the Year 243 A.D.” *Zeitschrift für Semistik und verwandte Gebiete* 10 (1935): 33–45; Han J. W. Drijvers and John F. Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions of Edessa and Osroene. Texts, Translations and Commentary* (Leiden–New York–Köln: Brill, 1999), 232–36); P2 = Transfer of debt, 240 CE (Javier Teixidor, “Les derniers rois d’Édesse d’après deux nouveaux documents syriaques,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 76 (1989): 219–22; Javier Teixidor, “Deux documents syriaques du III^e siècle après J.-C., provenant du Moyen Euphrate,” *Comptes rendus des séances de l’Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* 134 (1990): 144–54; Drijvers and Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions*, 237–42); P3 = Lease of repossessed property, 242 CE (Teixidor, “Les derniers rois d’Édesse,” 219–22; Teixidor, “Deux documents syriaques,” 154–57; Javier Teixidor, “Un document syriaque de fermage de 242 ap. J.-C.,” *Semitica* 41–42 (1991–1992): 195–208; Drijvers and Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions*, 243–48). Torrey, “A Syriac Parchment,” 34 described the script of the parchment as “a flowing Estrangela, showing a number of standing peculiarities, mostly incidental to a rapid cursive,” see Drijvers and Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions*, 2. On Syriac *ostraca*, see especially Amir Harrak, *Iraq. Syriac and Garshuni Inscriptions*, 2 vols. (Paris: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 2010), 609–59 who published the *ostraca* of Takrit, dated between the late eighth and the fourteenth centuries. We should also mention that the cursive script is additionally attested in papyri, although very few have survived; see William M. Brashear, “Syriaca,” *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 44 (1998): 86–127. On the other hand, the script used in Syriac magic bowls (fifth-seventh centuries)

monumental or formal script has much more squared shapes. In this contribution we would like to examine these writing styles in Syriac epigraphy, with particular attention on the current hand.

Our purpose is to offer an initial survey that fills a lacuna in the field of Syriac palaeography, since this latter area has mainly been studied through manuscripts rather than inscriptions.³ As far as inscriptions are concerned, one can rely on marginal palaeographic notes integrated into articles dedicated to one or more inscriptions.⁴ Andrew Palmer's article dedicated to the letter-forms in the inscriptions of the Ṭūr 'Abdīn region, South-East Turkey, is the only major study devoted to the palaeography of Syriac inscriptions.⁵

We also intend to extend our focus on the question of the use of the cursive script by including the more Western provinces of Şanlıurfa (ancient Edessa) and Gaziantep (Maps 5.1-3). Turkey is of particular interest here since it is the cradle of Syriac Christianity and the land containing the oldest inscriptions. Furthermore, we include in our scope the development of

found in Southern Mesopotamia and Khuzestan is rather monumental (Marco Moriggi, *A Corpus of Syriac Incantation Bowls. Syriac Magical Texts from Late-Antique Mesopotamia* [Leiden: Brill, 2014], 13).

³ For Syriac palaeography in manuscripts, much work has been done. Mention should be made of two recent studies. The first is Ayda Kaplan, "The Shape of the Letters and the Dynamics of Composition in Syriac Manuscripts (Fifth-Tenth Century)," in *Ruling the Script in the Middle Ages: Formal Aspects of Written Communication (Books, Charters, and Inscriptions)*, ed. Sébastien Barret, Dominique Stutzmann, and Georg Vogeler (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 379–398, which focussed on the development of several standardised Syriac scripts by singling out several features relevant for a palaeographic analysis which might be useful for the study of the development of Syriac scripts in epigraphy. The second study is an article by Michael Penn, R. Jordan Crouser, and Philipp Abbott, "Serto before Serto: Reexamining the Earliest Development of Syriac Script," *Aramaic Studies* 18, no. 1 (2020): 1–18, who took into account the writing of colophons of some manuscripts. Their conclusions are based on the digital tool they built at Stanford University, *Digital Analysis of Syriac Handwriting* (<https://dash.stanford.edu/>). On this project, see also Kristina Bush et al., "Challenging the Estrangela/Serto Divide: Why the Standard Model of Syriac Scripts Just Doesn't Work," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 21, no. 1 (2018): 43–81; Michael Penn et al., "A New Tool for Computer Assisted Paleography: The Digital Analysis of Syriac Handwriting Project," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 24, no. 1 (2021): 35–52. For palaeography in the Turfan Syriac fragments, see Erica C. D. Hunter, "Cursive Palaeography at Turfan: Exploring 'Medial' Estrangelā", in *Silk Road Traces: Studies on Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*, ed. Li Tang, Dietmar W. Winkler (Wien: Lit Verlag, 2022), 253–270 (*non vidimus*).

⁴ We can add to this the non-exhaustive palaeographic studies included in the introductions of the "Recueil des Inscriptions Syriaques" volumes on Kerala and Iraq. In this respect, the Syriac field is far behind other Semitic languages, such as Phoenician or ancient Aramaic, for which there exist comprehensive palaeographic studies in epigraphy. See, for example, J. Brian Peckham, *The Development of the Late Phoenician Scripts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968); Joseph Naveh, *The Development of the Aramaic Script* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1970).

⁵ Andrew N. Palmer, "The Syriac Letter-Forms of Ṭūr 'Abdin and Environs," *Oriens Christianus* 73 (1989): 68–89.

writings from Edessan Aramaic (first to third centuries) to Syriac (up to the thirteen century).⁶ These inscriptions will serve as our case study; we will compare them palaeographically to those from Northern Syria (Map 5.4), which belonged in antiquity to the same region, namely Osrhoene, as well as to manuscripts, whenever relevant.

[PLACE MAP_5.1 HERE]

Map 5.1 Map of South-Eastern Turkey and Northern Syria (© S. Marion de Procé)

[PLACE MAP_5.2 HERE]

Map 5.2 Map of Edessa and its environs (© S. Marion de Procé)

[PLACE MAP_5.3 HERE]

Map 5.3 Map of the Tūr ‘Abdīn Region, South-East Turkey (© S. Marion de Procé)

[PLACE MAP_5.4 HERE]

Map 5.4 Map of the Limestone Massif, North Syria (© S. Marion de Procé)

Our study aims to examine some questions concerning the differences between the cursive and the monumental styles: is the context (i.e., the spatio-temporal circumstances of the time) or the medium (stone, mosaics, bedrock, etc.) each sufficient to explain the use of different letter-forms? Should one style be linked to a more sophisticated mastery of the writing and/or to aesthetic choices? Is it possible to associate professional artisans, who may also be copyists of manuscripts, with one of the two styles? Finally, should we consider these two styles to be two clearly distinctive scripts, or rather a single script with some particular individualities?

⁶ We use the expression “Edessan Aramaic” to refer to the language of the city of Edessa and its region during the Roman Pagan Period (first to third centuries CE), intending it as a synonym for the term “Old Syriac” used by other scholars. “Syriac” is a later form of this language for the Christian period, which emerged from the fifth century onwards.

Accordingly, we will consider all the relevant palaeographic elements (the morphology, size of the letters, ductus, ligatures, diacritical points, as well as the layout of the inscriptions, including the setup of the lines of writing and line-justification) and we will pioneer a holistic approach, taking into account not only the main texts but also the para-texts. First, we will provide a synchronous study of inscriptions on mosaic, and then those on stone, in order to assess whether the material on which they are engraved has an impact on the cursive or monumental shape of the letters. Second, we will focus on two letters: the letter *he*, which can help us to determine whether its cursive and monumental shapes follow chronological patterns; and the *'olaf* in its cursive shape, which may point towards a practical and aesthetic use of the letter. Third, the paratextual elements will be addressed, in order to see whether an engraver adopted the same script in the main text and in his signature; other kinds of marginalia will also be analysed. Fourth and finally, graffiti will be examined to determine whether the writing differs from that in official inscriptions.

