The most prominent Christian building in Homs, the antique city of Emesa in Syria, is the Greek Orthodox Church of Mar Elian. The reputation of this fairly modern three-aisled construction, with apses and a dome, is based upon the presence of the relics of the holy doctor Elian, or Julian, from Homs, which are kept inside a marble sarcophagus inside the south apse. The eyes of today’s visitors are irresistibly drawn to the impressive neo-Byzantine paintings made by the Romanian artists Gavril and Miha Morasan, whose work concluded the renovation of the church in the early 1970s. In May 1970, while cleaning the walls before applying a fresh layer of plaster, wall paintings came to light inside and near the south apse, which were soon after restored by the Syrian Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums. Following the inauguration of the church in 1974, Gabriel Saadé dedicated an instructive booklet to St Elian, the church and its ancient and modern art. The main source for the discoveries is, however, Jules Leroy’s study of 1975. Unfortunately, Leroy did not have the opportunity to observe the wall paintings from nearby; the matter of distinguishing the different layers of paintings and, subsequently, also their chronology, therefore deserves further consideration.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PAINTINGS

A. Apses (Fig. 1)

The apse consists of a half-dome resting on the north, east and south walls and on two smaller conches in the northeast and southeast corners. On their discovery, only fragmented images appeared from underneath the plaster. Recognisable are a Deisis in the half-dome, a row of apostles and evangelists on the side walls and in the corners, and above them on each side-wall, a rectangular field with the portraits of two prophets. In between these rectangles is a horizontal band with a continuous W-shaped pattern in red, blue and white. The construction of a central niche in the east wall in the 1950s led to the loss of the then still hidden decoration on this spot. All that remains is the central arch of a tripartite arcade.

The palette is limited to dark-blue for all backgrounds, red for the borders separating the different fields, white, blue, red, and red-brown for the clothes of the figures, and yellow for their haloes.

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ECA 2 (2005), p. 149-166; doi: 10.2143/ECA.2.0.2004557

1 Saadé 1974, 40-43.
2 Saadé 1974, 37-43, Pls II-III.
3 Leroy 1975, 99-106, Figs 4-13; see also: Cruikshank Dodd 1992, 1 n. 1; idem 2001, xvii n. 8, 45; Immerzeel/Innemée/Mommers 1998, 64; Peña 2000, 124-125; Velmans 1988, 372-375, Fig. 1; idem 1994, Figs 1-6; idem 1999, 62, Fig. 54; idem 2000, 157-159; Zayat 2000, 10; Balicka-Witakowski et alii 2001, 222.
4 Saadé 1974, 40.
Names are mentioned in Arabic and Greek inscriptions painted in white. Large parts of the murals are faded, or have entirely disappeared. At some point, the images were covered with plaster; for a better fixation of the covering, holes were cut into the decorated surfaces. Perhaps part of the more serious damage was also inflicted on this occasion.

A.1. Half-dome (Pl. 1)
Christ, the central figure, is depicted sitting on his throne, traces of which are visible at the bottom right, raising his right hand in a speaking gesture and holding an opened book in his left (Fig. 1, no. 1). The inscription near his head reads IC XC. To the left of his throne the feet of a cherub are discernible, while scanty traces of a second one remain to the right. To the left of Christ stands the Virgin (no. 2; MP ΘC), to the right, St John the Baptist (no. 3; IW). The identity of the other two saints, beardless and with short, dark-brown hair, is not revealed in inscriptions (nos 4, 5). All turn and stretch their hands towards Christ. The background is embellished with white stars and, beside Christ’s halo, the moon and sun. The lower part of the image has been almost entirely lost, in particular the centre and the right half of the composition. During the restoration, this damaged area and all gaps were filled in and painted in somewhat lighter colours, while the left half of the throne was drawn in outline. An open spot to the left of St John’s knees displays an older layer of plaster, intentionally left in this state, as impressions of tesserae demonstrate that the earliest decoration of the half-dome consisted of a mosaic. A hardly legible Greek inscription runs over the full length of the red border line below the half-dome. Leroy succeeded in deciphering the date 1811 Ména Phebrouariou (‘the month of February’), below the Virgin, providing a clue to the chronology (Pl. 6).

