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## PAINTINGS, MOSAICS, ICONS. A SYRIAC HYMN ON THE CATHEDRAL OF EDESSA<sup>1</sup>

The 13<sup>th</sup>-century Codex Vaticanus 95, fol. 49-50 has preserved a magnificent Syriac hymn (ܣܘܓܝܬܐ *sugitho*) on the Cathedral Church of Edessa (Urhay, Urfa) composed by a gifted anonymous Syriac poet who flourished in all likelihood during the reign of Justinian. There is very little information about him and his poetic lore. We can only deduce that the Syriac *melodos* probably wrote his poem for the consecration of the newly constructed Cathedral church in Edessa.<sup>2</sup> Its architecture was inspired by and modelled on the Church of Divine Wisdom in Constantinople, which still deserves its fame as the greatest jewel of Christian architecture in the world. Still in the time of its construction John of Ephesus, quoted by the anonymous Chronicler of Zuqin, rightly labelled it 'the most magnificent church in the world'.<sup>3</sup> The Edessan clergy had huge ambitions to establish 'a second Jerusalem' and set up an alternative centre of Christianity to Antioch, Constantinople or Alexandria, which they managed to accomplish at least to a certain degree. Justinian's church in Edessa was admired for successive centuries as one of the world's wonders (Duval 1892; Goussen 1925: 117). I feel

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<sup>2</sup> The hymn was preserved in the Syriac Jacobite *tropologion*, which was described by Assemani as follows: Cod. antiq. in-8, bombyc., foll. 98, Syriacis litteris stranghelis exaratus. Scalae ܣܘܒܝܠܬܐ (*sebiltae*), ex hymnis ܡܕܪܫܬܐ (*medrasheh*) maxime S. Ephraemi confectae, numero 156, init. et fin. mutilus, circa XIII saeculum; cf. Goussen 1925: 117. The Syriac version in Goussen 1925: 118-119, German translation in Goussen 1925: 120-121; a German translation which slightly differs from Goussen's in Schneider 1941: 161-163; the French translation in Dupont-Sommer 1947: 30-32; the Polish translation in Kania 1991-1992: 234-37; Kania 1973: 165-167.

<sup>3</sup> Ps.-Dionysius of Tell-Mahre on the reconstruction of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople in Witakowski 1996: 117-118.

and share this feeling with others that the anonymous author of the Edessan *sugitho*, a literary work remarkable for its sophisticated poetics of sixteen-syllable verse perfected within the frame of a two-verse stanza, was only one of many poems representative of the golden age of the Greek and Syriac poetry, the period which brought the hymnic poetry of Romanos Melodos, a Greek poet of Syriac descent, the Syriac poets like Simon of Geshir or Jacob of Serug, or the Greek poets known as the *Kyklos* of Agathias. It is not without importance that the most prominent of the latter, Paulus Silentarius, wrote his hexametric hymn for the consecration of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople which was celebrated at Christmas, 563. The event came after a longer period of reconstruction works on the dome, which had collapsed as a result of the earthquake of 553.<sup>4</sup> It cannot altogether be excluded on the chronological grounds that Paulus Silentarius was inspired by the Syriac poem performed during a consecration ceremony in Edessa some ten to twenty years earlier. This is a subject I will be returning to several times in the present study.

I think that here it is necessary to add a few words of commentary which would place the anonymous Edessan poem within a wider and already well established tradition of consecration hymns and rhetorical *enkomia* on churches, genres which always referred to art and architecture in their standard *ecphrastic* structural units. We already find them in the writings of Eusebius of Caesarea, in his description of the golden *octogon* in Antioch, the newly built church in Tyre, the *Anastasis* Church in Jerusalem or the Nativity Church in Bethlehem. We can follow the tradition of the genre in the rhetorical description of St. Euphemia's *Martyrion* in Chalcedon with its impressive cycle of paintings documented by Asterios of Amaseia, or in the description of the church in Nyssa by Gregory of Nyssa, in Balai's Syriac consecration hymn on the church in Kenneshrin (Chalcis), or in the elegiac Greek verse in the *Palatine Anthology*, and finally in the panegyric writing in honour of Justinian composed by Procopius of Caesarea with his two major *ecphraseis* of the Hagia Sophia and the Apostles' Church in Constantinople (*de aedificiis Justiniani*). The Edessan *sugitho* and the poem of Balai must have been performed by choirs of singers. Referring to this type of music, Mar Denha criticized the Nestorians that 'in order to deceive the naive poor folk they enchant their ears with the church hymns and beautiful melodies' (Pigulewska 1989: 44).

In its dedicatory inscription the *sugitho* names Bishop Amidonius as the founder of the church (*Sug. II 2*). Amidonius was a Chalcedonian bishop who

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<sup>4</sup> The Greek text of the poem appended with a general description of its contents in Friedländer 1912; the German translation of the *ecphrastic* part of the poem vv. 354-835 in Richter 1897: 66-79; the *ambo* vv. 51-296, Richter 1897: 84-90; *Patrologia Graeca* 86 II, 2119-2158; *descriptio ambonis* in *Patrologia Graeca* 86 II, 2251-2264.

succeeded Bishop Addai (533-541) and held the office in the times of the famous Monophysite Bishop of Edessa, Jacob Baradaeus (541-578) (Duval 1892: 216), who in actual fact never had the opportunity to enjoy this appointment. In 544 Chosroes I besieged the city. Since the Edessa *sugitho* referred to the famous *acheiropoietos* image of Christ as preserved and venerated in the Cathedral, and since we also learn about the image first from Euagrius Scholasticus (*HE* 4, 27) who elaborated on the siege and the miraculous salvation of the city through divine intervention, we may conclude that the poem may have been written some time after 544.<sup>5</sup> In 579 Edessa was again besieged by Hormizd. In 602 after the death of Mauricius Chosroes II invaded Roman Mesopotamia and in 609 captured Edessa. The churches held by the Chalcedonians were handed over to the Monophysites. These dates clearly show the chronological frame of the poem. A. Grabar believed that it was written some time in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, because it reveals the theological and cosmological conceptions of Maximus the Confessor (Grabar 1947: 58).<sup>6</sup> Schneider also wavered when he wrote that the hymn was performed on every anniversary of the consecration (Schneider 1941:161). In 629/30 Heraclius regained control over Edessa, however already in 637 the city was lost again and this time it was seized by the Arabs. The late 6<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries were certainly not a period to celebrate the glory of the Cathedral and its precious liturgical appurtenances. In those years the Syrian and North Mesopotamian churches suffered from plunder and severe devastation. The *sugitho* must have been written some time shortly after 544, that is c.550, the more so as it referred to Bishop Amidonius as the founder of a new church, who in all likelihood ordered the poem for the consecration ceremony.<sup>7</sup> The hymn's confusing opening phrase ܩܘܡܐ ܕܡܢ ܩܘܡܐ (ܩܘܡܐ ܕܡܢ ܩܘܡܐ) (*sugitho ahritho*), that is 'a prior poem', seems to suggest another related hymn. Perhaps 'a second poem' had glorified the splendour of the Cathedral's pulpit, which is mentioned in the preserved work (*Sug.XV*), as in the case of a second poem by Paulus Silentarius, a poetic *ecphrasis* of the pulpit in the Constantinopolitan Hagia Sophia?

