

CHRISTINA MARANCI

**NEW EVIDENCE FOR THE WALL PAINTINGS AND
TRIUMPHAL ARCH INSCRIPTION AT MREN**

The church of Mren, completed c. 638/9 and located in the Kars province of modern eastern Turkey, preserves in its sanctuary the fragmentary remains of wall painting, as many have observed. I had the good fortune of making visits to the church last year, when I detected heretofore unnoticed details of Christ in the apse, an almost complete identification of the apostolic group, new details of their figures, and additional paintings on the north wall of the sanctuary and one of the eastern piers (see picture N 17). During the same trip, Steven Sim and I observed and took photographs of an inscription on the apsidal arch. I deciphered this inscription in April of this year, and believe that it constitutes one of the earliest Armenophone biblical inscriptions. What I offer here is a summary of these findings. One hopes that this new pictorial and textual evidence serves to heighten the urgency of stabilizing and preserving the church, which is now in precarious structural condition.

The Wall Paintings in the Sanctuary

The bust of Christ in the apse conch is sufficiently well preserved to identify basic forms and contours. Christ has a long, oval face and wears a purple, robe-like himation over a square-necked chiton. The halo contained a cruciform design, of which only the left arm is now visible. The left and right shoulders of Christ are not of equal height: while the outline of his left shoulder curves downward, the right shoulder curves up as if he were raising his right hand in benediction. Fragments of paint in the zone of his left shoulder suggest that he was holding an open scroll. Christ's right lower leg, his foot, and a jeweled pedestal are also visible (see picture N 18). His garment is hemmed at the top of the long and elegant foot, which is shown slightly foreshortened. The remains of a sandal are also evident: it is fastened to the foot with string-like straps. Deep flesh-toned pigment can still be discerned in this area. Below the foot is a jeweled boxlike footrest. The foreshortened position of the footstool is indicated in part by a series of diagonal hatchmarks on its

upper surface. From behind the footrest, a rinceau emerges like a woody stem.

Below the image of Christ, in the zone of the three windows, is a row of figures identifiable as an apostolic group. While the existence of this group has been mentioned, the photographs presented here offer new information for consideration. There appear to be eight apostles in total: three to the left of the left apse window, two flanking the central window, and three to the right of the right window. The figures' busts are enclosed in medallions and bear, to the side, onomastic inscriptions in *erkat'agir*. These texts are incised into the wall surface and were probably painted originally. The left group, from left to right, consists of Philip (ՓԻԼԻՊՈՍ), Matthew (ՄԱԹԷՈՍ), and John (ՅՈՎՀԱՆՆԷՍ). The next identifiable single figure is Peter (ՊԵՏՐՈՍ). Damage to the figure to the left of the central window precludes secure identification, but we may suppose that it is Paul; the same pairing was suggested on the west portal lintel. Finally, the trio at far right is, from the left, Mark (ՄԱՐԿՈՍ), Luke (ԼՈՒԿԱՍ), and Thaddeus (ԹՍՏԷՈՍ).

All the apostles at Mren have been defaced. Nevertheless, close observation permits some deductions regarding their original appearance. The heads are small and the necks muscular, with subtle modulations indicating roundness. They are rendered as specific likenesses: Philip (see picture N 19) is represented as a young beardless man, according to tradition, while Peter (the best preserved of the group) is a bearded older man with short gray hair and a high forehead. The figures wear draped garments that fall in vertical folds down one shoulder and create a square opening for the neck. At least some of the figures (Matthew, Peter, Luke) appear to be in three-quarter view.

Medallions emphasize the nimbed heads and busts of the apostles, but they were actually rendered as full-length figures, as a few faint details show. Some distance below the bust of Phillip is a hand holding a closed scroll, and Mark's right hand, emerging from long flowing drapery, is also visible. The right hand of Peter may be seen next to the central window; he uses it to point upward to the figure of Christ. The proportions of these figures are naturalistic, if not slightly elongated, with small heads and soft modulations of color on skin and on drapery.

On the intrados of the apse are a series of busts in medallions. Although only three remain, on the right side of the apse, it seems likely that twelve originally decorated this zone. As Thierry and Thierry have noted, the medallions form a kind of rinceau in which two bands intersect

to form a set of circles. Two of the three preserve their names next to their heads; unlike the apostles on the apse wall, the names are entirely within the frame of the medallions and on both sides of the figures' heads. The uppermost of these busts, perhaps because of its great height, offers the best-preserved physiognomy of any painted figure at Mren. Because of the way the painting has deteriorated, inverting the colors of the photograph (essentially creating a negative) yields a greater sense of the facial features. The face is long, with large, almond-shaped eyes, a long nose with fleshy nostrils, full lips, and a long wispy mustache and pointed beard.

Clerics appear on the northern wall of the sanctuary. The western of the two, published in 1971 by Thierry and Thierry, is the best-preserved full-length figure at Mren. Framed in a painted rectangular panel, he is situated on the northern pilaster of the sanctuary, bordering the area of the nave. On the same wall, just to the north of the triumphal arch, I have identified an additional clerical figure. Although almost completely defaced, one clue remains to ensure both the existence of a figure and its ecclesiastical identity: the omophorion. Descending toward the hem of the figure's garment is a narrow, rectangular panel of cloth which is edged in horizontal lines and terminating in a fringe. This figure, too, was framed in a rectangular panel.