1. A Synchronous Study of Letter Shapes According to the Medium (Fifth-Sixth Centuries)

The analysis of writing styles used on different media can allow us to refine the criteria for defining what is a cursive trend in Syriac writing in epigraphy.⁷ Therefore, we will focus here on the oldest Syriac inscriptions on mosaics and stone, which date from the fifth and sixth centuries. Their script is quite similar to the Edessan Aramaic one.⁸ Two major features distinguish the Edessan Aramaic

⁷ Our analysis follows the study of the cursive tendencies in Edessan Aramaic inscriptions (first to third centuries CE) carried out within the framework of the debate on the genesis of the *estrangela* and *serto* scripts, in particular by Drijvers and Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions*, 16–17. See also John F. Healey, “The Early History of the Syriac Script. A Reassessment,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 45 (2000): 55–67 and Françoise Briquel Chatonnet, “De l’écriture édessénienne à l’estrangela et au sertu,” *Semitica* 50 (2000): 81–90.

⁸ See Drijvers and Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions*, 1.

script from the Syriac one: first, some palaeographic elements change;⁹ and second, some Edessan letter-shapes alternate with others in the same text in Syriac epigraphy.¹⁰

1.1 Fifth- and Sixth-Century Syriac Inscriptions on Mosaics

The oldest Syriac inscriptions are mostly tiled in mosaics and found in South-Eastern Turkey.¹¹ These inscriptions had an official character since they mostly covered churches' floors and targeted a large audience; only two Christian inscriptions tiled in mosaics, discovered in a family tomb in Kale Eteği, Şanlıurfa, are funerary inscriptions.¹²

The completion of the mosaic requires without doubt specific skills, and the shape of the letters very likely was the result of a deliberate choice. H. Drijvers and J. Healey have noted that the script of the Edessan mosaics diverges from that of the inscriptions on stone by exhibiting some

⁹ Compare the palaeographic charts of Edessan in Drijvers and Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions*, 5–10 with the Syriac ones in Andrew N. Palmer, "A Corpus of Inscriptions from ʿAbdīn and Environs," *Oriens Christianus* 71 (1987): 86 for inscriptions dated between the eighth and tenth centuries from ʿAbdīn. The palaeographic features that disappear in Syriac epigraphy are the following: the *dolat/riš* open to more than 45 degrees, the *semkat* without a middle stroke, the final *semkat* without a tail, and the V-shape *šin* without a ligature to the left. In addition, contrary to the Edessan inscriptions, most of the earliest Syriac inscriptions have *dolat/riš* with diacritical points, except three undated inscriptions from Şanlıurfa (one in Kale Eteği and two in Kızılkoyun); see Alain Desreumaux and Mehmet Önal, "The Translation of Syriac Inscriptions of New Mosaics found in Şanlıurfa/Edessa," in *Urfa-Edessa Mozaikleri*, ed. Mehmet Önal (Şanlıurfa: Şanlıurfa Büyükşehir Belediyesi Kültür ve Sosyal Daire Başkanlığı, 2017), 135 (the tomb of Gadya in Kale Eteği); Bekir Çetin et al., "New Inscriptions in Aramaic/Early Syriac and Greek from the Cemeteries of Edessa," *Anatolia Antiqua* 28 (2020): 122–128 (the funerary inscription of Za'ura son of Marbayta and the Syriac-Greek bilingual inscription of Za'ūrā, in Kızılkoyun).

¹⁰ These letters are the opened *waw*, *he*, and *mim* with those having a closed loop; the *het* resembling an upper-case N with the one with right angles; the oval shape *qof* ending with a vertical short stroke with the squared one.

¹¹ A list of early dated inscriptions was established by Sebastian P. Brock, "Dating Formulae in Syriac Inscriptions and Manuscripts of the 5th and 6th centuries," in *From Ugarit to Nabataea. Studies in Honor of John F. Healey*, ed. George Kiraz and Zeyad al-Salameen (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2012), 85–106. It now needs to be completed due to recent discoveries, especially in South-Eastern Turkey; see Mehmet Önal, *Urfa-Edessa Mozaikleri* (Şanlıurfa: Şanlıurfa Büyükşehir Belediyesi Kültür ve Sosyal Daire Başkanlığı, 2017); Alain Desreumaux, "About Recent Discoveries at Edessa: Church Mosaic Pavements with Syriac Inscriptions," *The Harp* 35 (2019 [2021]): 233–42; Çetin et al., "New Inscriptions"; Simon Brelaud, Jimmy Daccache, Flavia Ruani and Volkan Bağlayıcı, "Les inscriptions syriaques de la mosaïque de l'église de Gola," *Syria* 99 (forthcoming). Other mosaic inscriptions from Turkey and Syria are being studied and will be soon published: Cıncıklı, a site in the district of Nizip, Örmetaş, Kurtaran, Kuruçay, in Turkey; Tall Bī'a, in Northern Syria.

¹² Yet, these are most probably from the Roman Pagan Period: the inscription of the son of 'Abdū and the one of Auxentios in Kale Eteği (Desreumaux and Önal, "The Translation," 119–21, 136–37).

more cursive tendencies.¹³ Yet in fact, it remains to define what these cursive tendencies mean for the Edessan Period (i.e., before the fourth century), since, at that time, the form of the letters of Edessan inscriptions tiled in mosaics is still closer to that of inscriptions on stone than that of the Middle Euphrates parchments. Regarding the Syriac mosaic inscriptions, we note that the writing styles are diverse and two main tendencies can be identified (Figure 5.1).

[PLACE FIGURE_5.1 HERE]

Figure 5.1 Palaeographic chart of the inscriptions tiled in mosaics from Turkey

1.1.1 Some Syriac mosaic inscriptions are remarkable for their overall monumental style. This tendency was the most widespread and was achieved by several means:

- The lines of writing, either vertical or horizontal, are straight and regular. This is, for example, evident on the mosaic of Gola (589 CE?), located at the border between the Tektek plateau and the Țūr ‘Abdīn¹⁴ (Figure 5.2). The lines of writing are separated by lines made of black *tesserae* at Ma‘ar Zaytā (515/6 CE) in North-Eastern Syria.¹⁵

[PLACE FIGURE_5.2 HERE]

Figure 5.2 Inscription tiled in a mosaic from Gola (© Ch. Labedan-Kodaş, V. Bağlayıcı, H.

Menteş)

- The letters have a monumental appearance. They largely correspond to the letter-forms of the Edessan Aramaic script, but above all they are well proportioned, and their shape is, on the whole, square – in particular, the letter *qof*. This is the case for the letters in the mosaic

¹³ Drijvers and Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions*, 16–17.

¹⁴ Brelaud, Daccache, Ruani and Bağlayıcı, “Les inscriptions syriaques.”