A.2. Lower zone (Pls 2-6)
The tripartite arcade painted above the niche and in the conches is adorned with a vine-scroll pattern, white fruits and red flowers set against a greyish background (b-d). In the left part of the arcade, a dark-blue background and a W-shaped pattern
similar to that above the arches shines through this decoration (Pl. 5). Two partly preserved painted columns with capitals support the arches; in front of the left one, the upper body of a small person looking upward and raising his hands can be discerned (no. 20; Pl. 5). Other figurative elements are four cherubim flanking the arcade, and, below the central arch, the tip of a red wing, presumably of a heavenly creature belonging to the now lost central scene on the east wall.

All figures are identified in partly legible bilingual inscriptions. The evangelists in the southeast corner are Mark and Matthew, and here, too, the background is adorned with stars (МАΡΚΟΣ Ο ΕΒΑΓΓΕΛΙΣΤΗΣ; ΜΑΘΕΟΣ; nos 6, 7; Pls 2, 3). The apostles on the south wall are identified as Andrew, James (?) and Thomas (ΘΩΜΑ; nos 8-10). They are depicted frontally, raise their right hand in a speaking gesture, and hold either codices (the evangelists) or scrolls (the apostles) in their left. This composition is repeated on the opposite side, showing the evangelists, John (Ο ΕΒΑΓΓΕΛΙΣΤΗΣ…) and Luke (nos 13, 14), and the apostles Philip (ΦΗΛΙ…), Simon (ΣΙΜΟΝ, called Paul in Arabic) and Bartholomew (ΒΑΡΤΟΛΟΜΕΟΣ; nos 15-17; Pls 5, 6). The lower part of the apostles has almost entirely disappeared. Those on the north wall were not rendered in full length, as a red line just below their waists marks the edge of the painting. This line is lacking on the opposite wall.

The red-bordered medallions on the south side contain the portraits of the Kings Solomon (Ο ΣΩΛΟΜΩΝ; Arabic: Salomon the Wise) and David (ΔΑΒΙΔ; nos 11, 12; Pl. 4). Both are crowned and hold an opened scroll with a text in Arabic. Only the first words of Solomon’s text remain, reading: ‘Wisdom has built …’ (Proverbs IX, 1). The prophets at their opposite are Jeremiah (Ο ΙΕΡΗΜΙΑ) and Isaiah (Ο ΙΩΑΚΙΜ) (nos 18, 19; Pl. 6). The text on Isaiah’s scroll reads: ‘A voice is calling in the desert: prepare the way of the Lord’ (Isaiah XL 3-5); that on Jeremiah’s: ‘The Virgin will give birth to a child, that will be called Emmanuel’ (Isaiah VII, 14). Cherubim with two or four red wings fill the space in between the medallions.
Pl. 3. South side: Sts Mark and Matthew

Pl. 4. South wall: King Solomon and King David
Pl. 5. North wall of the apse

Pl. 6. North wall: the Prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah
Evidently the present decoration is the result of different painting campaigns. Some damaged parts were retouched in 1970, but many elements, e.g. the faces and clothes, were repainted prior to the plastering of the walls. The most obvious spot displaying the two phases is the left arch, where vine-scrolls have been applied over the older W-shaped motif. A second example will be given below. To distinguish the original paintings from the later work, the first is indicated as layer 1, the second as layer 2.

B. East and south walls

On the east wall to the right of the apse is a fragment showing the foreleg of a light-brown horse, turned towards the apse, apparently that of an equestrian saint (no. 21, Pl. 7). On the south wall of the nave, immediately to the right of the former horseman, the image of St Abraham remains (O A[Γ]IOC A BPAAM; Pl. 8). Only the upper part of his body is rendered, turned to the left and with both hands slightly raised. The saint has white hair and beard, a blue tunic and red mantle, and a black outline with white dots surrounding his yellow halo. Below are traces of a second person and the beginning of an inscription reading: OA[Γ]IOC CA[?…]. Possible interpretations of this name are Saba or Isaac. St Abraham is placed against a dark-blue background with a red border. Above his head, part of a broad horizontal frieze remains, consisting of alternating red squares and a white-toothed red disk inside a blue circle. The background of this panel consists of a pink and red stone-like structure, also present to the right of the saint below. Although the image of St Abraham was slightly retouched in 1970, nothing indicates an earlier repainting or intentional cutting. Apparently these fragments were not noticed by the painter of layer 2, implying that these fragments are surviving elements of layer 1.