Having discussed the date of the Syriac poem in the following section we will be concerned with the confusing history of the Cathedral Church in Urhay. This world wonder of Late Antiquity has had no archaeological research on it, and even its location still remains disputable. Basing on Guyer's map, Schneider suggested the south-western area of the town, the area which is situated to the north of the upper *acropolis* between the water pools (Schneider 1941, p.168, Fig.1). F.Trombley and J.Watt, the editors of the *Chronicle* of Joshua the Stylites

<sup>5</sup> Euagrius *HE* on the salvation of Edessa in Dobschütz 1899: 108f. Euagrius based his account on the *Bella* by Procopius of Caesarea, in Dobschütz 1899: 106f.

<sup>6</sup> Maximus the Confessor + 662/3.

<sup>7</sup> Dupont-Sommer 1947: 29 dated it in the mid fifth century.

located the church of St. Thomas there (Trombley, Watt 2000: Map. IV; cf. Segal 1970: 264, Plan II). This reflects a lasting confusion. 'Die Stadt Orhai-Edessa ... ist archäologisch, leider so gut wie nicht erforscht' Schneider wrote in his paper. His pessimistic evaluation of our archaeological knowledge regarding the Cathedral Church of Edessa still remains more or less valid despite the passage of almost 70 years since the publication of Schneider's paper (1941). J. Lassus in his brilliant and still indispensable book *Sanctuaires chrétiens de Syrie* (1947) did not find place for even a short passage on the most famous church in Syria. Basing on the Syriac chroniclers A. Baumstark once undertook a painstaking and still admirable effort aimed at clarifying the history of the Cathedral Church of Edessa (1904). Goussen followed the results of Baumstark's study in his essential paper concerned with the translation and commentary to the Edessan *sugitho* (1925). Kirsten's paper on Edessa published in *RACH* did not bring anything which might be regarded as illuminating or new if compared with the results put forward by Baumstark in 1904.<sup>8</sup> The history of Edessa Cathedral does not cease to raise doubts. In some points it still keeps its secrets from us. In his *Church History* Michael the Syrian (1125-1199) recorded that the Chalcedonian Bishop Amazon (38<sup>th</sup> bishop of Edessa) rebuilt the great church (*M.* II, 246b) (c.445). The information was repeated by Bar Hebraeus (1225/6-1286) (*S.* I 220) (Goussen 1925: 129; Kirsten (in *RACH*: 578); Grabar 1947: 43, cf. n.12; Schneider 1941: 163f). In all likelihood Procopius of Caesarea referred to that event in his panegyric in honour of Justinian and his building programme which covered all his empire (*de aedificiis* 2, 7, 1-5). The construction works in Edessa followed a catastrophic flood which brought about the utter ruin of the previous church in the winter of 524/5.<sup>9</sup> The anonymous 13<sup>th</sup>-century Syriac chronicler from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, sometimes labelled the *Anonymous Baumstarki*, or the *Anonymous Chronicler of 1234* (his Chronicle ranges from 527 to 1234) referred in passing to the 'old great church' raised by Bishop Amasonius (*An.* S.295) (Goussen 1925: 131). The *sugitho* which named him Amidonios (*Sug.* II 2) additionally preserved the names of the architects – Asaf and Addai, as was once suggested by Goussen (Goussen 1925: 122). This information about the architects is unique in the extant sources. We can be sure that the poet referred to the constructors because the *sugitho* compared Amidonius, Asaf and Addai to Beseleel, who was responsible for the Tabernacle in the desert according to the biblical account (*Ex.* 31,2; 35,30). Beseleel had a collaborator in the person of Ohaliab (Dupont-Sommer 1947: 33). Let us note another and perhaps not incidental parallel. In his lofty hexameters Paulus Silentiarius celebrated the builders of the Hagia Sophia: Anthemios of Tralleis and Isidoros of Ephesus.

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<sup>8</sup> Kirsten (in *RACH*: 577-581) is particularly relevant here.

<sup>9</sup> Ps. Dionysius of Tell-Mahre described the disaster, Witkowski 1996: 41 ff.

Where should we look for the church on the archaeological map of ancient Urhai? The Church of Amidonios was surrounded by water. The poem states this very clearly: **هَامْرُ حَطَا حَطَا مَسْمَمِ** ‘the waters surround it like the sea’ (*Sug.* IV 2). Consequently it is generally regarded that the region of the mosque of Khalil Errahman may be implied in the text (Kirsten in RACH: 580). However in the present state of our knowledge this information does not cease to raise doubts. The *Anonymous Chronicler of 1234* located the older Cathedral Church of St.Saviour in the same place, ‘on the ponds’, that is in the western part of the city (Chabot 1920, I p.123). The Church of St.Saviour was first mentioned by the *Chronicon Edessenum* in the connection with the flood of 201 (no 1/VIII, Guidi, *Chron.min.* I, 1903, p.3, 1.23/24) (Goussen 1925: 124). Baumstark and Goussen emphasize that the Church of St.Saviour which according to tradition was built by the Apostle Thaddaeus, and the Church of Divine Wisdom were two different churches and should not be confused with one another (Matthew of Edessa s.48/9 and 229, ed.Dulaurier 1858). Michael the Syrian wrote that the Arabs destroyed both the Great Church and the Church of St. Saviour (Mar Paroqa), that is Abgar’s church, in 1186 (III 2, s.398, Chabot 1899). We also know that the St. Saviour’s Church was of the basilica type located in a former pagan temple founded by Seleucos I Nicator and that it was adorned with rows of columns (*An.* I p.123, Chabot 1920). Consequently it was a church with an entirely different plan and appearance from Justinian’s church, which was built on a central plan and crowned with a monumental dome. It is difficult to decide whether these mentioned churches stood on the same site in two different construction periods or, whether they were only located in the same quarter of the city as claimed by Baumstark. It is impossible to give a definitive answer to this question.