¹⁵ Amir Harrak, “Notes on Syriac Inscriptions, I: The Inscription of Ma‘ar-zaytā (Syria),” *Orientalia* 64, no. 2 (1995): 110–19, Tab. I.

inscriptions from Kurtaran (492 CE)¹⁶ and Nizip (unpublished) in the Gaziantep province, as well as for numerous examples of mosaics in Northern Syria, especially in the Raqqa area, at al-Baḥta (556 CE)¹⁷ and Tall Bī'a (509 and 595 CE).¹⁸

- However, a few letters within a principally monumental-script inscription may be close to the cursive script, i.e., that of the Edessan parchments from the Middle Euphrates and the Syriac *ostraca*. We can mention, for instance, the inscription of Nabḡa, Northern Syria – which is the oldest dated Syriac inscription (406/7 CE) – which has some cursive letters in its second part: especially the final *'olaf*, which consists of an oblique line with a tail, reminiscent of the letter *'e*, and the *mim*, which has the shape of a reverse *epsilon*¹⁹ (Figure 5.3). However, these cursive letters do not undermine the monumental character of the whole mosaic. In Gola, Turkey, the craftsman has written the *he* and the *mim* both with a closed loop (cursive) and without it (monumental); he also used elongated tails on several final letters that give an impression of cursiveness²⁰ (Figure 5.2). Here too, these features do not affect the general monumental quality of the inscriptions.

[PLACE FIGURE_5.3 HERE]

Figure 5.3 Inscription tiled in a mosaic from Nabḡa (Briquel Chatonnet & Desreumaux 2008: 52, fig. 29)

¹⁶ The mosaic is housed at the Zeugma Mosaic Museum, Gaziantep.

¹⁷ Ali Abou Assaf. "Kitābāt suryāniyyat ḡadīdat fī al-maḥaf al-waṭānī bi-Dimašq." *Annales archéologiques arabes de Syrie* 22 (1972): no. 1.

¹⁸ Manfred Krebernīk, "Schriftfunde aus Tall Bī'a 1990," *Mitteilungen der deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft zu Berlin* 123 (1991): no. 1 & 2.

¹⁹ Françoise Briquel Chatonnet and Alain Desreumaux, "L'inscription syriacque," in *Le martyrium Saint-Jean dans la moyenne vallée de l'Euphrate : fouilles de la direction générale des Antiquités à Nabgha au nord-est de Jarablus*, ed. Rana Sabbagh, Fayez Ayash, Janine Balty, Françoise Briquel Chatonnet, and Alain Desreumaux (Damas: Ministère de la culture, Direction générale des antiquités et des musées, 2008), 23–28, fig. 13–15.

²⁰ Brelaud, Daccache, Ruani and Baḡlayıcı, "Les inscriptions syriaques."

- Finally, the monumental character is sometimes achieved through the calligraphy of the letters. So, at Ḥuwayjat Ḥalāwa (471 CE), Northern Syria, the artist thickened the lines of certain letters (*'olaf*, *bet*, *dolat/riš*, *kaf*, *mim*) by mimicking the downstrokes and the upstrokes of handwritten calligraphy.²¹

1.1.2. Other mosaic inscriptions are characterised by a script that evokes cursive handwriting. First, the pronounced inclination of the letters suggests a rapidly executed writing, which affects the regularity of the lines. Thus, even when the *dolat* and *riš* are rectangular, they could be slanted, even slightly curved. Indeed, the letters most often conform to the monumental shape, namely, that of the letters of Edessan inscriptions.²² However, the mosaicists have given the Syriac letters cursive features and the text has a certain flexibility in the layout, notably by curving the letters, as in most of the *qof* in the unpublished inscription of Örmetaş (489 CE), found in the province of Gaziantep (Figure 5.4). At Hazinedere (556 CE, Figure 5.5)²³ and Yolbilen (565 CE, Figure 5.6)²⁴ in the province of Şanlıurfa, several letters tend to assume a cursive form: the *he*, the *waw*, and the *mim* may have closed loops; the *šin* has a V-shape or a triangular form that tends to open from below; and the *taw* may have a small loop, or none at all.

[PLACE FIGURE_5.4 HERE]

Figure 5.4 Cursive *qof* in the inscription tiled in a mosaic from Örmetaş

²¹ Abou Assaf. “Kitābāt suryāniyyat ḡadīdat,” no. 2.

²² For instance, in the inscription tiled in a mosaic from Aşağıbaşak, Turkey (ca. sixth-seventh century), the *'olaf* has a hook at the bottom of its right foot (Önal, *Urfa-Edessa Mozaikleri*, 128–29, 138–39; Desreumaux, “About Recent Discoveries,” 240). This feature appears on late Edessan mosaics, such as the Phoenix one dated to 235/6 CE (Drijvers and Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions*, no. Am6) and the undated mosaics of Barhadad (Drijvers and Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions*, no. Am10) and Gadya (Önal, *Urfa-Edessa Mozaikleri*, 116–17).

²³ Önal, *Urfa-Edessa Mozaikleri*, 113.

²⁴ Selahattin E. Güler, *Şanlıurfa Yazıtları (Grekçe, Ermenice, Süryanice)* (Istanbul: Arkeoloji ve Sanat Yayınları, 2014), 159; Önal, *Urfa-Edessa Mozaikleri*, 130–31, 140–41.

[PLACE FIGURE_5.5 HERE]

Figure 5.5 Inscriptions tiled in a mosaic from Hazinedere (Önal 2017: 138, 140–41)

[PLACE FIGURE_5.6 HERE]

Figure 5.6 Inscription tiled in a mosaic from Yolbilen (Önal 2017: 114)

The study of the Syriac inscriptions on mosaics thus underlines an important principle, which is that the shape of the letters is not the most relevant criterion for distinguishing two styles of writing, since the majority of the letters display a monumental form. However, the artists were able to achieve a cursive appearance by several means: by curving the letters, by slanting them to the point of affecting the alignment of the text, and sometimes by using a rapid calligraphy. Among the mosaics, the cursive features seem to be more pronounced in the Syriac inscriptions than in the Edessan ones.

1.2 Fifth- and Sixth-Century Syriac Inscriptions on Stone

We should point out at the outset that, compared to Syria, the Syriac inscriptions engraved on stone dated before the eighth century are very few in Turkey; only four bear a date and probably three others are datable to this period on palaeographic criteria.²⁵

In Syriac inscriptions on stone, one finds the two writing styles that we have observed in the inscriptions tiled in mosaics, but in a quite different proportion, since the monumental style prevails by far. This monumental effect is produced by several techniques. It is striking that almost all of the oldest Syriac inscriptions on stone are formally written and well aligned (Figure 5.7). In particular, the lines of writing, whether vertical or horizontal, are straight and regular. Moreover,

²⁵ For details, see the following discussion.

even if cursive forms were used – although to a lesser extent – together with the letters that imitate the letter-forms of the Edessan inscriptions,²⁶ they are uniform in size.

[PLACE FIGURE_5.7 HERE]

Figure 5.7 Palaeographic chart of early inscriptions on stone from Turkey

We find these monumental features, for example, in the inscription engraved on a stela at the monastery of Mor Gabriel in Qartmīn (534 CE) – the oldest inscription of the Ṭūr ‘Abdīn region – despite the slanting of the *dolat* at 45° to the right, which evokes the ductus of handwriting.²⁷ The writing of the inscription engraved on a door pediment, probably discovered at Kırk Mağara, Şanlıurfa (585 CE, Figure 5.8),²⁸ is rather monumental, featuring a triangular *šin*, an opened *mim*, and especially a hooked-foot *’olaf*; only the two *he* of the inscription have closed loops, denoting a cursive shape.