Layer 1: The medieval decoration

In distinguishing the two layers, the figure of St Abraham is crucial. Outstanding characteristics are the fairly flat rendering of his face, hands and dress, and the outlines and pleats drawn with slightly darker lines. By contrast, the details of the apse paintings display a more plastic execution. The faces are shaded with darker paint and highlighted with narrow white brush strokes, which also appear on their clothes. Their features differ from those of St Abraham in the smaller oval-shaped eyes and long, small noses. At least one saint inside the apse has not been entirely repainted. The brushwork of St Matthew’s red tunic is similar to the dress of St Abraham (Pl. 3) and should therefore belong to layer 1, while the white outline of this figure, partly overlapping the background, the highlighting and his head are later additions. It is to be expected that a more detailed analysis will reveal more of such distinct details inside the apse.

The first scholars who analysed the murals had noticed the repainting. Bashir Zouhdi dated layer 1 to the twelfth or thirteenth century and surmised that the Arabic inscriptions were added to the repainting, yet he supposed that the images were covered by the end of the Mamluk period. Leroy agreed with this point of view, although he was puzzled by the rather recent date in the inscription: ‘A un endroit on croit pouvoir lire 181(1) Ména Phèbrouariou. Si la lecture est bonne, il ne peut s’agir que d’une date de restauration, car la présence des chiffres arabes, le style général de la peinture s’opposent à une date d’exécution aussi récente.’ Eventually he inclined towards a medieval date: ‘Rien n’est ici caractéristique de la peinture de l’époque des croisades. Toutefois, si l’on considère le mouvement de cette période qui se manifeste dans la peinture, on n’hésitera guère à lui attribuer aussi cette magnifique fresque.’ In more recent publications, however, the date and evidence for repainting were entirely neglected, resulting in oversimplified, if not erroneous, perceptions of the origins of the artists and the dating. Tania Velmans took Leroy’s ‘Crusader connection’ for granted, while Ewa Balicka-Witakowski alleged that the representations were executed by Syrian artists, working under a Western master.
Pl. 7. East wall of the nave: fragment of a horse

Pl. 8. South wall of the nave: St Abraham
In this matter, the analysis of Erica Cruikshank Dodd, who had the advantage of having studied more wall paintings in Syria and Lebanon than any of the scholars quoted, is more clarifying:

The paintings of St. Elian in Homs belong to a second layer of fresco, painted over an earlier scheme of decoration. This second layer, moreover, was at some time radically restored and repainted. It is not clear whether this restoration was conducted recently when the frescoes were uncovered by the Department of Antiquities, or in the nineteenth century. In this connection, Leroy (ibid., p. 100) read an inscription giving February 1811 as a possible date of restoration. In either case, whether restored in the 19th or 20th century, the style of painting is radically altered from the originals. One painting only, the small head of St. Abraham (ibid., fig. 12), inexplicably escaped restoration and apparently remained untouched. The style of this single figure is notably different from the other paintings in the church, but from its iconography it belongs in the same scheme. The style of St. Abraham, indeed, is strikingly similar to the style of the other paintings from Qara, in SS. Sergios and Bacchos, and the Monastery of Mar Yacub. This fact suggests that the restoration, however clumsy, follows the original program in the other frescoes as well. In this case, the iconography depicted in the church today is likely that of the original program of the twelfth century.10