Some time in the 380s a Spanish nun Egeria (if we correctly read her name and her identity) visited Edessa and left an interesting account. She paid a visit to a church which she described as *valde pulchra et nova dispositione* (big, very beautiful and newly restored), the *Martyrion* of St.Thomas the Apostle, *ubi corpus illius integrum positum est* (where his complete body was buried), and as she put it, the palaces of Abgar, a contemporary of Christ, and his son Ma’nu, in fact probably of Abgar IX and his son Severus Abgar bar Abgar (Dobschütz 1899: 155f.; Petré 1948; Wilkinson 1971). It is hard to decide if she visited two different places of worship, a church and a separate *martyrion* of St. Thomas, or, more likely, a church with an adjoining *Martyrion*, as for example in Sergiopolis (Rusafa). We know that the relics of St. Thomas were transferred to a renovated church by Bishop Cyros in 394. The church was provided with three naves. It must have been a basilica church.<sup>10</sup> The religious conflicts looming from behind

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<sup>10</sup> Goussen’s suggestion that Egeria’s ‘new arrangement’ refers to *Hierataeum* (a new chancel) founded by Bishop Nonnos in 448 (*Chron.Ed.* no. 68, s.7) cannot be correct. It is too late

the historical narratives blur the historical truth and consequently add to our confusion. The Syrian churches had been changing hands, from the Niceans to the Arians, from the Chalcedonians to the Monophysites, and vice versa. In 609 Chosroes II handed over the Cathedral Church of Edessa to the Monophysites. The Chalcedonians regained it in 628. Sometimes we have the feeling that the chroniclers either did not exactly know all the facts, or more likely they pretended not to know. The *Anonymous Chronicler of 1234* mentioned only in passing an important piece of information, that the Chalcedonian bishop Amazonius was the builder of the Cathedral Church. He treated it only as a secondary item of information when he was giving an account of the restoration works carried out in the main Monophysite sanctuary of Maria Theotokos, which were sponsored by a wealthy Jacobite, Athanasius bar Gumayeh. He omitted it when he related the events of the year c. 445. The Maria Theotokos Church was naturally a rival of the main Chalcedonian sanctuary (Goussen 1925: 131). A reader of the *Syriac Chronicles* compiled by Joshua the Stylite or Ps. Dionysius of Tell Mahre knows only too well that the antagonism between the Chalcedonians and the centre of power in Constantinople on the one hand, and the Syrian Monophysites and Nestorians on the other became a meaningful factor which blunted the intellectual faculties and rational thinking. We shall probably never be able to arrive at the truth on the basis of as wide as possible a range of facts. The poem does not say a word about St. Thomas, his relics or his *Martyrion*. It is a strong *argumentum ex silentio* that there were actually two different churches: the Cathedral Church and St. Thomas'. The former held the *acheiropoietos* icon of Christ acquired by Abgar Ukkama, and the latter kept the relics of St. Thomas.

Grabar also pointed out that the Edessan Sugitho did not mention the church's name (Grabar 1947: 59). In fact the poet referred time and again to *ܡܕܒܪܢܘܬܐ* (mdabronauto), the Greek divine οἰκονομία, which may be satisfactorily rendered as 'the Divine Wisdom'.

Now we must face the question of the Cathedral's architecture. I am going to limit myself to a general review of the problem, which has been already extensively discussed from the aspect of the interior church decoration which is the subject of my study. We know that in the early Byzantine churches the visual arts played a subordinate role in the architectural decoration and hence they made up an integral part of the architecture. Schneider, who more or less followed Goussen, believed that Justinian's Cathedral in Edessa was cross-shaped and crowned with a monumental dome. He argued that its cruciform shape was clearly recognizable from the outside (Schneider 1941: 166). It would follow from his arguments that

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for Egeria's visit (the mid 380s), she apparently referred to the Constantinian building or to the restoration works which took place before the transfer of St. Thomas's relics.



be implied in the text of the poem, which says that 'there are magnificent arches, four of them, which represent the four sides of the world' (*Sug.VII*). Concluding our limited discussion on the architecture of the Edessan Cathedral we can safely say that it represented a church on a central plan, which had been widespread in Armenia, Syria and Palestine since the 5<sup>th</sup> century (Kłosińska 1973: 23). The description corresponds well with the church architecture of the Justinian period as we know it from the archaeological data and still extant churches. The poet filled his description with theological speculations. The church crowned with the dome and surrounded by pools of water ('like the sea which surrounds the world' *Sug.IV*) symbolized the universe with the earth, sky and ocean. Surrounded by open air courts which were enclosed with the columned porticos, it alluded to the Twelve Tribes of Israel which encircled the Tabernacle in the desert (*Sug.XI 2*). The architecture seems to have reflected some theological and cosmological speculations which we know from the *Topographia Christiana* by Cosmas Indicopleustes as well as from the mystical writings of Ps. Dionysius Areopagite and the *Mystagogia* by Maximus the Confessor (Grabar 1947: 54ff. Pl.IV, 1-2).

The main section of my paper will be concerned with the figural and decorative arts which adorned the Cathedral's interior: the mosaics and wall paintings, icons, marble stone decoration and liturgical appurtenances. As a result of a historical paradox much of we know about the Christian Oriental wall decoration comes from Rome, Ravenna and Thessaloniki. What we learn from the literary sources and the archaeological discoveries of the recent decades, which refer to the period of the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, leaves no doubt that the best mosaicists and painters worked in the Oriental provinces of the Empire – in Asia Minor, Syria, the Holy Land and Egypt (Kłosińska 1973: 80). The premeditated and systematic destruction carried out by the iconoclasts who had been active in the Christian Orient for more than a century led to an almost total removal of the entire complexes of mosaic and fresco decorations from the walls of the churches in Constantinople and other centres. When in the reign of Constantine V the hands of the iconoclasts were laid on the image of Christ in the Hagia Sophia Church in Constantinople, a contemporary Greek author observed with nostalgia: 'the whole beauty disappeared from the churches' (Tatarkiewicz 1988: 45). The impressive confession of his feelings of regret and irreparable loss may be legitimately extended over the vast territories of the Byzantine Orient. The decline of Greek power in the Orient, the long-lasting wars with Sassanid Persia and finally the armies of Islam added to the almost total destruction of the Christian visual and decorative arts in the East. It is no coincidence that the old classic, Dalton's *Byzantine Art and Archaeology* contains chapters like 'Sculpture now destroyed.' They make a meaningful component of his art history (Dalton 1961: 121ff). Consequently only at times and only sporadically can we retrieve something of their past glory, refreshing inventiveness, unique atmosphere of