[PLACE FIGURE_5.8 HERE]

Figure 5.8 Inscription of Kırk Mağara (© M. Önal)

Among all the inscriptions on stone found in Turkey, the most markedly monumental features are attested in two of them, recently discovered in the necropoleis of Şanlıurfa, which are dated on palaeographic grounds to the fourth or early fifth century.²⁹ First, the Syriac-Greek bilingual funerary inscription of Za‘ūrā, engraved most likely on a lintel found in the Kızılkoyun necropolis and

²⁶ It should be noted that cursive tendencies can already be seen among the latest Edessan inscriptions on stone, which date to Roman times (the first to third centuries). Three funerary inscriptions found on the borders of the Oshroene, at Apamea on the Euphrates River in Turkey (Alain Desreumaux, Justine Gaborit, and Jean-Sylvain Caillou, “Nouvelles découvertes à Apamée d’Osroène,” *Comptes rendus des séances de l’Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* 143, no. 1 (1999): Api3 [192 CE], Api9 [226 or 250 CE]) and Tall Mağāra in Syria, date to 240 or 265 CE (Javier Teixidor, “Inscripción siríaca de hipogeo de Tell Mağāra,” in *Romanización y cristianismo en la Siria Mesopotámica*, ed. Antonino González Blanco and Gonzalo Matilla Sériquer [Murcia: Universidad de Murcia, 1998], 433–36). Their scripts have somewhat more cursive tendencies than the texts of the other Edessan inscriptions on stone.

²⁷ Jacques Jarry, “Inscriptions syriaques et arabes inédites du Tur ‘Abdin,” *Annales islamologiques* 10 (1972): 243–44, no. 76; Palmer, “A Corpus of Inscriptions,” 57–59, no. A1. The quality of the pictures does not allow us to read the letters precisely, but we observe globally angular letters. The *waw* is a closed circle, and so more cursive.

²⁸ Güler, *Şanlıurfa Yazıtları*, 143.

²⁹ The dating is especially based on the absence of diacritical points, as in the Edessan Aramaic inscriptions.

positioned below the Western city wall,³⁰ is well preserved and finely executed (Figure 5.9). Its text is aligned, and the layout of the letters, which are uniform in size, is very meticulous. The letters – especially the *dolat* and *riš* – are rather angular, denoting a monumental habit. Although the *he* has a closed-loop shape, it still has a monumental appearance. A peculiarity of this inscription is that the *zayn* follows the slope of the *ʿe*, a combination also attested in manuscripts of the same period.³¹ Second, the funerary inscription of the deacon Saba, probably engraved on a lintel within a *tabula ansata* and found in the necropolis of Kale Eteği, west of the citadel,³² demonstrates similar characteristics, with no cursive features detected (Figure 5.10). It should be noted that these formal features can also be observed in a series of more ancient Syriac inscriptions dated to the fifth and beginning of the sixth centuries, engraved on lintels found in Northern Syria.³³ The texts are justified, even if some of the letters tend to tilt. But they are still monumental and square, notably the hooked-foot *ʿolaf* and the opened-loop *waw* and *mim*.

[PLACE FIGURE_5.9 HERE]

Figure 5.9 Bilingual inscription from Kızılkoyun (© M. Demir)

³⁰ Çetin et al., “New Inscriptions,” 123–28. It is interesting to note that the Greek text is horizontal in orientation and the Syriac is vertical, following the usual technique used by Syriac engravers. Besides, the Kızılkoyun inscription adds to the meagre corpus of known Syriac bilingual inscriptions. In this inscription, both texts are literally identical, which is not very common in bilingual inscriptions in general. See the chapter of Françoise Briquel Chatonnet in this volume for an overview of Greek-Syriac bilingualism in Syria.

³¹ This is the case for the oldest dated and well-known Syriac manuscript, London, British Library, Add. 12 150, that was written in Edessa in the year 411 CE. See, for example, the word ܪܝܫܘܢܝ at fol. 235va digitized in <https://hmmlschool.org/syriac-earliest-estrangela/>.

³² Desreumaux and Önal, “The Translation,” 135.

³³ Burj al-Qās (407 CE), Dār Qītā (434 CE), Qaşr ʿİblisū (441/2 CE), Ĥirbat al-Ĥaṭīb (473/4 CE), and Ĥirbat Ḥasan (507/8 CE) in which, however, a mixture of monumental and cursive scripts is used. Enno Littmann, *Syria. Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria in 1904-5 and 1909, Division IV: Semitic Inscriptions, Section B: Syriac Inscriptions* (Leiden: Brill, 1934), no. 53; no. 4; no. 11; no. 7 Enno Littmann, *Publications of an American Archaeological Expedition to Syria in 1899-1900, 4. Semitic Inscriptions from Northern Central Syria, Palmyra and the Region of the Ḥaurân* (New-York, London: The Century Co.-William Heinemann, 1905), no. 7; Jimmy Daccache, “La ‘mise en pierre’ et la composition typographique des inscriptions syriaques de Syrie du Nord et du sud-est de la Turquie,” in *Le calame et le ciseau: colophons syriaques offerts à Françoise Briquel Chatonnet*, ed. Simon Brelaud, Jimmy Daccache, Muriel Debié, Margherita Farina, Flavia Ruani, and Émilie Villey (Paris: Geuthner, 2021), 80–82, fig. 6.

[PLACE FIGURE_5.10 HERE]

Figure 5.10 Inscription of the deacon Saba from Kale Eteği (Önal 2017: 135)

Among these monumental inscriptions, some display a more cursive tendency, such as the funerary inscription of Za‘ūrā son of Marbaytā, engraved on a stone that closes the loculus found in the Kızılkoyun necropolis³⁴ (Figure 5.11). The form of the letters is generally monumental, especially the hooked-foot *’olaf* and the opened *mim*. However, we observe a current hand style: the *dolat* and *riš* are either squared or curved, with one squared *riš* slanting at 45° to the right; both opened- and closed-loop *waw* are used; the *zayn*, followed by the *‘e*, is tilted, as in the bilingual inscription;³⁵ finally, the text is slightly slanted. On the other hand, the cursive appearance is achieved by neglecting the ductus of the letters. This combination of monumental and cursive letters is also attested in inscriptions from Northern Syria, such as those of Surqānyā (501 CE) and Ḥirbat Ḥasan (507/8 CE, Figure 5.12), both of which are carved on lintels.³⁶

[PLACE FIGURE_5.11 HERE]

Figure 5.11 Inscription of Za‘ūrā son of Marbaytā from Kızılkoyun (Çetin, Demir, Desreumaux,

Healey & Liddel 2020: 122, fig. 5)

[PLACE FIGURE_5.12 HERE]

Figure 5.12 Inscription of Ḥirbat Ḥasan in Northern Syria (© French-Syrian expedition of Syriac epigraphy)

³⁴ Çetin et al., “New Inscriptions,” 122–23.

³⁵ See above.

³⁶ Littmann, *Syria*, no. 57; Henri Pognon, *Inscriptions sémitiques de la Syrie, de la Mésopotamie et de la région de Mossoul* (Paris: Victor Lecoffre, J. Gabalda, 1907), no. 82; Daccache, “La ‘mise en pierre’,” 80–81.

The inscription of Alagün (491/2 CE),³⁷ engraved on a stone which was probably a lintel, presents exactly the opposite appearance, in which the cursive letters are predominant: the squared *dolat* and *riš* are slanted to the left; the *waw* is a circle; the *mim* resembles a reversed Greek *epsilon*, also attested in the fifth-century mosaic of Nabğa in Northern Syria³⁸ (Figure 5.3) and even earlier, in the Edessan parchments from the Middle Euphrates;³⁹ and the *qof* is oval with a short vertical line to the left.