One can only but agree with these conclusions. The nineteenth-century ‘restorers’ intended to revitalise the by then already partly destroyed apse decoration. Nevertheless, they largely respected the existing iconography, which contains sufficient elements to confirm its medieval origin. The presence of a cherub in the Deisis scene points to a variant called Deisis-Vision, combining the common intercession of the Virgin and St John the Baptist with the visionary apparition of Christ. This was a familiar apse subject in churches on the Eastern periphery of the Byzantine Empire11, e.g. in Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi near Nebek12 and Deir Mar Ya’qub near Qara (Syria)13, and in Deir Mar Mitri and Deir Saydet Hamatur – both in Qusba –, Rashkida, Kfar Shleiman, Bahdeidat, Qassuba, and Qannubin (Lebanon)14. Enigmatic, however, is the addition of two anonymous saints to the Deisis-Vision in Homs (Pl. 1). Their youthful appearance suggests their being angels, left wingless on their repainting, perhaps because they were not recognized as such. This interpretation finds confirmation in the presence of two angels near the Virgin in the Deisis scene in Saydet Hamatur, depicted in the same attitude as the left person in the Church of Mar Elian15. As to the row of apostles and evangelists below the Deisis-Vision, these are also rendered in the Church of Mar Tadros in Bahdeidat16. Furthermore, Byzantine examples of prophets depicted in medallions are numerous17, while equestrian saints were an almost indispensable theme in Levantine church decoration (see below), but representations of Abraham as an isolated saint are rare. He is rendered with his hands raised in a medallion on the right wall of the presbytery in the Cathedral of Cefalù in Sicily (1148-1170), with Melchizedek at his opposite18. The interpretation of the partly preserved name of the person below St Abraham in Homs is still open to debate. Should he be St Saba of Jerusalem, then there is nothing particular about his presence in a medieval programme, and if the reading of the name as Isaac is correct, the connection with Abraham speaks for itself19.

The medieval decorative elements in Homs do also have their counterparts in Byzantine murals. The W-shaped pattern below the conch and in the arches is to be found in, among others, the Church of St George in Kurbinovo, Macedonia (1191)20. Finally, the remarkable pink and red structure near St Abraham is characteristic for the rendering of stone structures in the Eastern Mediterranean from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, e.g. in Deir Mar Musa and several churches in Lebanon21.

10 Cruikshank Dodd 2001, xvii n. 8.
12 Cruikshank Dodd 2001, 41-42, 130, Pl. 16.
13 Schmidt/Westphalen 2005, in print.
14 Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 34-36, nos 4, 6, 14, 17, 19, 22, 26; Hélou 1998 (Deir Mar Mitri, Bahdeidat).
17 E.g. in Deir Mar Mitri at Qusba, Lebanon (Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 48, no. 4).
18 Borsook 19982, 10, Pls 9, 11.
19 Abraham and Isaac are depicted in medallions in the Cathedral of Monreale (1176); Borsook 19982, 64, Pls 57, 68, 69, 103.
20 Velmans 1999, Taf. 67.
21 Cruikshank Dodd 2004, 86.
In his appearance and colours St Abraham recalls the paintings of layer 3 in Deir Mar Musa from ca 120022 and in the two churches in Qara, referred to by Cruikshank Dodd, both from before 126623. These murals are expressive exponents of the ‘Syrian style’ of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, distinguishing wall paintings executed by local ateliers from those made by Byzantine masters, active in the Levant24. To resume, layer 1 should date to the second half of the twelfth century or the first half of the thirteenth, with, however, the sixties of that century as the ultimate limit. After 1260, the Mongol raids and the military campaigns of the Mamluk army disturbed the until then relatively peaceful life in West Syria, and it is more than probable that the flourishing of Christian art in this region had by then come to an end25.

LAYER 2: THE WORK OF A NINETEENTH-CENTURY MASTER

The mention of the year 1811 in the inscription suggests that the paintings of layer 2 were executed in the early nineteenth century. Comparing them to contemporary works of art should be the right approach for confirmation of this dating, but unfortunately, no other Syrian or Lebanese murals from this period have come down to us. By contrast, there was an abundant production of icons and related objects.

In the late Ottoman period, the Middle Eastern tradition of icon-painting came to a flourish as, for centuries, it had not. This artistic renaissance reflects the emancipation of the Eastern Christian communities as well as the inherent participation of Christians in economic and social life. In Aleppo, a major trading centre at that time, the al-Musawwir family formed the backbone of the so-called ‘School of Aleppo’26. Since this workshop was active between 1645 and 1777, its involvement in the decoration of the apse can be excluded. Furthermore, the primitive style of the murals is in no way reminiscent of the elaborate neo-Cretan tradition reflected in the Aleppine icons. Stylistic arguments also exclude the involvement of Michael, an artist from Crete who worked in Lebanon and Syria between 1809 and 182127. Michael Polychronis al-Kreti produced an impressive quantity of abundantly ornamented icons painted in a neo-Cretan style, which for several decades would be the predominant fashion in the region. His influence resounds in the icons of Nemeh Nasr al-Homsi, preserved in different churches in the area north of Damascus, but Nemeh cannot be held responsible for the paintings in his hometown, Homs, as he was not active before the middle of the nineteenth century28.