solemnity and glamour suffused with spirituality, for example, in the secluded parts of Egypt, as in Bagawat, Bawit, or from the sensational rediscovery of the Sinai icons or from the floor mosaics uncovered through archaeological excavations, like those collected by Father Piccirillo in his impressive book on the mosaics of Jordan (Stern 1960: 93-119; Thérel 1969: 221-270; Severin 1998: 295-338; Piccirillo 1993; Sotiriou 1956-58; Weitzmann 1976). The dome mosaics of S.Constanza in Rome dated to the mid-fourth century, known only from the watercolour copies by F.d'Ollanda, showed a conventional Oriental or Nilotic landscape with all its attributes, which we know from the floor mosaics in the *Casa del fauno* in Pompei, from Tabgha and Sepphoris, or from the mosaic maps of Africa found in Preneste and Aventino in Rome (Maguire 1994: 51, fig.43).<sup>12</sup> Oriental inspirations are also transparent in the abstract gold ground of the dome mosaics in the Arian Baptistry in Ravenna (Kłosińska 1973: 94) or Christ in *mandorla* from the Transfiguration scene in Porenzo (6<sup>th</sup> century) (Kłosińska 1973: 99). The mosaic decoration which shows the Virgin Mary among the Saints in the Chapel of St.Venantius (S. Giovanni in Laterano, Theodor I 642-649) is remarkable for its Egyptian analogies. The same can be said of a fresco portrait of St.Abbasyr of Alexandria in S. Maria Antiqua in Rome (7<sup>th</sup> century), conspicuous for its expressionist and graphic qualities which call to mind the Coptic icons from Bawit (Kłosińska 1973: 108). A range of Egyptian and Syrian motifs can be immediately identified on the rainbow arch of S. Maria Maggiore in Rome (Sextus III 432-440), as for example the Syrian styled Christ-Emmanuel resting on the throne in the Epiphany scene with the Magi, who wear magnificent Persian gowns (Molé 1931: 231f.; Brenk 1975; Jastrzębowska 1997: 120-133; Filarska 1999: 100ff.). The cross set against the panorama of Jerusalem pictured in the apsidal mosaic decoration of S. Pudenziana in Rome (4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century) was modelled on the *crux gemmata*, the famous reliquary treasured in the *Anastasis* Church in Jerusalem (Filarska 1999: 221; Filarska 1986: 251ff.; Petriagnani 1934). Similar instances are numerous. Beyond any doubt in the 4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries the church interiors in the East in the period of 4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century were also adorned with images of Christ, the Apostles, Prophets and Saints as well as with scenes drawn from the Gospels. All of them were arranged on the walls and made according to established patterns. The artists' aim was to completely cover the interior walls with images, as if they were tapestries (Grabar 1947: 67). The most prominent Greek Fathers, like Asterios of Amaseia (*Or.* 11), Nilus of Ancyra (*Ep.* 61, *ad Olympiodorum*) or Choricus of Gaza (*Laudes Marciani* I-II), time and again mention and describe painting and mosaic church decoration. Asterios of Amaseia in his pamphlet on the rich (εἰς τὸν πλούσιον) compared richly ornamented gowns to church walls adorned with figural images. The patterns

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<sup>12</sup> For further references and drawings see Filarska 1986: 132ff.; Stern 1958: 157-218; Mayboom 1995; Weiss, Netzer 1996: 127-131; Zevi 1998: 21-65; Rizzo 1929, Tav.XLVI.



(Grabar 1947: 58, Pl.IV 1; Stornajolo 1908: fol.43, Pl.X).<sup>14</sup> In his description of the church the poet focused on the luminous effects. In the Byzantine mosaics the light blended with crystal-pure, intense colours, which call to mind the hues cast by precious stones. This effect is central to the artistic secrets of the graphic, chromatic and luminous art of Byzantine mosaic decoration. Dalton labelled the mosaic art 'a wise convention' remarkable for its 'solemn glow of colour,' the secret of its success (Dalton 1961: 253). 'The glass cubes assimilate and reflect light of the day, which touches the golden mosaic background and shines even more brightly, and glitters in a dark church interior with its unique supernatural brilliance,' wrote Kłosińska, a contemporary Polish art historian (Kłosińska 1973: 84). 'I am the light of the world' (*J* 8,12), 'and his face was like the sun shining with all its force' (*Rev.*1,16). These words of Christ and St. John in the *Apocalypse* were adapted as the basis of the main aesthetic principle of the early Byzantine mosaic decoration. Actually they should be read and interpreted in a wide context of numerous related biblical passages from the *Old* and *New Testament*, passages which refer to the metaphor of light (*Is* 60,19-21; *Ml* 4,2; *Nb* 24,17; *Lk* 9,29-30; *Mk* 9,2-3; *Mt* 17,2-3; *2 P* 1,16-19 etc.). They were in fact reread and commented upon as such by many Christian authors, as for example, St. Ephraim, Anastasius of Sinai (7<sup>th</sup> cent.), Andrew of Caesarea (mid 6<sup>th</sup> cent.), Anastasius of Antioch (mid 6<sup>th</sup> cent.), Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostomos and Andrew of Crete, to adduce only a couple of names associated chronologically and geographically with the present discussion. Polish Byzantine studies have acquired a brilliant and exhaustive monograph on the symbolism of light in the first millennium which focuses mainly on the iconography and design of images of the Transfiguration and Second Coming of Christ. I have in mind *Sol Verus. Studia nad ikonografią Chrystusa w sztuce piętnastego tysiąclecia* by J.Miziołek (1991). A reader interested in the symbolism of light in the Early Byzantine art may refer to that inspiring study supplied with an extensive and thoughtfully-selected bibliography. The Christian aesthetics of light so conspicuous for the language and metaphor of the Edessan *sugitho* also incorporated Plotinus' idea of simple and indivisible beauty, as he expressed through his memorable metaphors on the colour of gold and the starry sky (*Enn.*I 6; V 8; *Symp.*210) (cf. Beierwaltes 1961: 334-362). This theory inspired the Early Christian learning which reached its maturity in the period of Justinian. The influential aesthetic theory of the Late Platonists blended together with the main principles of Christian aesthetics: the conception of ἀγλαΐα (*claritas*, light, radiance) and ἀπήχημα, a material reflection of the perfect beauty (Tatarkiewicz 1988: 32). The philosophical metaphor of the perfect light which although degraded to the level of earthly

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Sug.* IV where the poet literally expressed this conception: 'wie eine weite Welt er (scil.the Cathedral) ist in seiner Kleinheit, nicht der Masse sondern dem Typus nach, und wie ein Meer umgeben ihn die Wasser' (trans.Schneider).

light still calls to mind its original source was also illustrated in the decoration of Edessa Cathedral. I have a feeling that the poet wrote stanzas V-VII, IX and XIV, that is those stanzas which directly refer to the visual arts, guided by the same impression which we always share with him when we contemplate the splendour of the Byzantine mosaics in Venice, Ravenna or Rome.

