

Thomas Bauzou
Khirbat as-Samra Project

The village of Rihab, in north Jordan, between al-Mafraq and Jarash, is a very promising archaeological site. After European teams had conducted surveys and excavations there, systematic archaeological research on behalf of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan has been directed since the 1990s by Abdelqader Al-Husan, who discovered a number of buildings, artefacts and inscriptions dating from the Bronze Age to the Mamluk period. Among these discoveries that now make Rihab a site of exceptional interest, a Byzantine church has been first mistakenly dated to the early third century, a claim that was immediately rejected by the whole academic community, in Jordan as well as abroad, but reached the international media. An important site like Rihab, and the research and restorations made there by Abdelqader Al-Husan, deserve better than this. The St. George oratory inscription, which is the root of the claim and of the subsequent controversy, has been discussed in literature several times since 2002, but mostly by scholars who had not seen the mosaic itself, or a good detailed photograph.

This paper intends to synthesize the academic literature on the inscription, provide accurate photographs, a facsimile drawn after the original, and a regular edition of the text.

I - A Too Much Debated Inscription

In December 2000 the Department of Antiquities excavated a church in Rihab that looked like many other Byzantine churches of the sixth or seventh century in the area: it is a basilica with three naves paved with geometric mosaics, with a sanctuary behind a chancel made of marble slabs, an apse with an altar on four feet in the centre. In front of the chancel a Greek dedicatory mosaic inscription written in 6 lines within a *tabula ansata* indicated the church had been built in honour of Saint George. A photograph of the excavated ruins was published soon afterwards,² with a comment about the alleged date of the building being 230 AD, a date that would make this church the oldest in the world.

In 2002 two new articles were published, one in Arabic in *ADAJ* 46 (Amman)³ and one in English in the *Architectural Science Review* 45.4 (Sydney).⁴ Both provided a clear photograph of the mosaic inscription, of which the *ADAJ* Arabic article contained an inaccurate Greek transcription; both articles proposed a translation (in Arabic in *ADAJ*, in English in *ASR*), but because it was unfortunately founded on the inaccurate transcription, it contained many errors. The main problem was the apparent date, in Greek “PKΔ”: 124. Given the fact that all dated church inscriptions in north Jordan refer to the era of the Province of Arabia starting in 106 AD, it would have meant that the mosaic (and the church itself) were made in 230 AD. Such a date is absolutely unacceptable and the scientific community rejected it unanimously for a number of obvious reasons.

1. I am deeply indebted to Mr. Abdelqader al-Husan, in charge of the Rihab excavations, for giving us access to the site and collection of recovered artefacts, and for discussing with us this text at length. I am glad to express my gratitude to Dr. Fawwaz Khraysheh, Director General of the Department of Antiquities, who proposed this publication to the Khirbat as-Samra Project. I wish also to express all my thanks to Dr. Fawzi Zayadine who discussed this paper with me and confirmed its conclusions. Alain Desreumaux, Louis de Lisle and Khalid Mahfoud, of the Kh. as-Samra Project, made the facsimile drawing.

2. Abdelqader Mahmud AL HUSAN in *ADAJ* 45 (2001), Arabic section, p. 10-11, and fig. 13.

3. Abdelqader Mahmud AL HUSAN, “The New Archaeological Discoveries of the al-Fudayn and Rihab al-Mafraq Excavation Projects, 1991-2001”, *ADAJ* 46 (2002), Arabic section, p. 71-93.

4. Samer ABU-GHAZALAH, Abdel-Kader AL-HISSAN, « Discovery of the Oldest Church of the World », *Architectural Science Review* 45.4 (Sydney, 2002), p. 295 sq.