A more constructive approach is to turn our eyes toward the artistic tradition of Jerusalem. Countless works of art in the Middle East betray a Palestinian background, but they have not yet been subject to systematic study, except for some icons from the second half of the nineteenth century29. In 1860, tensions between Christians and Muslims in the region flared up, resulting in the destruction of churches and the loss of many icons. After the situation had calmed down, the destroyed sanctuaries were rebuilt, while the production of new icons was entrusted to artists, with the adjective ‘al-Qudsi’ (from the Holy City) or ‘al-Urshalimi’ (from Jerusalem), in their name. Apparently, the availability of local artists was so limited, that the church authorities had to turn to Jerusalem to meet their needs of new icons. This would have been impossible without the existence of a firmly established painting tradition in that city.

In contrast to artists active in Syria, Palestinian icon painters had the advantage of working in an area that had always attracted Christian pilgrims, who, as genuine ‘souvenir hunters’, formed a grateful clientele for icon workshops30. This guarantee of potential customers resulted in the flourishing of a souvenir industry, the existence of which can be ascertained by, amongst others, a number of dated proskynetaria31. Regarding the date of 1811

22 Whereas Cruikshank Dodd prefers the Seleucid year 1504 (A.D. 1192/93; Cruikshank Dodd 2001, 170), Dall’Oglio reads A.H. 604 (A.D. 1208; Dall’Oglio 1998, 16).
23 For the discussion on their chronology see: Schmidt/Westphalen 2005, 34-37, 120-124.
24 Cruikshank Dodd 2001, 104-124; see also idem 2004, 95-96.
31 Meinardus 1967; Immerzeel 1999 and 2004c, with further references. See also the contributions on proskynetaria in this volume.
Pl. 9. Decoration of the haykal in Deir Abu Sefein, Cairo
mentioned in the Church of Mar Elian, the specimen in Hernen Castle (1832), discussed elsewhere in this volume, is an outstanding work of art for reference. The simplified features of its representations typify the popular character of the Palestinian production in the period under consideration. The reduced size of the scenes hinders a detailed comparison, but the limitation of the palette to the primary colours red, blue and yellow, touched up with narrow darker brushstrokes and highlights, certainly recalls the paintings in Homs.

The products of one nineteenth-century artist from Jerusalem have been relatively well studied. He signed his icons with ‘Anastasi’ or ‘Astasi al-Rumi al-Qudsi’ (Anastasius the Greek from the Holy City), and worked on behalf of the Coptic Orthodox community in Cairo between 1832 and 1871. His art displays the same artistic naivety as contemporary proskynetaria, betraying his formative years in a Palestinian artistic environment. Illustrative is Anastasi’s contribution to the decoration of the haykal in the main Church of St Mercurius (Deir Abu Sefein) in Old Cairo, one of his most monumental works. This project had been inaugurated by the eighteenth-century Coptic artist, Ibrahim al-Nasikh, who painted the central niche with the image of Christ Enthroned and decorated the canopy above the altar. To this, Anastasi added the twelve apostles, painted on panels fixed to the walls beside Ibrahim’s Christ (Pl. 9). He also decorated the half-dome with a Christ, carried by two angels, executed mainly in red and blue, a rare example of his abilities as a mural painter. Compared to the paintings in Homs, these works of art betray a more skilled hand, yet in the choice of colours and the simplicity of the execution, both incontestably have their roots in the same tradition.