The anonymous author of the *Nomina Divina*, known to us as Ps.Dionysius the Areopagite, who lived in the period just before the reign of Justinian, returned time and again to the metaphor of light, ‘the radiance of the supernatural light’ (*Nom.div.I* 4), ‘the luminous apex from which innumerable brilliant rays shine forth’ (*Nom.div.III* 1) or in his impressive minor treatise on light, which makes up a separate section of his *Divine Names* (III 4-6). A visitor to the *Mausoleum* of Galla Placidia (the Oratory of St. Laurence in Ravenna) (cf. Deichmann 1974-76) will never forget the radiance of the stylized yellow, red and blue stars set against the deep blue background of a ceiling which imitates the sky and looks as if it were studded with gems. Its illusionistic design opens up a celestial space over an actually fairly small interior. St. Agnes between Symmachus and Honorius I (625-638), the founder of S. Agnese in Rome, pictured against the abstract gold background with the starry sky above their heads (Molé 1931: 280), the stars on the cupola of Hagios Georgios in Thessaloniki (Miziołek 1991: 62ff), the central field of the vault mosaic decoration in the Baptistery by S. Restituta’s in Naples (c.400) (Filarska 1986: 275ff., Fig. 268f.; Maier 1964; Bovini 1967: 21-42)<sup>15</sup> or the sky in Casanarello (5<sup>th</sup> cent.) (Berchem, Clouzot 1974: 113f) may be adduced as the analogies. The related iconographic evidence was once collected by A. Grabar in his impressive paper on the starry sky and the spiritual sky behind it *L’iconographie du ciel dans l’art chrétien* (1982).

*Sug. VII:*

الْبَيْتُ وَنَحْوَهُمْ وَهُمُومًا لِلْأَوْكَ قَتْمٌ وَكَلْحًا رُيْمٌ  
وَهُمْ أَوْدُ حُمُومًا كَهَلْمِهِمْ. لَقَمًا مَحْسَلًا هَمٌ وَجَلًا ∴

‘Its vast and splendid arches symbolize the four parts of the world. In the richness of their colours they resemble the rainbow’.<sup>16</sup> Dupont-Sommer was right in his observation that ‘la variété de ses couleurs’ (كَهَلْمِهِمْ) alluded to the multicoloured mosaics set in the church (Dupont-Sommer 1947: 34). The marble stone decoration reached only to the basis of the arches, leaving the surfaces above for mosaics or frescoes. They could be set only above the

<sup>15</sup> Filarska 1986: 275ff., Fig.268f.; Maier 1964; Bovini 1967: 21-42.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Die weite Pracht ihrer Bogen, sie vesinnbildlichen die vier Seiten der Welt.

<sup>17</sup> sie gleichen ferner in der Verschiedenheit ihrer Farben, dem herrlichen Bogen der Welt’ (trans. Schneider)

stone slab decoration. This principle was strictly followed by the Byzantine architects and decorators (Grabar 1947: 52). The stanza is allusive on two levels – the theological and the descriptive level (ideological and formal). First it alludes to Noah’s Ark and the rainbow as a symbol of hope. In his commentary to Rev.4, 4-3 Primasius of Tarentum wrote of the *arcus post diluvium* as the *indicium securitatis* (Miziolek 1991: 60; Primasius of Hadrumetum, PL 68, c.814). Moreover the Syriac poet alluded to the full range of the intensive Byzantine palette of colours (red, blue, green, yellow), which sparkled on the four main arches spanning the Cathedral’s central nave. Once again the mosaics which adorn the rainbow arch of S.Maria Maggiore in Rome, a sight which is set indelibly in the observer’s memory, may be adduced as an analogy of the coloristic and luminous effects mirrored by this Syriac verse.

I think that the poet alluded once again to the figural decoration in the stanza XIV which goes as follows:

ܘܥܘܪܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܪܘܢܐ ܘܥܘܪܘܢܐ ܘܥܘܪܘܢܐ ܘܥܘܪܘܢܐ  
ܘܥܘܪܘܢܐ ܘܥܘܪܘܢܐ ܘܥܘܪܘܢܐ ܘܥܘܪܘܢܐ ܘܥܘܪܘܢܐ

‘The light comes from the three sides through the great number of windows. It represents the Apostles and Our Lord, the Prophets, the Martyrs and the Confessors.’<sup>17</sup> The word ܘܥܘܪܘܢܐ part.act. of ܘܥܘܪܘܢܐ, *figuravit, depinxit*, is frequently translated as an abstract expression: ‘elle représente’ (Dupont-Sommer), ‘es stellt dar’ (Schneider). In accordance with this reading we should understand the sentence as ‘the light symbolizes Our Lord and the Apostles etc.’. However, if we read it in both the concrete and metaphoric way as *depinxit*, we can understand the phrase as ‘the light painted Our Lord etc’ on the walls of the church. A visitor to extant Byzantine churches can actually interpret it in this way, having in mind, for example, the procession of martyrs in S. Apollinare Nuovo or the Apostles in the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna, a memorable decoration suffused with the unique Byzantine hieratism. ‘The light paints something ...’ carries a great deal of meaning in Byzantine aesthetics. The Byzantine art is above all graphic, luminous and colorist. This is the secret of its unique charm. A visitor entering St. Mark’s in Venice at dawn may have a chance to witness how the first rays of sunlight gradually illuminate the images pictured on the walls and paint them with reflections of light. Vojslav Molé, who may be regarded as the Father of the Polish Byzantine art history, described this effect in the following words: ‘the light comes into the interior from all sides through the windows, which are located at regular intervals from one another, ... and is reflected from the colourful details of the interior, it softens every line and every object, and strengthens the colorist and painterly quality of Byzantine art.’ (Molé 1931: 71).

<sup>17</sup> ‘Das Licht wiederum der drei Fassaden wird durch viele Fenster erzielt; es stellt dar die Apostel mit unserem Herrn, die Propheten, Martyrer und Bekenner’ (trans.Schneider).

The mosaics of Edessa Cathedral are not only implied in the text of the poem. We may adduce the literary testimonies which give an unambiguous reference to the mosaic decoration in Edessa's Cathedral. The already-mentioned *Anonymous Chronicler of 1234* (*Anonymous Baumstarki*) (Baumstark 1922: 302) referred to both the mosaic and marble stone decoration in the Edessan Cathedral Church (Baumstark 1904: 171; Grabar 1947: 42, n.3). The Arabic writer Mukadasi also mentioned a mosaic decoration of the dome (Dupont-Sommer 1947: 36). We may safely conclude that the Cathedral was adorned with the mosaic decoration rich in figural context, in conformity with the established theological programme, which with a certain scope for varieties had always shown the Apostles, Prophets, Saints, the Gospel scenes, in other words the economy of Redemption accomplished by Christ and His Church on Earth, and always in agreement with the conventional pattern, which was once so aptly analysed and defined by Otto Demus in his indispensable study on the Byzantine mosaic decoration. We can only guess what was represented on the walls. Was there a *crux gemmata* in the centre of the dome? Such a cross of impressively great dimensions once occupied the central part of the dome in the Constantinopolitan Hagia Sophia. John of Gaza described a similar cross which occupied the central position on the spherical painting in the baths of Gaza during the reign of Justinian (*Tabula mundi*). While the Egyptians had a particularly pious approach to the flight into Egypt, a subject which we can admire e.g. in the sequence of both the canonical and apocryphal scenes on the rainbow arch of S. Maria Maggiore in Rome, for analogously self-evident reasons the Syrians felt a predilection for the Three Magi, who were the first to bring news of the Messiah. A magnificent homage of the Magi dressed in the Persian style can also be seen among the scenes pictured on the rainbow arch of S. Maria Maggiore. So it is not amazing that the Syriac poet Balai focused on the story of the Magi in his hymn composed for the consecration ceremony of the church in Kenneshrin (Chalcis), which in all likelihood reflects the fresco or mosaic decoration of its interior walls (Baumstark 1922: 61; Overbeck 259-69. 251-58).