There is no need here to develop at length what is presently known about the oldest places of Christian worship. The text of the Rihab inscription provides by itself clear evidence against a third century date. For example, the late Father Michele Piccirillo noticed that no church could have been dedicated to Saint George 50 years *before* this saint, who served in Diocletian's army, was born. The date also mentions the indiction, and indictions only began in 312 AD. The inscription mentions 1.1 the Holy Trinity, which is unlikely before the Council of Nicaea and the theological debates of the fourth century. Of course the style of the mosaic, the palaeography, the architecture of the church itself, so similar to all the other churches in Rihab and north Jordan, everything pointed to a sixth or seventh century date.

On the basis of the photograph in *ADAJ* 46, the mosaic-inscription was re-interpreted in *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* which proposed a first scholarly edition of this text,⁵ but did not understand the end of 1.2 and the beginning of 1.3. *SEG* correctly read the eighth year of the indiction,⁶ but seemed to endorse the *lectio* "PKΔ", with this comment: "(it) seems to be supported by the (photograph); the numeral 124, however, cannot refer to the era of the Province of Arabia used in other inscriptions from the same site (...); consequently the reading can hardly be correct."

Independently, and from the same photograph in *ADAJ* 46, Denis Feissel and Pierre-Louis Gatier proposed in 2005 another reading of the inscription in the *Bulletin Epigraphique* of the *Revue des Etudes Grecques*.⁷ They did not understand the second word of 1.1 (ὀ(νό)μ(ατι)), but were positive about the rest of the text. Confronted with the puzzling beginning of 1.3, (where Abdelqader al-Husan and Samer Abu-Ghazalah had created the word "*mohok*" otherwise unattested), they themselves reluctantly created another Greek word "μονοκτίστ(ης ?)", never heard of before, with this comment: "*hapax de sens douteux*". For the date, they clearly decided against the problematic P and correctly read <υ>κδ' (<4>24), noting that the apparent P is absurd and must have been a mistake, while an eighth year of the indiction coincides very well with the year 424 of the Province. The date of this inscription was then clearly established: in the month of Apellaios, indiction 8, in the year 424 (of Arabia) = November-December 529 AD.

In spite of this note in *REG* which should have closed the case, much ado about this church reached national and international media in 2008. Two scholars from Toronto, Lincoln Blumell and Jennifer Cianca, then proposed a paper about this inscription to the *Biblical Archaeology Review*.⁸ Their reading of the text combines those by Tybout (*SEG*) and Feissel-Gatier (*REG*). For the date, Blumell-Cianca of course follow the Feissel-Gatier interpretation, and accurately notice (after a close examination of the *ADAJ* photograph) that the letter P is not really a mistake, but that "the supralinear stroke that marks the *upsilon* as a number touches the two up diverging stems of the letter (Y) so that at first glance it looks like a *rho* (P)".⁹ They also endorsed Feissel and Gatier's neologism "μονοκτίστ(ης)" with much less caution than the two French scholars, proposing a translation as "the sole founder". This paper was taken in consideration by the editors of the *BAR* but could not be published in the regular printed edition, so it was made available online on their website as a PDF file¹⁰. Lincoln Blumell then published a short article in *Zeitschrift für Papyriologie und Epigraphik* about the word Μονοκτίστ(ης), in which he publishes in fact what was supposed to be the definitive edition of the Rihab Saint George

5. *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 51 (2001), p. 629, n° 2045 (Tybout).

6. And not the 18th as in the first publication.

7. *Revue des Etudes Grecques* 118 (2005), p. 565.

8. Lincoln BLUMELL, Jenn CIANCA, "The Oratory of St. George in Rihab: The Oldest Extant Christian Building or Just Another Byzantine Church?", paper submitted in July 2008 to *Biblical Archaeology Review*, PDF version available online on the *BAR* website.