Anastasi was not the only Palestinian painter who earned his money abroad. Isa from Jerusalem decorated the wooden canopy in the chapel of the Monastery of St Sergius and St Bacchus in Ma’alula (Syria), dated 1824 (Pls 10, 11). Once more, the execution is fully Palestinian, although it is more sophisticated than in Anastasi’s icons and the paintings in the Church of Mar Elian. Not only are the cherubim on the outside of the canopy similar to those in Homs (Pls 4, 6), their features also resemble several faces inside the church, e.g. those of the prophets (Pls 4, 6), in particular, the shape of the noses and eyes, and the shadows. Other Palestinian icons in churches in the Middle East may have been brought there by pilgrims returning from Jerusalem, e.g. a specimen in the Monastery of St Thecla in Ma’alula with St George killing the dragon, St Nicholas, the Prophet Elijah with the decapitated head of a Baal priest, St Saba (?), and the Archangel Michael holding a soul (Pl. 12). An icon of the Last Judgement in the Monastery of the Virgin at Saydnaya is dated 1854 (Pl. 13). Despite its advanced date, it still displays the same style and colours that typify the Palestinian icon-production in the previous decades. In conclusion, there is little doubt about the Palestinian origin of the master who was responsible for the paintings of layer 2 in the Church of Mar Elian.

THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE BUILDING

As the building history of the church has not yet been subject to profound research, little can be said about the connection between the architecture and the successive layers of decoration. Nevertheless, some indicative details are revealed in hagiographic sources. The life of St Elian has come down to us in two Georgian manuscripts (ninth and tenth century respectively) and in an Arabic version (seventeenth century). His martyrdom occurred in A.D. 284-285. After being tortured and left for dead, Elian dragged himself to a cave used as a potter’s workshop, where he supposedly died on February 6, 285. His remains were brought to safety, but, according to the Arabic version, the relics were returned to the cave on April 15, 432, soon after which, Bishop Paul of Homs erected a church there. Should this assessment of the age of this
martyrion (?) concern the present building, this would shed some light on the evidence for a mosaic being the earliest decoration of the half-dome. This argument dates the south-eastern part of the present construction and the mosaic to pre-Islamic times (fifth-seventh century).

An object furnishing additional arguments for such an early date is St Elian's tomb. It is actually a late antique sarcophagus with a gabled lid, provided with rounded knobs at its corners. The decoration of the coffin consists of mouldings at the top and bottom and crosses in low relief. Its shape is common for sarcophagi produced in the quarries of Proconnesus on the Island of Marmara, an origin supported by a macroscopic determination of the stone used, a coarse-grained white marble with parallel grey bands. Such sarcophagi were produced up to the sixth century, yet there are indications for this particular piece being a spoil from the third century. Many sarcophagi from the quarries of Proconnesus were exported as semi-products to different areas over the Eastern Mediterranean. In the quarries, the coffins were hollowed out and provided with pre-shaped patterns on the outside. A widespread model was the so-called garland-sarcophagus. In their quarry state, the geometric design consisted of three semicircular shapes with a central roundel, in between four rectangular fields.

38 Cândea 1972, 234 n. 3, Fig. 6; Koch 2000, 578-579, Abb. 86, T. 208. The measurements are 2.32 × 1.35 × 1.06 m. See also the (inaccurate) painting reproduced in Peña 2000, 71.

Fig. 2. Tomb of St Elian; reconstruction of the original reliefs
on the front and reverse sides, providing the framework for garlands hung between animals’ heads or human figures, with a mask or floral design in the centre (Fig. 2; Pl. 14). One pre-shaped garland was placed on each small panel. Once at their destination, local sculptors should have finished the carving, but actually the sarcophagi were often used as they were. Seemingly, centuries after its first funerary use, one of such semi-produced garland-sarcophagi was taken to Homs and finished. The sculpting procedure follows from the shapes and number of crosses on each side. On the front, the four rectangular fields formed the basis for four crosses with long stems. (Fig. 2). The execution of the back and end panels was somewhat different; the roundels inside the garlands were turned into small Greek crosses. The mouldings received their final shape, all superfluous elements were removed, and finally the surface was smoothened. In their quarry state, the gabled lids were provided with acroteria at the corners, which, on the lid of St Elian’s tomb, were elaborated as knobs. The cross in the centre of the slanting front panel was created by removing a few centimetres of marble from the surface.

The shape of the long-stemmed crosses on the front, with arms expanding to the ends, could well be indicative for the period of reuse of this sarcophagus. One inclines to designate them as ‘Latin crosses’, but this suggestive term diverts from the fact that this model was also well known in the early Eastern tradition. Therefore, the suggestion of the decoration being applied on the occasion of the alleged transportation of the saint’s relics to the present site, or not long thereafter, is a serious option.