Finally, the so-called Syriac inscription of Rabbūlā (425/6 CE) stands out as the only example written entirely with a cursive script, yet the overall effect is still monumental⁴⁰ (Figure 5.13). Although it is of unknown provenance, it most likely comes from the diocese of Edessa, since it mentions Rabbūlā who was the bishop of Edessa between 411/2 and 435/6 CE. It is engraved on a basalt stone within a *tabula ansata*. The script is strikingly similar to that of the Edessan parchments, especially with the *'olaf* that has a looped shape and, once more, the *mim* with a reversed Greek *epsilon* shape. In addition, the *šin* has the shape of a square rather than a triangle and the *taw* has a hook to the left. Notwithstanding the cursiveness of the script, the text is justified, the lines are quite straight, and the letters have about the same size, all of which are markers of the monumental aspect of the inscription.

[PLACE FIGURE_5.13 HERE]

Figure 5.13 Inscription of bishop Rabbūlā (Briquel Chatonnet, Desreumaux & Moukarzel 2008:

27–28)

³⁷ Elif Keser-Kayaalp, *Church Architecture of Late Antique Northern Mesopotamia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 144, fig. 2.7.7.

³⁸ Briquel Chatonnet and Desreumaux, “L’inscription syriaque.”

³⁹ See n. 2 above.

⁴⁰ The inscription mentions only a date and the name of the bishop. See Françoise Briquel Chatonnet, Alain Desreumaux, and Joseph Moukarzel, “Découverte d’une inscription syriaque mentionnant l’évêque Rabbula,” in *Malphono w-Rabo d-Malphone. Studies in Honor of Sebastian P. Brock*, ed. George Kiraz (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2008), 19–28.

To conclude, although the letters are sometimes cursive, inscriptions can be defined as monumental if the following elements are clearly present: evenly sized letters and a justified text written with straight lines. In terms of palaeographic methodology, therefore, we conclude that the shape of the letters alone is not enough to consider an inscription as cursive or not. The question then arises as to why an engraver uses certain cursive letters in these monumental inscriptions, such as the closed-loop *waw* and *mim*, but especially the closed-loop *he* and the straight-line *'olaf*.

2. Two Diachronic Case-Studies of Letters in Edessan and Syriac Inscriptions

In this section, we offer a detailed study of the letters *he* and *'olaf* to assess their cursive use over a long period of time in inscriptions from Turkey where the monumental tendency is dominant.

2.1 The Letter *he*: Chronological Development

The *he* appears in two different styles in Edessan as well as Syriac textual and epigraphic evidence. It either has the shape of an *epsilon* flipped horizontally (henceforth referred to as an opened *he*), or has the middle stroke attached to the left one, thus becoming a closed loop (henceforth referred to as closed-loop *he*). The use of these two shapes will be assessed across different time periods and will be correlated with the different media on which inscriptions appear.

It is firstly necessary to outline the palaeographical development of the letter *he*, beginning with its earlier attestations in inscriptions and parchments from the Edessan period (first–third centuries). To begin with, a close look at the Edessan inscriptions, which are mostly from the province of Şanlıurfa and are either carved on stone or tiled in mosaic, reveals that the opened *he* was by far predominant. In engraved inscriptions, the closed-loop *he* seems to be scarcely used,

appearing only in four out of almost eighty Edessan inscriptions: 1) the inscription of Apamea Apig;⁴¹ 2) the inscription of Tall Mağāra;⁴² 3) an inscription carved above the entrance of a cave tomb near the cemetery of Şih Maksut in Southern Şanlıurfa⁴³ – the engraver used both shapes of the *he*, but, out of the five occurrences, only one has a closed loop; and 4) the fragmentary inscription of Şuaip, East of Harran, which could not be dated accurately and therefore may actually not be Edessan at all (Figure 5.14).⁴⁴ The same conclusion can be drawn with regard to the Edessan inscriptions tiled in mosaics, that is, the closed-loop *he* is much less represented than the opened *he*. There are just two attestations of this form, probably from the early third century, within the whole corpus of mosaic inscriptions (approximately forty): in the mosaic of Barhadad⁴⁵ and the mosaic of ʿAftūhā,⁴⁶ where the closed-loop *he* occurs alongside the opened *he*. From this one might suppose that the opened-*he* shape was the most prevalent one among the Edessan inscriptions (Figure 5.15).

It should be noted, however, that the Edessan material also presents a great number of instances of *he* with the central downstroke slanting towards the left, where it tends to touch the left leg of the letter and thus form a loop. This type of *he* is especially illustrated by the inscription of ʿAftūhā,⁴⁷ engraved on the column of the citadel of Edessa (Figure 5.14), and by the main text in a now-lost mosaic from Aşağı Mıcıt, west of Şanlıurfa, dated to the year 242/3.⁴⁸ In addition to

⁴¹ Desreumaux, Gaborit, and Caillou, “Nouvelles découvertes,” 97, fig. 21.

⁴² Teixidor, “Inscripción siriaca,” 433–36.

⁴³ Pognon, *Inscriptions sémitiques*, 87–89, no. 48, pl. XXIII; Judah Benzion Segal, *Edessa, “The Blessed City”* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 34–35, pl. 30a; Klaus Beyer, “Altsyrische Inschriften neu gelesen,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 146 (1996): 43–44 no. 39; Drijvers and Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions*, no. As5; Güler, *Şanlıurfa Yazıtları*, 104.

⁴⁴ Judah Benzion Segal, “Four Syriac Inscriptions,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 30 (1967): 300–2 no. 3; Drijvers and Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions*, no. As58; Güler, *Şanlıurfa Yazıtları*, 140.

⁴⁵ Drijvers and Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions*, no. Am11; Güler, *Şanlıurfa Yazıtları*, 65; Önal, *Urfa-Edessa Mozaikleri*, 51–52.

⁴⁶ Line 5 of the inscription: Drijvers and Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions*, no. Am2; Önal, *Urfa-Edessa Mozaikleri*, 54–55.

⁴⁷ Line 4 of the inscription: Drijvers and Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions*, no. As1.

⁴⁸ Güler, *Şanlıurfa Yazıtları*, 71.

epigraphic data, the three administrative parchments from the Middle Euphrates provide a notable example since they contain both forms of the letter *he*.⁴⁹ But in parchments, unlike in inscriptions, the closed-loop *he* appears to have been utilised much more frequently than the opened-*he* shape; therefore, we can assume that this ductus is the most cursive one in the Edessan material (Figure 5.16).⁵⁰

With respect to the *he* in Syriac inscriptions – i.e., those with overt Christian connotations – mosaicists and engravers have in general used both forms of *he*, sometimes to the point of alternating them within the same text. The only exception to this are the oldest inscriptions, i.e. the inscription of the son of ‘Abdū and that of Auxentios, which only contain opened-*he* shapes (Figure 5.18).⁵¹ However, a slight difference in the use of *he* shapes can be observed depending on the material on which inscriptions are made.

It seems that the closed-loop *he* is somewhat more common among the earliest Syriac inscriptions on stone than in Edessan epigraphy, although, as mentioned above, very few pre-seventh-century engraved inscriptions have survived in Turkey. The only dated inscription on stone from Turkey containing the letter *he* is that of Kırk Mağara (584/5 CE, Figure 5.8),⁵² where the *he* is attested twice, each represented by one of the two styles. The *he* also occurs in the unpublished inscription of Günece and in the two early inscriptions on stone found in Kızılkoyun and Kale Eteği necropoleis in Şanlıurfa, dated on archaeological and palaeographic grounds, namely: 1) the Syriac-Greek bilingual funerary inscription of Za‘ūrā’s family (*ca.* late fourth-early fifth century, Figure 5.9),

⁴⁹ See n. 2 above.