9. Blumell-Cianca (2008), p. 5.

10. Cf. "Scholars Skeptical About World's Oldest Church", *Biblical Archaeology Review* 34.5 (September-October 2008) p. 14.

church dedicatory inscription.¹¹

Indeed, the case is not completely closed. There is a general consensus about the date of the inscription being Apellaios 424 of the era of Arabia, that is to say November-December 529 AD. But there is no such thing as a μονοκτίστ(ης), not more than any “*mohok*”. Line 3 is full of blunders, as it often happens in sixth century village Greek inscriptions, but one can easily recognize the standard formula “ἐκτίσθη καὶ ἐτελιώθη” (was founded and completed) that can be found in several contemporaneous

church inscriptions in the area, with various spellings.¹² The first three letters MOH are to be read μον(αχοῦ) and apply to Thomas, son of Gaianos; moreover after the mosaic-maker omitted the abbreviation mark, he confused the probable lunar *epsilon* with an *omicron*.

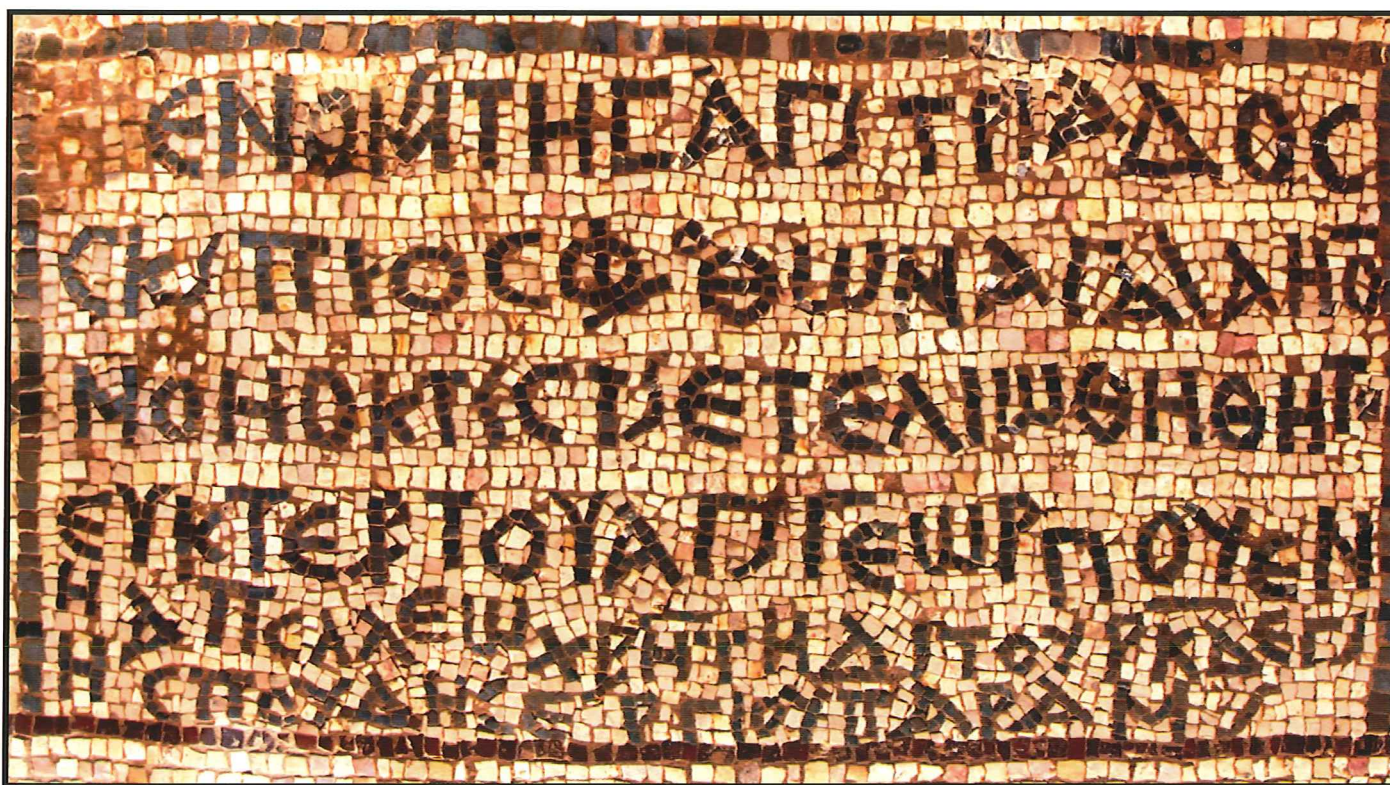


Fig.1. The inscription.