The style of the representation of St Abraham and the iconography of the apse decoration demonstrate that layer 1 was applied in the second half of the twelfth, or first half of the thirteenth century. The reason for this redecoration may have been irreparable damage to the mosaic, perhaps as a result of the heavy earthquake that hit Syria in 1159. The French traveller, Jean de Thévenot, who visited Homs in 1658, mentioned the church and the marble tomb of Mar Elian in the account of his stay in the Levant. Unfortunately, he did not write about the paintings, but this omission certainly does not imply that they were by then already hidden from view. Nothing is reported about any works executed in the early nineteenth century, when the paintings of layer 2 were applied, but according to ‘Issa As’ad the church was enlarged in 1843. Presumably, all representations visible at that time were intentionally damaged and entirely covered with plaster, only about three decades after the apse decoration had been restored. Resuming, this brings us to the following provisional chronology:

1. Fifth-seventh century (after 432?): construction of the church; application of a mosaic in the apse; decoration of the sarcophagus.
2. Second half of the twelfth/first half of the thirteenth century: the mosaic is replaced by paintings; the nave is decorated as well (layer 1).
3. 1811: the apse decoration is repainted (layer 2).
4. 1843: reconstruction/enlargement of the building and covering of the murals with a layer of plaster.
5. 1970: discovery and conservation of the paintings. Empty spots are filled in with somewhat lighter colours.
6. 1973: the remaining surfaces of the church interior are decorated.

The Equestrian Saint

As the fragment of an equestrian saint is not mentioned in other publications, it deserves some additional attention (Pl. 7). Actually, the presence of this theme in Homs is hardly surprising, as holy riders were common in the decoration of churches in the Middle East, in particular in Lebanon and Syria.

40 For such semi-products found in Lebanon and Syria, see: Ward Perkins 1992.
41 A similar cross is, for instance, represented on a sixth-century gem in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Inv. Inv. 26.07 (Catalogue Frankfurt 1983, no. 174).
43 J. de Thévenot, Relation d’un voyage fait au Levant, Paris 1964, 446.
44 For the renovation, this author refers to a manuscript, very likely present in the church library (‘Issa As’ad 1928, 249, quoted in Saadé 1974, 33 n. 2). The work started on September 18, and lasted 45 days. One wonders if this short period would have been sufficient for extending the small building, according to ‘Issa As’ad, to its present size.
45 In the vicinity of Homs, mounted saints are present in Deir Mar Musa (Cruikshank Dodd 2001, 50-56, 133-134, Pls IX, X, 27-33; Immerzeel 2004, no. 17, Pls 11, 12, 19, 20), the Church of Mar Sarkis (n. 46; Immerzeel 2004, no. 15, Pls 1, 2), and Deir Mar Ya’qub (Immerzeel 2004, no. 16; Schmidt/Westphalen 2005), both in Qara.
What distinguishes this image is the position of the rider; he is not painted on one of the side walls of the nave, as would normally be the case, but on the east wall. Perhaps he belonged to a pair of juxtaposed mounted saints flanking the apse. Such a composition exists in the Church of Mar Girgis in Dedé (Lebanon), but there the riders (St Theodore and St George?) are depicted on the west wall. The exceptional situation in Homs is explained by the availability of enough space beside the apse for such space-consuming scenes as riders.

The identity of the now vanished rider can only be derived from the brown colour of his horse. This reduces our choice to St Theodore, St Bacchus, or St Demetrius, whose horses are brown; the saints George and Sergius can be excluded since in the Middle East, theirs are always painted in white. There is, however, another option; the horseman could have been the patron saint of the church itself. Nineteenth-century icons render St Elian mounted on a brown horse. The reason for the remarkable admission of a doctor into the heavenly cavalry among warrior saints remains unclear, as none of the written sources about his martyrdom refer to a military background. In this matter, St Elian's status as a protomartyros, like, for instance, St George and St Sergius, may have been a contributory factor, but this is merely a suggestion. Be this as it may, the iconography of St Elian as a rider was not a nineteenth-century innovation. In 1598, an icon with this subject was ordered by Patriarch Joachim IV of Antioch, who, before being ordained to the highest office in the Melkite Church in Syria in 1592, was bishop of Homs (Pl. 15). It was seen inside the church in 1901, but was later sold abroad. Even though this icon is the oldest surviving image of St Elian on horseback, it is possible that it was inspired by an older prototype.