⁵⁰ On the letter *he* in Edessan inscriptions, compared to *he* in later Syriac manuscripts, see Drijvers and Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions*, 12.

⁵¹ See n. 15 above.

⁵² Güler, *Şanlıurfa Yazıtları*, 143.

1) once in each of the two inscriptions of Aşağı Mıcır tiled in mosaic in the year 475/6 CE;⁶¹ 2) twice in the mosaic inscription of Kurtaran, which also contains another *he* with an opened-*he* shape, dated to 491/2 CE; 3) and six times in three mosaic inscriptions from Hazinedere dating from the year 556 CE.⁶² It should be pointed out that one of these inscriptions – the one on the border of the mosaic in the *bet sahde* – comprises three *he* without the central downstroke and a closed-loop *he* whose right stroke ends with a hook towards the left (Figure 5.5); and 4) three occurrences in the mosaic inscription of Yolbilen from the year 561/2 CE (Figure 5.6).⁶³ The unpublished mosaic inscription of Örmetaş, made in the year 488/9 CE, deserves special attention. Although it does not record any closed-loop *he*, it includes a couple of instances of opened *he* tilted to the right, but with the central downstroke slanted to the left, as well as a *he* with a rather atypical shape, featuring a combination of two closed-loops, thus resembling a *semkat* (Figure 5.18).

In the case of undated mosaic inscriptions, the same conclusion applies to six inscriptions datable between the fifth and seventh centuries, in which the closed-loop *he* is predominant: 1–4) four unpublished mosaic inscriptions from Cıncıklı (*ca.* fifth–sixth centuries) with eight occurrences; 5) the unpublished mosaic inscription of Nizip (probably sixth or seventh century), in which the *he* takes different shapes: two with a closed loop, but one of which is made with the right stroke; three having the opened *he*, with one of them having the end of the middle stroke very close

⁶¹ Bülent Üçdağ and Erman Bediz, “Şanlıurfa Otoban Kurtarma Kazısı 2008/2009 Yılı Çalışmaları,” in *19. Müze Çalışmaları ve Kurtarma Kazıları Sempozyumu 29.04 – 01.05.2010*, ed. A. Naci Toy and Candaş Keskin (Ankara: İsmail Aygül, 2011), 26, fig. 11–12; Güler, *Şanlıurfa Yazıtları*, 72; Önal, *Urfa-Edessa Mozaikleri*, 27, fot. 39; Daccache, “La ‘mise en pierre,’” 95, fig. 17.

⁶² Desreumaux and Önal, “The Translation,” 138, fot. 174, 140–41, fot. 176–77; See also Önal, *Urfa-Edessa Mozaikleri*, 130, fot. 165.

⁶³ Elif Keser-Kayaalp, “The Beth Qadishe in the Late Antique Monasteries of Northern Mesopotamia (South-Eastern Turkey),” *Parole de l’Orient* 35 (2010): 328, fig. 8; Güler, *Şanlıurfa Yazıtları*, 159; Önal, *Urfa-Edessa Mozaikleri*, 113–14, fot. 145, 147; Desreumaux, “About Recent Discoveries,” 238–39.

to the left one; and 6) the mosaic of Aşağbaşak (probably sixth or seventh century) with three attestations.

In light of these data, the following chronological developments can be observed. The opened-*he* shape was predominant among the inscriptions dated to the Edessan Period, on stone and even more so in mosaics; the two forms coexist in a more balanced proportion in early Syriac epigraphy (fifth–sixth centuries). Then the opened-*he* shape prevails again for the later periods, starting from the eighth century. As regards the medium, i.e. mosaic vs. stone, we can observe that it does not impact the shape of the *he* in the Edessan inscriptions, since in both media the formal opened-*he* is largely predominant. On the other hand, in Syriac inscriptions, the cursive closed-loop *he* is more frequently attested in mosaic than on stone; one may thus suggest that the medium has an influence on the cursive shape of the letter in the Syriac epigraphic corpus. Nevertheless, caution is in order since, on the one hand, mosaic inscriptions have thus far not been attested after the eighth century, and, on the other hand, Syriac inscriptions on stone are very rare during the first centuries CE (i.e., before the seventh century). In any case, we are inclined to attribute the more widespread use of the closed-loop *he* in Syriac mosaic inscriptions, compared with the Edessan ones, to the greater contact of engravers with milieux where the cursive handwriting was used.⁶⁴

[PLACE FIGURE_5.14 HERE]

Figure 5.14 Palaeographic chart of the letter *he* in engraved Edessan inscriptions from Turkey

[PLACE FIGURE_5.15 HERE]

⁶⁴ See Daccache, “La ‘mise en pierre’,” 97–98, who discusses the case of engraver-priests in ecclesiastical and monastic milieux.

Figure 5.15 Palaeographic chart of the letter *he* in Edessan inscriptions tiled in mosaics from

Turkey

[PLACE FIGURE_5.16 HERE]

Figure 5.16 The letter *he* in the administrative parchments from the Middle Euphrates. Left: P1

(© Beinecke Library); right: P2 (Teixidor 1990: Fig. 1)

[PLACE FIGURE_5.17 HERE]

Figure 5.17 Palaeographic chart of the letter *he* in engraved Syriac inscriptions from Turkey

[PLACE FIGURE_5.18 HERE]

Figure 5.18 Palaeographic chart of the letter *he* in Syriac inscriptions tiled in mosaics from

Turkey

2.2 Functional Use of Letters: The Case of the *'olaf*

Sometimes there are practical reasons that explain the use of a cursive letter, in particular the straight-line *'olaf*. This is especially illustrated in some inscriptions from Turkey dating from the eighth century onwards. Some stone-carvers chose to use the cursive form of the *'olaf* when it appears at the end of a line, or before the edge of a stone, such as the one from the eighth century engraved on the South wall of Saint Sergius church in Eneš, located in the province of Gaziantep on the Euphrates River. The use of a cursive *'olaf* here reflects the concern of the engraver to provide an orderly layout of the inscription (Figure 5.19).

[PLACE FIGURE_5.19 HERE]

Figure 5.19 Excerpt from the inscription on the South wall of Saint Sergius church in Eneš (© A.

Desreumaux)

Similarly, three engravers from the Ṭūr ‘Abdīn region – Yūḥanon and ‘Alwān, who carved together an epitaph (912/3 CE) in Hešterek,⁶⁵ and the anonymous author of a funerary inscription (940 CE) in the church of Mor Domeṭ in Zāz⁶⁶ – opted for two cursive *’olaf* at the end of lines 2 and 11 respectively, so that the word would not extend beyond the stone, nor would it be cut at the end of the lines (Figure 5.20-21).

[PLACE FIGURE_5.20 HERE]

Figure 5.20 Drawing of the epitaph from Hešterek dated to the year 912/3 CE (Pognon 1907: pl.

pl. XL, 107)

[PLACE FIGURE 5.21 HERE]

Figure 5.21 Inscription of Mor Domeṭ’s church in Zāz (Durmaz 2021: 117)

The inscription of Mor Gabriel in Qartmīn, set in a frame decorated with zigzags and listing the bishops of the monastery between 848/9 and 1088/9 CE, provides a particularly interesting example.⁶⁷ It should be stressed at the outset that the inscription was executed by a single engraver, with no later additions. The *’olaf* of the demonstrative pronoun *’olaf*, at the end of line 10, has been written cursively so that it does not extend over the frame and complies with the margin of the text. It is also noteworthy that the whole word, *’olaf*, is smaller than the rest of the inscription. This suggests that the sculpted frame was prepared before the text. However, the two instances of *’olaf* at the end of the first two lines are written with a formal script and run over the frame. Close examination of the upper part of the inscription shows that these instances of *’olaf* were engraved after the completion of the zigzag-decoration. In order to execute both instances, it seems that the

⁶⁵ Pognon, *Inscriptions sémitiques*, 197–98 no. 107, pl. XL.