II – The Inscription (Fig. 1)

Mosaic inscription in six lines of black tesserae within a tabula ansata. The rectangular frame is 104 x 54 cm. Letters 7-5.5 cm high (ll. 1-4), 4-3 cm (ll. 5-6), interl. 4 cm. Seen, photographed, reproduced on a transparent sheet. The rectangular frame had obviously been prepared for lines 1-5 only, and the general composition of the inscription was disturbed in the end by the addition of line 6.

[+] Ἐν ὀ(νό)μ(ατι) τῆς Ἀγ(ίας) Τριάδος, / ἐκπροσφ(οράς) Θωμᾶ Γαιανοῦ / μον(αχοῦ), ἐκτίσ(η) καὶ ἐτελιώθη<θη> τὸ / εὐκτέρο(ιον) τοῦ ἀγ(ίου) Γεωργίου ἐν / μῆ(νι) Ἀπελλέω, χρ(όνων) η΄ ἰνδ(ικτιώνος), τοῦ (ἔτους) υκδ΄ (τῆς) ἐπ(αρχίας), / σπουδῆ Σεργίου παραμ(οναρίου).

11. Lincoln BLUMELL, “A Note on the Meaning of the Term Μονοκτίστ(ης)”, ZPE 166 (2008), p. 22.

12. In Mekhayyat: IGLS XXI 97: (...) ἐκτίσθη καὶ ἐτελιώθη ὁ ἅγιος τῶπως (...); 100: (...) ἐκτίσθη καὶ ἐτελιώθη ὁ ἅγιος τόπος (...) dated 535-536; see also in Ma'in IGLS XXI 162, with the same formula.

“ + In the name of the Holy Trinity, from offerings by the monk Thomas, son of Gaianos, this oratory of Saint George has been founded and completed in the month of Apellaios, in the 8th year of the indiction, the year 424 of the Province, by the efforts of the paramonarion Sergios.”

L.1: + Ἐν ὀ(νό)μ(ατι) τῆς Ἁγ(ίας) Τριάδος (Tybout *SEG*); . εν... τῆς ἀγ(ίας) Τριάδος (Feissel-Gatier *REG*); ἐν ὀ(νό)μ(ατι) τῆς ἀγ(ίας) τριάδος (Blumell-Cianca; Blumell *ZPE*).

L.2: ἐκ προσφ(ορᾶς) ΘΩΝΑΓΑ\ΑΗΟΙ (Tybout *SEG*); <ἐ>κ προσφ(ορᾶς) Θωμᾶ Γαιανοῦ (Feissel-Gatier *REG*).

L.3: ΝΩΝΟΚΤΙCΤS ἐτελιώθη {θη} τὸ (Tybout *SEG*); μονοκτίστ(ου) ἐτελιώθη {θη} τὸ (Feissel-Gatier *REG*, Blumell-Cianca, Blumell *ZPE*).

L.5: τοῦ ρκδ' (?) ἔτ(ους) (Tybout *SEG*); τοῦ <υ>κδ' <ἔ>τ(ους) (Feissel-Gatier *REG*); υκδ ἔτ(ους) (Blumell-Cianca; Blumell *ZPE* who forgot the τοῦ).

On L. 1 there is an empty space at the beginning, and it seems the mosaic has been restored there; there was probably an initial cross. The word ὀ(νό)μ(ατι) is abbreviated and written OM with an abbreviation mark above the M.