Whether the rider in question was St Elian, St Sergius or St Theodore, it is hard to believe that our horseman was not accompanied by others. In this matter, one interesting text from the fifteenth century has come down to us. In 1465-1466, the Russian merchant Basil visited the Middle East, and his account of this journey contains an intriguing passage about his impressions of Homs:

À l’extrémité de la ville s’élève l’église du saint martyr George; près du saint autel repose le saint martyr Julien. Le célèbre martyr George délivra cette ville du dragon & sauva une vierge; l’église est située près du lac où il baptisa les habitants de la ville & de la caverne d’où sortit le dragon; près du lac s’élève une montagne, de l’autre côté de laquelle se trouve la Mer Blanche; un grand monolithe se dresse sur l’endroit où il tua le dragon.

In spite of Basil’s conviction of having visited a church dedicated to St George, his reference to

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46 Cruikshank Dodd 2004, no. 24, Pls XCI, XCII, 24.2; Immerzeel 2004a, no. 2, Pl. 21; idem 2004b, no. 2; Nordiguian/Voisin 1999, 277-278, 376-377.

47 Immerzeel 2004a, Fig. 2.

48 Cândea 1972, 225-232, Figs 2-5; see also Immerzeel 1997, 116, no. 43.

49 Cândea 1972, Fig. 1.

50 Th.I. Uspenski, Archeologičeskie pamjatniki Siri’, Izvestija Ruskogo archeologičeskogo Instituta v Konstantinopole, 7 (1901-1902), 141. The icon was taken from the church around 1930 and entered into a private collection in Paris (Cândea 1972, 225-226). Later on it was sold to Switzerland (Saadé 1974, 31 n. 4).

51 A probably sixth-century silver plate in a private collection said to be found in Homs, shows a beardless horseman killing a human-headed snake (Mundell Mango 1987, 22). Mundell Mango’s suggestion that the saint is St Elian is inspired by its alleged finding-place, rather than by iconographic relevancy.

St Elian’s tomb indicates that he was actually in our church. As the alleged connection between Homs and the miracle of St George’s slaying of the dragon is not confirmed by other sources, Basil must have confused his memories about the city’s church with the local tradition, which situates this event near the Bay of Junieh near Beirut, on the other side of the Lebanese mountains. One is inclined to think that he saw the wall paintings inside the church, including the now vanished images of equestrian saints, and may have recognized some familiar elements. According to what is known about the Levantine iconography of mounted saints, there was probably no representation of St George defeating the dragon, but instead, one of him rescuing a young slave and of St Theodore acting as a dragon-slayer. As a Russian, Basil was acquainted with the story of St George rescuing the princess from the monster, one of the most popular themes in the Russian Orthodox tradition of the fifteenth century. Was he so overwhelmed by his impressions of the Middle East that he mixed up all the details, ending up with what he knew from his own experience?

CONCLUSION

The south apse in the Church of Mar Elian at Homs seems to be a surviving element of a pre-Islamic building, incorporated into the present construction, which was perhaps erected in 1843. Traces of a mosaic inside the half-dome and St Elian’s tomb, a late antique sarcophagus that was reworked a few centuries later, are witness to this past. In the second half of the twelfth, or the first half of the thirteenth century, new decoration was applied, traces of which remain inside the apse and on the adjoining east and south walls (layer 1). In the early nineteenth century, the paintings inside the apse were restored by a Palestinian artist, who faithfully copied the medieval composition, very likely with the exception of the two angels beside the Deisis, who were turned into anonymous saints (layer 2). On the enlargement of the church in 1843, all the paintings then visible were covered with a layer of plaster, as a result of which they were partly damaged. The paintings were rediscovered in 1970, and all the damaged parts were restored and retouched. It can be concluded that all the phases are more or less clearly distinguishable, i.e. the impressions of tesserae, the paintings of layer 1, the repainting of layer 2, and the retouching in 1970. Nevertheless, additional research is deemed necessary, in particular for a detailed distinction between the medieval and nineteenth-century elements in the apse decoration.

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