On the east face of the southeast dome pier, one additional figure may be discerned (see picture N 20). Only the upper left corner of the painting is preserved. Within a rectangular panel framed in red is the fragmentary head and nimbus of a figure. The one preserved eye is large and almond-shaped, and the brow above is prominent and thick; the low forehead is capped by thick crop of black hair, suggesting a youthful person. Next to the face, in faint lettering, is the inscribed word SURB (ՍՈՒՐԲ). To the left of the figure is a narrow band, evidently a kind of frame, in which one may still discern faint traces, in yellow-gold pigment, of a star or floral ornament. This form is reminiscent of the border decorations of sixth-century icons in Sinai, including the encaustic panels of Christ and of the Virgin, Child, and Saints.

This short description hopefully demonstrates that Mren has the potential to add significantly to our knowledge of Armenian painting. Only some seven identifiable figural programs are known; of them the best known and relatively best preserved are Lmbatavank' (Širak province), the large church at T'alın, and Aruč (both in Aragac'otn province). The church of Aruč provides the closest parallel for the program

at Mren, however. There Christ is shown standing above a row of apostles, as at Mren. Although there is some discussion about the precise years of the construction of Aruč, historical sources and a foundation inscription indicate a likely date in the seventh decade of the seventh century. It is difficult to compare two fragmentary programs; nevertheless, what remains at the two monuments demonstrates a common iconographic scheme, a shared pictorial style and figural treatment, and a correspondence in several compositional details. Notably, the elevated right arm and the unfurled scroll in the left hand; the elegant, elongated feet, the same sandal type, and the identical conception of a two-tiered jeweled footrest from which a rinceau emerges. Close examination of the two footstools reveals a striking stylistic parallel: the same technique of diagonal strokes is used in both to indicate recession from the front to back of the object. This feature was previously thought to be unique to Aruč in the context of early medieval Armenian wall painting.

The close relationship between Mren and Aruč bears on a number of existing scholarly questions, including the relative chronologies of the two monuments (a subject best approached by textual and architecture analysis), and it raises new ones as well, including, but not limited to, exploring the prevalence of the standing (rather than enthroned) Christ as seen at Aruch, Tsromi, Mren, and maybe Artik (according to Durnovo); the role of images in this Heraclian-era monument, and the continuity of Armenian painting tradition from the fourth to the sixth decade of the seventh century, that is, from Byzantine to Arab rule. The wall paintings at Mren offer important evidence for these issues because they belong to a monument rich in epigraphy and sculpture for which we have considerable contextual information. What we can say for sure is that this set of images, the extent of which was not appreciated until very recently, now constitutes the most complete and coherent program of early medieval wall painting surviving in Armenia.

The Apsidal Inscription

The inscription is located in the east end of the church on the arch crowning the apsidal curvature, on the surface facing the interior. The letters are painted in dark or black color and are in *erkat 'agir* script, measure around 24 centimeters high, and are spaced generously. Presumably they once ran around the semicircle of the arch, but damage to the wall surface prevented me from discerning any on the left side. The first visible letter appears slightly to the left of the apex of the arch, and, with

two lacunae, is then followed with a series of almost completely readable letters until the bottom right. There are nineteen visible letters. The first letters preserve the last part of a nominative abstract noun "...**ՔՈՒԹԻՒՆ**"; the last visible fragment preserves the sequence of letters "**ԴԵՐԿԱՅՆԱ-ԻՈՒՐՄ**". Based on this evidence, I propose that the complete inscription was a quotation from Psalm 92 (93): 5:

[ՏԱՆՔՈՒՄՎԱՅՆԼԷՍՐ]ՔՈՒԹԻՒՆ[ՏԷՐԸՆ]ԴԵՐԿԱՅՆԱԻՈՒՐՄ.

Տան քոմ վայելէ սրբութիւն Տէր ընդ երկայն ատուս.

Holiness befits your house, Lord, for the length of days.

When was this inscription painted? It should not necessarily be assumed that the text is seventh century; much more close physical inspection should be done to ascertain that. As is well known, Mren underwent periods of restoration, most prominently in the tenth and thirteenth centuries. It is possible that the text was added during the period of Bagratid control of the settlement of Mren, a period well attested in the exterior epigraphy of the church. At the same time, there is nothing in the paleography, as far as I can see, distinguishing the text from seventh-century Armenian inscriptions, whether lapidary, of which there are many, or painted. The paleography seems quite comparable to mid-seventh-century Armenian inscriptions in stone, such as the exterior west façade inscription at Mren itself, the sundial inscription at Zuart‘noc‘ (c. 641-661), and the east façade foundation inscription of Aruč (c. 660). The most useful comparison, however, is with the painted inscription in the apse of Aruč. The wall painting there features a standing Christ holding in his left hand an open scroll which preserves the Armenian text of John 14:21. Another reason to date the Mren inscription to the seventh century is the strong relationship of the inscription to the painted program within which it is nested. The evidence of the wall paintings, together with the paleographical remarks made above, therefore offer a strong basis on which to situate the inscription within the original period of church construction.