On L. 2 misspellings and confusions of letters occur. The beginning is obviously the very frequent formula ἐκ προσφ(ορᾶς): the mosaic maker made a confusion between an € and a C, and added the abbreviation mark for no reason. προσφ(ορᾶς) is abbreviated, followed by a small o that could be the second o of the word. Θωμᾶ is the name Θωμας (Thomas) in the genitive form. The following letters ΓΑΙΑΗΩ must be read Γαιανοῦ (genitive form of the name Gaianos): on the whole inscription the letter N is always written H, except for the last letter on l. 4, (like in the Cyrillic alphabet), and the stroke on top of the O must not be taken as a numeration mark, but as a cursive form of the OY monogram.

On L. 3 one can recognise the standard formula ἐκτίστ(η καὶ) ἐτελιώθη (*was founded and completed*) used in similar inscriptions from Mukhayyat and Ma'in.¹³ In this respect, the first three letters on this line, ΜΟΗ, must be an abbreviation for μον(αχοῦ) (*monk*) with omission of the expected abbreviation mark. The first € of ἐκτίστη (*was founded*) has been confused with an O, while the last letter of this verb is replaced by an abbreviation mark and the conjunction καὶ is omitted, a frequent omission on this kind of church dedications. The second verb, ἐτελιώθη (*was completed*) is correctly written and spelled, but the mosaic maker (or the model he was copying) added a redundant θη. At the end of the line the article τὸ is written with a very small o due to lack of space.

On L. 4 one can easily read the abbreviated term εὐκτέρο(ιον) (oratory) with an abbreviation mark crossing the P. It is not difficult to read the rest of the line, with the classical abbreviation ΑΓ(abbreviation mark) for ἀγ(ίου), as on l. 1. In the name Γεωργίου the mosaic maker wrote Π for ΠΙ. The last letter, N, is the only *nu* on this inscription to be noted N and not H.

On L. 5 the two H in a vertical line that are on the bottom left of the text are the frequent abbreviation for μη(νὶ) (*in the month*). The following name is Ἀπελλέω, an alternative spelling for Ἀπελλάϊω. In the Macedonian calendar, the month of Apellaios is November-December.

The rest of the line must be the year in which this *eukterion* was built, and the date is indicated with

¹³. IGLS XXI 97, 100 (dated 535-536), 162 ; see above.

a classical formula: XP(abbreviation mark) for χρ(όνων), the numeral H (numeration mark) and ΙΗΔ(abbreviation mark). Χρ(όνων) ἡ' ἰνδ(ικτιῶνος) means “in the eighth year of the indiction”. There follows the year of the provincial era. After the article τοῦ, the word (ἔτους) is omitted, and there is the numeral which could be read at first glance PKΔ, of which only the K and the Δ seem to be topped by a horizontal stroke marking the letters as numerals. As Blumell and Cianca first noticed, the apparent P is in fact Y but its horizontal stroke touches the top of the letter, which is of the same size (5 black *tesserae*) than the two others (**Fig. 2**). The two last letters, ΕΓ(abbreviation mark) mean nothing and have been read ἔτ(ους) with a confusion between T and Γ. One may as well read ΕΠ for ἐπ(αρχίας): “of the province”, which makes more sense. In l. 6 there is neither misspelling nor confusion of letters.

The meaning of this inscription is clear and it is very much like many other Byzantine church dedications already known in the area: thanks to the generosity of a pious monk who funded the project, an oratory dedicated to Saint George was built by the local paramonaire and dedicated in November or December 529 AD. The beginning of the text, “In the name of the Holy Trinity”, sounds like an invocation that prefigures the “*bismillah*” of the later Muslim inscriptions. The building itself is called an *eukterion* (and not an *ekklesia*): this is unusual but paralleled by a religious inscription from Bostra under Justinian and Theodora.¹⁴



Fig.2. Detail - the date on the inscription

Thomas Bauzou
(University of Orléans, France)

14. IGLS XIII n° 9137.