⁶⁶ Reyhan Durmaz, “Patronage and Prestige in the Countryside: The Case of the Church of Mār Domeṭ in Medieval Northern Mesopotamia,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 80, no. 1 (2021): 116–18, fig. 10.

⁶⁷ Palmer, “A Corpus of Inscriptions,” 116, 118–19, no. B13.

engraver had to dig out and slightly flatten the relief of the frame. In this case, it would thus appear that the engraver was compelled to either respect the formal shape of the letter or the margin (Figure 5.22).

[PLACE FIGURE_5.22 HERE]

Figure 5.22 Details of the inscription of Mor Gabriel in Qartmīn (© A. Desreumaux)

Finally, the cursive *'olaf* appears at the end of the line in three epitaphs from the twelfth century in Hešterek⁶⁸ and once in Ḥāḥ.⁶⁹ Here too, the engravers adopted this form rather than the monumental one, so that the letter does not protrude beyond the margin (Figure 5. 23-26).

[PLACE FIGURE_5.23 HERE]

Figure 5.23 Drawing of the epitaph from Hešterek dated to the year 1102/3 CE (Pognon 1907: pl.

XXXVIII, 97)

[PLACE FIGURE_5.24 HERE]

Figure 5.24 Drawing of the epitaph from Hešterek dated to the year 1110/1 CE (Pognon 1907: pl.

XL, 109)

[PLACE FIGURE_5.25 HERE]

Figure 5.25 Drawing of the epitaph from Hešterek dated to the year 1195/6 CE (Pognon 1907: pl.

XLI, 116)

[PLACE FIGURE_5.26 HERE]

Figure 5.26 Drawing of the epitaph from Ḥāḥ dated to the year 1180/1 CE (Pognon 1907: pl.

XXVIII, 64)

⁶⁸ The inscriptions date respectively to ca. 1102/3 CE, 1110/1 CE, and 1195/6 CE, Pognon, *Inscriptions sémitiques*, 192–93 no. 97, 198–89 no. 109 and 201–02 no. 116, pl. XXXVII, XL and XLI.

⁶⁹ The inscription dates to the year 1180/1 CE, Pognon, *Inscriptions sémitiques*, 118–19 no. 64, pl. XXVIII.

In an inscription from Hešterek (976 CE), we observe another interesting case of a single-stroke *'olaf*. This shape is found in the twice-attested numeral *'olef* (“one thousand”). Not only did the engraver-priest Šamu'il use the cursive shape, but he also slanted it, so that it follows the slope of the *lomad* that comes after it (Figure 5.27).⁷⁰ Two other occurrences of the *'olaf-lomad* set are present in this inscription, but without these characteristics, since the *'olaf* has the monumental shape. Therefore, this last example confirms that the engraver – or possibly the scribe who wrote the text copied by the engraver – could choose the cursive form of the *'olaf* for aesthetic reasons, and not because of the limits of the inscription frame.

[PLACE FIGURE_5.27 HERE]

Figure 5.27 Drawing of the epitaph from Hešterek dated to the year 976 CE (Pognon 1907: pl.

XXXIX, 99)

On the basis of these two case studies on the letters *he* and *'olaf* found in Syriac inscriptions from Turkey, several reasons may be given for the use of a cursive letter in the main text. First, the diachronic analysis of the letter *he* in both the Edessan corpus and the Syriac one reveals a progressive increase in the use of its cursive shape, especially between the fifth and sixth centuries.⁷¹ This is perhaps due to the social contexts that the engravers come from, especially ecclesiastical and monastic circles where cursive writing was in use. In the case of the *'olaf*, the use of the cursive form is due to practical or aesthetic reasons. The question arises then as to whether an engraver would change his writing style when producing a different kind of text, namely para-texts.

⁷⁰ Pognon, *Inscriptions sémitiques*, 194–95, no. 99, pl. XXXIX.

⁷¹ One might interpret the rare occurrences of the cursive closed-loop *he* in Syriac inscriptions dating from the eighth century onwards as proof of the standardisation of epigraphic scripts; but this hypothesis needs to be confirmed by further research.

3. Paratextual elements: Cursive Writing in Colophons and Marginalia

In Syriac epigraphy, when the engraver signs the inscription, he generally uses the same letter shapes for both text and colophon.⁷² However, in some cases, he may choose to be less careful in writing his signature. The newly discovered mosaic inscription of Gola offers a good example of this: the mosaicist who paved the church of Gola probably in the year 589 CE engraved his name (or, less likely, the name of the donor) – ܝܘܗܢܘܢ ܒܢ ܘܢܝܗܘܢ, “Yūḥanon his son/the son of...” – outside the *tabula ansata* where the main inscription is located (Figure 5.2).⁷³ Although the letter-forms are intermixed in both the main text and the para-text,⁷⁴ the latter is not as carefully executed as the former. The line of writing, which is oriented horizontally, is not straight, but slightly curved in its middle, producing a less regular distribution of the letters. Therefore, it is not the use of cursive forms that distinguishes the text from the para-text.

In other cases, the engraver may have intentionally mixed monumental and cursive forms for paratextual elements, while adopting a monumental style in the main text. In other words, he uses an informal script for the para-text and a formal one for the main text.⁷⁵ This concerns only inscriptions dated to the eighth century onwards, after Syriac scripts were standardised. The mingling of forms is illustrated in the colophon of the commemorative inscription engraved in the

⁷² A list of signatures has been provided by Daccache, “La ‘mise en pierre’,” 95–99.

⁷³ For signatures in floor mosaics in Palmyrene, Edessan Aramaic, and Syriac, see the chapter of Sean V. Leatherbury in this volume.

⁷⁴ The *bet* and the *riš* are square in the text and in the paratextual element; the *waw* is only attested in the cursive form, consisting of a closed circle in both parts; the *he* has the formal shape in the main text, whereas it has a closed loop in the “signature”. Besides the standard *yud*, there is another outstanding instance, which has a tail that runs upwards also when the letter is not in the final position. Thus, when it is in the initial position, this *yud* is linked to the following letter (the *riš* in the main text and the *waw* in the “signature”) in its upper part. The *mim*, which is only attested in the main text, alternates between the rectangular shape and the circular one with the upper shaft running diagonally upwards, a shape that is also found in manuscript colophons and marginal notes (Penn, Crouser, and Abbott, “Serto before Serto,” 58, fig. 7).

⁷⁵ This phenomenon can be more clearly observed to a larger extent in the manuscripts, which reflects the greater care given to the text over the para-text. See Penn, Crouser, and Abbott, “Serto before Serto”.

the para-text probably chose a very formal script here because he aimed to continue the main inscription and not just to write a note.

4. Writing Tendencies in Graffiti

So far, we have examined “official” inscriptions, where cursive letters can be found among monumental letters. Attention should also be paid, though, to graffiti. First of all, it should be noted that graffiti are usually neglected in scholarship on Syriac epigraphy. They are mentioned marginally and most of the time without any pictures or an attempted reading. A few exceptions to this general rule exist: E. Littmann published Syriac graffiti from Syria in his 1905 *Semitic Inscriptions*,⁸² and more recently S. P. Brock, H. Goldfus, and A. Kofsky have dedicated a fascinating study to the Syriac mediaeval graffiti engraved on the main gate of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.⁸³ Yet, the palaeography is not the principal focus of these works, which rather focus on deciphering the content of the graffiti and identifying their authors. When turning to Syriac graffiti from Turkey, scholars face several obstacles: graffiti are not yet surveyed, up to now the findings are limited, and the majority of them are not easy to read.

Graffiti can be found on sacred buildings, flanking the entrance of a church,⁸⁴ or on the walls of monasteries.⁸⁵ In Eneš (Gaziantep province), graffiti were engraved on the walls of the above-

⁸² Enno Littmann, *Publications of an American Archaeological Expedition to Syria in 1899-1900*, 4, *Semitic Inscriptions from Northern Central Syria, Palmyra and the Region of the Ḥaurân* (New-York, London: The Century Co.-William Heinemann, 1905), for example nos. 16–18.

⁸³ Sebastian P. Brock, Haim Goldfus, and Aryeh Kofsky, “The Syriac Inscriptions at the Entrance to the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem,” *ARAM* 18–19 (2006–2007): 415–38. See also Christian Locatell’s recent article on nine other unpublished graffiti: Christian Locatell, “More Syriac Graffiti at the Southern Entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre,” *Aramaic Studies* 20 (2022): 44–71.

⁸⁴ On the Limestone Massif in Syria, see Françoise Briquel Chatonnet, Jimmy Daccache, and Alain Desreumaux, “Écrire en syriaque dans les espaces sacrés en Syrie du Nord,” in *Espace sacré en Syrie du Nord à l’époque protobyzantine: actes du colloque de décembre 2015, Paris* (forthcoming).

⁸⁵ For example, in the sixth-century monastery of Mor Ya‘qub, South of Şanlıurfa, signatures were left on walls within the precinct, alongside Armenian graffiti. They are other good examples of the vertical orientation of Syriac writing,

mentioned Saint Sergius church. On the outer side of the Northern wall a graffito with a cross was carved near a very well-executed and long inscription bearing a religious polemical content.⁸⁶ The latter's amazingly proportioned writing may have influenced the author of this graffito: although it is not well preserved, there is no doubt that the letters were not scribbled but carefully written. From what remains, one can see a straight *'olaf* at the end of the first line (Figure 5.30). On the outer side of the Southern wall, another Syriac graffito mentions the Arabic names 'Abbās bar Ġabr and Ġubayr bar Sabīl. Most likely, one of these two persons wrote both names, given the consistency in the "handwriting". The lines are vertical; the letters are very well executed, and, apart from the *he* and the *'olaf*, they are all square, following a rather monumental script⁸⁷ (Figure 5.31). This is striking proof of the careful and precise writing that can be qualified as "calligraphy", despite the fact that it is a graffito.

[PLACE FIGURE_5.30 HERE]

Figure 5.30 Cursive *'olaf* in the graffito of the North wall of Saint Sergius church in Eneš (© A. Desreumaux)

[PLACE FIGURE_5.31 HERE]

Figure 5.31 Cursive *'olaf* and *he* in the graffito of the South wall of Saint Sergius church in Eneš (© A. Desreumaux)

Hence, the scripts used for the graffiti of Saint Sergius church are not very different from the ones found in Syriac official inscriptions, especially with regard to the coexistence of cursive and monumental features.

compared to the horizontally oriented Armenian one. On this monastery, which is still not well studied, see the brief discussion in Keser-Kayaalp, *Church Architecture*, 65–66.

⁸⁶ Simon Brelaud, Jimmy Daccache, and Flavia Ruani, "Unpublished Syriac Inscriptions from the Ruins of Saint-Sergius' Church in Eneš," *The Harp* 35 (2019 [2021]): 250–60.

⁸⁷ Brelaud, Daccache, and Ruani, "Unpublished Syriac Inscriptions," 249–50.

5. Conclusion

The present study aimed to extend the palaeographic analysis of Syriac that has been applied to manuscripts by investigating the palaeography of Syriac inscriptions from South-East Turkey (fifth – thirteenth centuries). More particularly, we examined the attestations of the two main writing styles, i.e. the cursive and monumental styles, found in the same inscriptions. We adopted various approaches based on the chronology, the medium, the distinction of the writing between main texts and para-texts, as well as graffiti. The combination of these approaches led to several observations on the development of the Syriac scripts. Most importantly, we can conclude that what distinguishes the overall monumentality or cursiveness of the analysed Syriac inscriptions is not limited to the shape of the letters, but includes the characteristics of the engraving, notably the precision of the engraving, the justification of the text, the regularity, and the calligraphy of the letters. Moreover, the presence of some cursive letters in an inscription does not imply that the inscription is not official.

This study allows us to formulate two general observations which need to be explored further: the first concerns the wider notion of standardisation of scripts in Syriac epigraphy and the second the social milieu of the engravers:

1) The shape of the letters is not a sufficient criterion for defining a standardised script in inscriptions, be it by considering the medium or the date (at least until the thirteenth century). Indeed, one of the first outcomes of our investigation has been that the monumental shape of the letters – inherited from the script of the Edessan inscriptions – was undoubtedly the main tendency of writing on mosaics and stone, both for official inscriptions and graffiti. Besides, some cursive forms can be found both in inscriptions on mosaics and stone, in the main texts and on the para-

texts, and sometimes alternating with monumental forms within the same inscription, as observed in the manuscripts.⁸⁸ The criteria that are used to mark discrepancies of writing in inscriptions, whether on mosaics or stone (the morphology, the ductus, etc.), do not allow us to identify standardised scripts in Syriac inscriptions, contrary to what has been done for writing systems in manuscripts.⁸⁹ However, trends and patterns can be discerned in epigraphy which may help us to date undated inscriptions, such as the growth of cursive forms between the fifth and sixth centuries.

2) The mingling of monumental and cursive tendencies in epigraphy raises sociological questions, such as the literacy of the engravers of inscriptions and their social status.⁹⁰ We have suggested above that the engravers may originate from ecclesiastical and monastic milieux; this needs to be further explored, especially by addressing the question of workshops where priests and monks would be trained to become writers of inscriptions. Moreover, the significant cursive trends, especially in the earliest inscriptions, could indicate that the practice of cursive writing in Syriac was more widespread among speakers of Syriac than we might think because of the lack of day-to-day Syriac documents, and influenced epigraphic habits.

⁸⁸ Even in Syriac manuscripts of the same period and region, one may notice that the “pure” monumental script is rarely used. For example, in the ms. London, British Library, Add. 12 150 (411 CE), some letters have a monumental shape (the *’olaf* with a hook at the bottom of its right foot; the *bet* and the *taw* are angular; the *waw* is open in its lower part; the *semkat* is also very similar), while others are more cursive (*dolat*/*riš* with the comma-shaped form, tilted *zayn*, closed *mim*). For an analysis of the letters, see <https://hmmlschool.org/syriac-earliest-estrangela/>.

⁸⁹ See n. 3 above. Furthermore, the cursive features do not seem to undergo a standardisation in inscriptions, contrary to the example of the appearance of *serto* in eighth-century manuscripts. *Serto* script is only found in inscriptions from recent periods.

⁹⁰ Cf. John F. Healey, “Minimal Literacy: Some Evidence from the Earliest Syriac Documents,” in *Le calame et le ciseau : colophons syriaques offerts à Françoise Briquel Chatonnet*, ed. Simon Brelaud, Jimmy Daccache, Muriel Debié, Margherita Farina, Flavia Ruani, and Émilie Villey (Paris: Geuthner, 2021), 175–90.

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