We have already discussed (see above) the multi-layered meaning symptomatic of the Edessan hymn, contained in its formal and ideological structures, the former ones mainly descriptive, the latter theological in character, and all of them rich in references and allusions. Almost every stanza testifies to this sophisticated art of writing. Let us look at two of them selected here for illustration: XI and XII.

دَمْعٌ لَهُ وَبِنَا، وَمَعْدَانُهُمَا لَوْعٌ، وَطَائِفُهُمَا حَزَقٌ  
 وَبِنِيمٍ لِحَقْلِهِ، وَأَمْبِيَّالًا. وَدَمْعٌ هَهُوَ لِحَكْمَظْرًا









of Christ's icon by Bishop Eulalios, which happened during the siege of Edessa by Chosroes I in 544. Euagrius probably drew his information from the *History of the Wars* by Procopius of Caesarea. However, Procopius does not say a word of the icon in his own narrative of the siege (Dobschütz 1899: 106f. (Procopius)) Moses of Choren referred to the Image in his *Armenian History* c.700 (2,26) as 'le portrait du Sauver, image qui se trouve encore aujourd'hui dans la ville d'Edesse.' (Dobschütz 1899: 184 Belege V, 26). Leon Anagnostes saw it in 787 (Mansi 13, 192c; Kirsten in *RACH* c.592). Egeria, who visited Edessa in the mid-380s did not mention the icon of Christ. Our literary sources seem to refer to two different traditions of the Edessan *acheiropoietos*. Both of them point to the famous apocryphal correspondence of Christ and Abgar Ukkama, probably Abgar V (AD 4-7, 13-49).<sup>21</sup> The tradition of the correspondence had been already known to Eusebius of Caesarea (*HE* 1,13, c.311-324). The Greek *Deeds of Thaddeus (Acta Thaddaei)* which are of later date (compiled c.550) (Starowieyski 1977: 189; Lipsius, Bonnet 1891:I.273-283), tell of Jesus Christ washing his face, then wiping it and giving the *mandylion* to Ananias (Syriac Channan) who brought the treasure to King Abgar. The second tradition which was documented by the anonymous author of the *Teachings of Addai (Doctrina Addaei)*, a monument of the Syriac literature compiled c.400,<sup>22</sup> tells us of a painted image which was made by the royal envoy Channan, who held the office of court painter. Let us read the related Syriac passage from the *Doctrina*

*Addaei*:

ܥܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܨܘܢܐ  
ܘܥܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܨܘܢܐ ܘܥܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܨܘܢܐ

I read the passage as follows: 'and (Channan) who was the king's painter came to work and painted the image of Jesus picking herbs.' And then the story continues: 'and went with it to Abgar his king and lord, and when King Abgar saw it he approached the image with great joy, and venerated it with great honours in one of the chambers of his palace.' Philips' translation (1876), which has been generally accepted and followed by other interpreters and commentators (Witakowski 1984: 187; Starowieyski 1977), substantially differs from the version I have put forward above in one point which is of crucial importance to us: 'by virtue of being the king's painter he took and painted a likeness of

<sup>21</sup> The king Abgar mentioned by Tacitus *Ann.*12,12.

<sup>22</sup> The Petersburg manuscript dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Witakowski 1984: 181; Philips 1876; Brockelmann 1965: 12-21; The British Museum manuscript ed. Cureton 1864: 5-23 (Syriac); Pigulewska 1989: 215: the manuscript dated in the 5/6<sup>th</sup> century, the composition of the text c.400, the original version without supplemented passages from the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

Jesus with choice paints.' (Philips 1876; Dobschütz 1899: 171). The interesting alternative reading of ܡܘܨܘܒܘܢܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܐ ܕܡܘܨܘܒܘܢܐ as 'likeness of Jesus picking herbs' was once proposed by A.Zaborski at one of his Syriac lectures in the academic year of 1996/1997 at the Jagiellonian University of Cracow (ܡܘܨܘܒܘܢܐ from the stem g-b-y). This intriguing suggestion which went against the established traditional translation and seemingly also against the narrative itself (according to the *Doctrina Addaei* Abgar praises Christ as a healer who heals human beings without the use of herbs and roots; ܡܘܨܘܒܘܢܐ in the meaning of 'herbs' appears earlier in the *Teachings of Addai*, p.14, l.9, ed.Brockelmann., *Chrestomathie*) and can be nevertheless substantiated by an Early Christian iconographic tradition, which we know from the literary sources. Eusebius of Caesarea described a statuary group cast in bronze which was located in a public precinct in Panyas (*HE* 7, 18). It represented the cure of the woman with a haemorrhage (*Mt.* 9, 19-22): παρὰ τοῖς ποσίν ξένον τι βοτάνης εἶδος φύειν (...) ἀλεξιφάρμακόν τι παντοίων νοσημάτων. 'A strange looking herb grows by his feet (scil. of Christ) ... one which has the power to protect from all illnesses.' This detail goes beyond the canonical text. T. Mathews in his book *The Clash of Gods* (1993) focused on the class of early Christian images of Christ who was pictured as magician (cf. Dumeige 1972: 115-141). It is likely that the original story told by Eusebius of Caesarea inspired the rise of other similar stories at a later time. Such a story was known to Macarios of Magnesia (c.410) (*apocrit.*1). He tells us about Queen Berenike of Edessa who was also said to have been cured of a haemorrhage by Christ. The story goes that in an act of gratitude the queen had a representation of the evangelical miracle of Panyas cast in bronze and set it up in the city of Edessa (Dobschütz 1899, Belege VI, (A) 10. pp.113/114; Cf. Kirsten, *RACH*: 592; G.Downey, Ekphrasis, *RACH* IV: 934 (Eusebius *HE* 7, 18); Hohlweg 44). We can only try to suggest answers to the questions which arise from this iconographic and literary riddle. What subject was actually represented by the bronze group in Panyas? The herbalist motif may well betray a source in pagan art. It might have happened that the Christians themselves reinterpreted a pagan subject and in this way saved the artwork from destruction. We know similar instances from Late Antiquity. And what if the Christian interpretation was inspired by the widely known and highly venerated apocryphal text of the *Doctrina Addaei*? I have emphasized the reading suggested by Zaborski, who belongs to a narrow group of the best Semito-African linguists at the turn of the centuries. His reading argues that at least some of the readers of the influential Syriac *apocryphon* understood it differently than Philips or Witakowski. The difficulty does not lie in the appearance of the Edessan *acheiropoietos*, which we know tolerably well from later Byzantine copies. K.Weitzmann focused on a late Byzantine icon from Sinai which pictured King Abgarus Ukkama with the *acheiropoietos* in his hands, the imprint of Christ's face on a linen cloth (1971). In his paper Weitzmann reviewed the extant pictorial evidence of the Edessan icon

preserved in a number of illuminated manuscripts. Weitzmann's icon probably originally made a wing of a triptych with the central *acheiropoietos* image of Christ. Zaborski's reading throws light on the birth of the image of Christ among herbs, which although so far unknown in the repertoire of the extant Christian works of art, is, however, corroborated by the literary evidence. It is likely then that the image of Christ among herbs was inspired by the famous *apocryphon* the *Doctrine of Addai*. And if so we would have evidence that the intriguing detail of Christ the Herbalist, which is contained in the narrative preserved in the St Petersburg manuscript (c. 500), was not an interpolation introduced to the text at some later stage, but that it made up an integral component of the *Doctrina Addaei* already at least two hundred years earlier (Eusebius of Caesarea).<sup>23</sup>

The *acheiropoietos* of Edessa emerged in the age of widespread icon devotion in the Christian Orient. Eusebius of Caesarea and Epiphanius of Salamina mentioned the icons of Christ, the Virgin Mary, or Saints Peter and Paul (Kłosińska 1975: 187; Dobschütz 1899: 252). Hypatius of Ephesus testified to icon devotion in the 6<sup>th</sup> century (Kłosińska 1975: 187).

There is very little information about the appearance of the Edessan *acheiropoietos*. The testimony of Andrew of Crete (died c.726) clearly refers to a painted image: ἐκμαγεῖλον οὐσαν τοῦ σωματικοῦ αὐτοῦ χαρακτῆρος καὶ μηδὲν ἀποδέουσαν τῆς ἐκ τῶν χρωμάτων γραφῆς (Dobschütz 1899: 185f). 'Although it is an impression of His bodily likeness (scil.Christ), it has all the colours of a painted representation.' The anonymous poet of the Edessan *sugitho* did not mention any paints. He only said in his impressive metaphor that Christ's image 'shone white among the marble stone decoration with the light of the sun', with his usual Biblical references and poetic predilection for symbols. St. John wrote of the Heavenly Jerusalem that 'the city did not need the sun or the moon for light, since it was lit by the radiant glory of God and the Lamb was the lighted torch of it' (*Rev.*21, 23). Ps.Dionysius the Areopagite would say that the Sun and the Holy Spirit are 'the sacred vines, and like flowers and supernatural light' (*Nomina Div.*II 7).

As we might expect the *acheiropoietos* of Edessa was copied time and again throughout the centuries, which is attested for the period after its transfer to Constantinople in 944 (Kirsten in RACH c. 591; Weitzmann 1971). It is tempting, although perhaps also deceptive, to see a copy of the Edessan icon in the famous Novogrod icon of Christ, painted in Constantinople in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Kłosińska 1975: 199).

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<sup>23</sup> Pigulewska 1989: 215, dated the original version in the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century

The Syriac poet also mentions the sparkle of the polished marble stone decoration which adorned the lower register of the interior walls in the Cathedral. It is interesting to note that Paulus Silentarius also focused on the marble stone decoration in the Hagia Sophia of Constantinople. In conformity with the Graeco-Roman *ecphrastic* tradition followed by the poets of the Late Antiquity (cf. Sidonius Apollinaris) Paulus elaborated on the variety of different stones which impressed the observer with a captivating play of colours, hues and patterns on the wall and the floor of the church. There were the green stones from Karystos in Euboea, the pink slabs of Phrygian marble slightly veiled with patches of white like a cloud-covered sky, stone sometimes displaying natural structures reminiscent of floral arrangements, and sometimes shining silver white and purple. The poet also admired the deep purple Egyptian porphyry, the light green colour of the Laconic stone, which was skilfully composed with the Lydian stone, which displays different patterns of pale and reddish flowers. The poet's attraction was also captivated by the Mauretanian stone remarkable for its glittering golden and saffron colours, as if it were still mirroring the burning African sun, and also by the stones which originated from Thessaly conspicuous for their different colours of green, emerald and snow white, which made a striking contrast when composed together with black intarsia (Richter 1897: 72-3).<sup>24</sup> It may be interesting to observe that while Paulus Silentarius focused on the variety of colours and in doing so referred to the influential Hellenic idea of complex beauty, which also included the doctrine of the harmonious interplay of different elements, the anonymous Syriac poet emphasized the unity of colour of the marble stone decoration which appeared as exclusively white. In this way he recalled the Neo-Platonic aesthetics of simple beauty, which was enthusiastically accepted by many Christian authors and artists. In his Christian *ecphrasis* Paulus Silentarius included some pagan metaphors. He describes the church as 'ambrosian,' (Richter 1897: 71) and mentioned Eos, who was embroidered on the altarcloth (Richter 1897: 76), the illumination of the church reminded him of the light of Phaeton (Richter 1897: 77), etc. This makes a striking contrast with the Syriac hymn, which knows only the Christian and Biblical tradition.

I think that the preceding discussion which focused on the mosaic, marble stone and iconic decoration is sufficient to conclude that the Cathedral Church of Edessa was adorned with figural decoration in the same way as other churches of the Christian Orient in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, whether in Antioch, Constantinople or Jerusalem.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Friedländer's edition 1912 appended by a summary of the poem's content.

<sup>25</sup> Grabar 1947: 53 pointed to an allegedly aniconic inclination of the Syriac poet, and concluded, in my view incorrectly, that the church in Edessa had no figural decoration. His interpretation of the Syriac poem reveals a purely *ecphrastic*, that is Greek rhetorical attitude



Procopius of Gaza described such a cross in the opening part of his *Tabula mundi*. If we read  $\text{ܐܡܪ}$  in the somewhat ambiguous expression of  $\text{ܚܘܨܬܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ}$  as ‘that is’ or ‘showing’ in place of ‘like,’ we may interpret the passage as one which describes a group which included the crucified Christ and the two thieves on either side.<sup>27</sup> It is difficult to decide what the shape was of the structure labelled by the poet as  $\text{ܕܚܘܨܬܐ}$ , whether it was actually ‘a column’ (the basic meaning of the word) or perhaps more properly ‘a high pedestal,’ or ‘a block of stone’ of a pyramidal shape, as attested by the cross from Mzchet (7<sup>th</sup> century), which was fixed on a steplike pyramidal postument (Grabar 1947: 64).

And finally we come to altar.

(Sug. XVIII)

$\text{ܕܚܘܨܬܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ}$   
 $\text{ܕܚܘܨܬܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ}$

‘The ten columns (  $\text{ܕܚܘܨܬܐ}$  ) which carry the Cherub of the altar (  $\text{ܕܚܘܨܬܐ}$  ) represent the ten Apostles, those who fled when Our Lord was crucified,’

(Sug. XIX)

$\text{ܕܚܘܨܬܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ}$   
 $\text{ܕܚܘܨܬܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ}$

‘There is a podium (  $\text{ܕܚܘܨܬܐ}$  ) which consists of nine stairs (  $\text{ܕܚܘܨܬܐ}$  ), they were placed in the choir (  $\text{ܕܚܘܨܬܐ}$  ) (that is in the chancel) and there is also a throne (  $\text{ܕܚܘܨܬܐ}$  ) (*mensa*, the true altar), which represented the throne of the Messiah, and the nine hierarchies of the Angels.’<sup>28</sup>

Some points in the text are disputable. Dupont-Sommer read  $\text{ܕܚܘܨܬܐ}$  as ‘choir’(chancel) in both stanzas, and  $\text{ܕܚܘܨܬܐ}$  literally as ‘a bishop’s throne’, a usual arrangement in Byzantine churches (Dupont Sommer 1947: 32. 38f), while Goussen and Schneider read  $\text{ܕܚܘܨܬܐ}$  as ‘choir’ (chancel), but interpreted  $\text{ܕܚܘܨܬܐ}$  as ‘altar’, that is metaphorically as the altar of the Messiah, the true *mensa* (Schneider 1941: 163; Goussen 1925: 121), which naturally led them to different conclusions. In addition Goussen interpreted ‘the Cherub’ as a veil in the chancel, also a typical arrangement in Byzantine churches. Paulus Silentiarius actually included a richly embroidered veil in his description. Schneider also

<sup>27</sup> Goussen 1925: 122, n.9 interpreted the passage as an ironical allusion to the church visitors.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Der Aufbau von 9 Stufen, die angelegt sind im Chor, mitsamt dem Altar (  $\text{ܕܚܘܨܬܐ}$  ) vesinbildet den Thron des Messias mitsamt den 9 Ordnungen der Engel’ trans.Schneider; ‘Telles quelles, les neuf marches placées dans son chœur, ainsi que le trône./ Représentent le Trône du Christ et les neuf Ordres des Anges’ trans.Dupont-Sommer.

referred to the ten columns of the 18th stanza as the columns of the *cancellae* (as in the church of Nea Anchialos) (Schneider 1941: 165). The question is difficult. Michael the Syrian actually says that Chosroes II carried off the treasures of Edessa Cathedral. He confiscated silver fixtures on the altar, the four columns of the *ciborium* and others (the ten columns of Stanza XIX?), which stood before the altar (*Mi* II, s.411a). In my opinion we should read **ܡܘܨܒܐ** first as ‘altar’ (*Sug.*XVIII), that is in its narrow meaning, and in the second instance (*Sug.* XIX) as ‘the chancel’ that is in its metonymic meaning (*pars pro toto*), and consequently **ܡܘܨܒܐ** as ‘altar’ in its metaphoric meaning - *mensa*, since otherwise we would have no *mensa* included in the description of the church, which would have been difficult to explain (see the translation above). We are not surprised that Paulus Silentarius did not forget about the magnificent altar or *mensa* in his poem. I also think that the ‘Cherub’ was a canopy which rested on the columns encircling the altar. It probably had the shape of a *tholos* or *ciborium*. A similar arrangement is attested for the earliest Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem (Grabar 1947: 64). We know that Syrian *ciboria* were decorated with cherubs, an allusion to the cherubs which guarded the Ark of the Covenant (Grabar 1947: 64, n.3; Sachau 1899: 585 (on the church of Qartamin dated in the period of Anastasius); Rahmani 1912: 268, following Goussen 1925:7).

Grabar aptly concluded that the liturgical furnishings of the church and the arrangement of its interior were modelled on the *loca sancta* in the Holy Land under the influence of Palestinian Christianity, while the external architecture (dome, central plan, courtyards, water-fountains) was inspired by the mystical ideas known to us from the writings of Ps.Dionysius the Areopagite and the model of the Christian universe which we know from the *Topographia Christiana* by Cosmas Indicopleustes (Grabar 1947: 62).

The original richness, splendour and artistic beauty of the greatest sanctuaries of the 6<sup>th</sup> century Christian Orient, their ancient glory which has been irreparably lost, exist only in the realm of the imagination. We learn from the literary sources that Justinian founded an altar made of gold for the Hagia Sophia, and that it was encrusted with enamel and studded with jewels. Silver columns adorned with portrait tondos which pictured Christ and the Saints separated the apse and the chancel from the nave. Justinian himself sat in the church on a throne which was crowned with a *ciborium* made of gold (Kłosińska 1975: 240). Candlesticks, candelabra, mirrors, liturgical vessels, book covers made of silver and gold and studded with gems made up its proverbial Byzantine opulence and splendour. Paulus Silentarius described with piety and fascination some of its fabrics, for example the veil of the *ciborium* or the altarcloth in the Hagia Sophia. They were adorned with the figural decorations. The altarcloth with images of Christ with Saints Peter and Paul, the canopy veil with the



miracles of Christ, the Emperor's works of charity, his foundations of churches, so admired by Procopius of Caesarea in his *Aedificia Justiniani*, and the image of the Emperor himself in front of the Virgin Mary (Richter 1897: 76f) To the eyes of visitors the greatest sanctuaries of the *Oriens Christianus* – the churches of Antioch and Alexandria, the Anastasis in Jerusalem, St. John's of Ephesus, or the Edessan Hagia Sophia – must have looked similar.

Both Tatarkiewicz in his *History of Aesthetics* and Grabar in his brilliant paper of 1947 unanimously emphasize the special value of the Edessan hymn for the history of aesthetics as well as for the theological and symbolic interpretation of the Byzantine art and architecture (Tatarkiewicz 1988: 35f.; Grabar 1947: 42). Grabar also observed that the Edessan Syriac hymn is unique when compared with the Greek *ecphraseis* of churches (Grabar 1947: 59).

There is a passage in the *Theologia Mystica* by Ps. Dionysius (I 1) which sounds rather like a commentary to the above cited symbolic interpretations of art and architecture of Edessa Cathedral. Strangely enough it contains some of the key words and phrases which we recognize from the Syriac hymn: 'O thou substantial and Holy Trinity, thou who art an inexhaustible goodness, thou guide of the Christians on their way to the Divine Wisdom, lead us to the highest, mystical summit of the Scripture, the summit which is unknown, which is higher than light. There hide in the darkness the simple, pure and unchangeable mysteries of theology; and in the darkness which surpasses light, there in the depth of mystical silence, in the unfathomable darkness, shines the entirely incognizable and invisible essence, which is the greatest brightness which fills unseeing minds with light and surpasses all beauty'.

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