If this seventh-century date is correct, the arch inscription at Mren would represent the earliest known direct quotation of the Bible in an Armenophone epigraphic context. However, an important local precedent is found in a Greek inscription of Psalm 92(93): 5 at the three-aisled basilica of Ereroyk‘. Located in the Ani-Pemza region of the Armenian Republic, Ereroyk‘ is typically dated by scholars from the end of the fifth to the sixth century. At the extreme eastern end of the south façade of the

church, just at the corner of the building, the psalm quotation appears in five lines within a rectangular frame with dovetails at either side.

In addition to the Ereroyk' text, at least thirteen other Greek inscriptions in the Mediterranean and Near East cite Psalm 92(93): 5. They may be grouped, roughly, into three categories: 1) fifth- and sixth-century inscriptions in stone or mosaic pavements in Cilicia, Syria, Lebanon, North Africa, and the Holy Land; 2) the early Byzantine mosaic inscription in the arch at the church of the Dormition in Nicaea, dated before 726; and 3) Byzantine inscriptions in Thrace, Greece, and Sicily, either painted or mosaic, and located (as at Nicaea) in the elevation of the apse.

Insofar as the Mren inscription is positioned within the apse, rather than on a pavement or exterior wall of the church, it forms a parallel closest with the church of the Dormition in Nicaea, because of its relatively early date, the text selection (the longer version of the Psalm text, and without the prefix "your decrees are very sure"), and its location in the arch span. Therefore, unlike the Greek inscription of the Psalm at Ereroyk', which has been connected with Syrian epigraphic practices and church decoration, the Mren inscription seems more persuasively situated within the context of early Byzantine church decoration. Certainly the contextual evidence supports such a claim, as Mren was constructed during the consolidation of the eastern frontier by the emperor Heraclius in the late 620s and 630s. Heraclius is named in a building inscription extending across the west façade of Mren. He is also identified by scholars on the north portal, in a scene believed to represent the Return of the True Cross to Jerusalem. This combination of epigraphic and visual evidence has been regarded a vivid expression of the "high tide" of Byzantium in Armenia. Within a local context, the Mren triumphal arch inscription is also noteworthy, as it is the earliest preserved biblical inscription to be found in an Armenian church apse. The text selection, moreover, may be connected to the Armenian rites of consecration and the eucharist, and raises interesting questions about possible relations with Byzantine liturgical tradition.

Conclusion

The apse at Mren offers precious new evidence for the art and epigraphy of medieval Armenia. More work must be done on this inscription, including, first and foremost, a high-quality photographic study (which was not possible during my visits). Given the severely compromised state of the building, this task should be given utmost priority.

Քրիստինա Մարանցի
Նոր տվյալներ Մրենի որմնանկարների և հաղթականաբարձանագրության վերաբերյալ

Կարսի շրջանում գտնվող Մրենի եկեղեցու շինարարությունն ավարտվել է 638/9 թ.: Պահպանվել են նրա զոհասեղանը և որմնանկարների հատվածներ: Ինձ բախտ է վիճակվել անցյալ տարի այցելելու եկեղեցին և խորանում նկատելու Քրիստոսի պատկերի մնացորդներ, առաքյալների համարյա մի ամբողջական խումբ, նրանց ֆիգուրների նոր մանրամասներ և լրացուցիչ նկարներ խորանի հյուսիսային պատին ու քարամուկներից մեկի վրա: Այս պատկերները սերտ առնչություն են ցուցաբերում է դարի վերջի Արուճի եկեղեցու հետ, և կարելի է ենթադրել, որ առաջինները պատկերազրույթյան առումով նմուշ են ծառայել վերջիններին համար, և, ավելի լայն առումով, որ արաբական նվաճումների առաջին տասնամյակներում Հայաստանում մշակութային ավանդույթների շարունակականություն է եղել:

Նույն ճամփորդության ժամանակ ես և Սթիվեն Սիմը քարամուկի վրա պսակող կամարի ներքին մակերեսի վրա նկատեցինք և վերծանեցինք մի արձանագրություն: Մոտ 24 սմ բարձրությամբ երկաթագիր տառերը գրված են մուգ գույնով և տեղադրված են միմյանցից բավական հեռու: Տասնինը տեսանելի տառերից դատելով ենթադրում եմ, որ ամբողջական արձանագրությունը մեջբերում է ՂԲ 5 Սաղմոսից. «Տան քում վայելէ սրբութիւն Տէր ընդ երկայն աւուրա»: Սա, իմ կարծիքով, հայալեզու սուրբգրային վաղագույն արձանագրություններից մեկն է: Հուսանք, որ այս նորահայտ որմնանկարներն ու արձանագրությունը ավելի հրատապ կգարձեն փլուզման ենթակա եկեղեցու ամրացման և պահպանման աշխատանքները: