Case Studies in Archaeology and World Religion
The Proceedings of the Cambridge Conference

Edited by
Timothy Insoll

BAR International Series 755
1999
The Early Syriac Liturgical Drama and its Architectural Setting.

Emma Loosley, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

Introduction

Spending Easter with the Syrian Orthodox Church is an experience that is in many ways alien to those of us who have been raised in the traditions of western Christianity. From the first day of Lent onwards the community is preparing itself for the momentous events of Passion week. On Good Friday the church is packed hours before the service. Old ladies fight each other for the seats at the front in behaviour not unlike that of teenagers wanting the best view of the latest music sensation. The events of the next three hours are played out in the sanctuary of the church. The people reach fever pitch when the flower filled bier, representing Christ’s body taken down from the Cross, leaves the east end of the church and is manhandled around the building by local young men acting as pallbearers. Those standing around the perimeter of the church become almost hysterical as they attempt to take flowers from the bier as a form of blessing. When the bier reaches the safety of the sanctuary again and is symbolically ‘buried’ behind the altar, the red velvet curtains before the sanctuary swish together, to remain shut until they are opened to celebrate the resurrection late the next day on the eve of Easter Day.

The impact of the modern Good Friday festival is extremely theatrical and the faithful are merely spectators to the action as it unfolds. There is little evidence of the sacred topography that played an integral part in early Syrian Christianity. The priests and deacons with their (male) pallbearers are the only active participants in the service. The church building itself also plays little part in the proceedings. Apart from the procession all the events centre on the altar, the lectern or Golgotha, as the Syrian Orthodox call it, with the Gospel book and the cross and censers. The Syrian evidence is important because it is the only early major Christian rite that can be studied through its material remains. Antioch was an important centre of early Christianity with Rome and Jerusalem, but whereas in the two latter cases the churches of the area have been destroyed or extensively altered over time obscuring the original plan, in the towns and villages to the east of Antioch the churches have been preserved unchanged allowing us a clear view of their spatial arrangement and liturgical features.

The Church as microcosm is not a new idea. Anthropologists are familiar with microcosm as an element of ceremonies in traditional societies and architectural historians have suggested that this cosmological view is illustrated by a variety of monuments (see McVey 1983; McEwan 1993, 1994). In the case of the Syrian liturgical tradition we have a surviving document from the East Syrian tradition that explains the church interior in cosmological terms. This text is known as the *Expositio officiorum ecclesiae*, Georgio Arbelensi vulgo adscripta. Over the course of this century academics have disputed the original attribution of the manuscript to the ninth-century author George of Arbela. It now seems likely that it was written in the eighth century by an unknown East-Syrian (Nestorian) theologian. Along with mention of the bema (a straight-sided horseshoe-shaped platform in the nave facing the apse) and its function in a variety of other Syriac and Armenian sources we can use this manuscript with the material remains and knowledge of current liturgical practice to reconstruct the ritual life and world view of the early Christian population. The importance of the Syrian tradition is that it extended the concept of microcosm further than other early Christian traditions by the extensive use of visual imagery coupled with liturgical furniture.

![Figure 1. Location map](image)

N. W. Syria and its churches

The limestone massif of north-west Syria is located between Aleppo and Antakya (Antioch) (Figure 1). The area flowered briefly between the fourth and early seventh centuries when olive oil, the spice route and large numbers of pilgrims travelling to visit local holy men, as well as en route to the Holy Land, created prosperity in the hinterland of the great city of Antioch. The communities which prospered there were Christian and spoke Syriac, a form of Aramaic, with the more educated possessing a knowledge of the Greek used in Antioch itself. Thus the inscriptions recorded in this area are mainly Greek, with some Syriac and Latin. The
peace and prosperity enjoyed by these settlements meant that they had the leisure and funds to undertake a number of building projects. Although on a provincial scale, the limestone buildings were constructed skillfully (so much so that in many cases only the roofs are missing today) with competent carving, but simple, decoration. The ruins are so numerous that locally the people call the area ‘the Dead Cities’. The area was surveyed by Georges Tchalenko in the 1950s and his resulting three volume study Villages Antiques de la Syrie du Nord (1953-58) remains the standard text on the sites of the massif.

Very few of the villages have been comprehensively excavated and in most cases only survey work has been carried out. Each village has at least one, and often as many as three, churches. On the hills around the great church of Qal’aat Sem’aan, the area known as the Jebel Sem’aan, there are approximately two hundred churches. There are other ‘Jebel’ groupings slightly to the south, although the Jebel Sem’aan appears to have a slightly larger number of settlements than the other areas and is better known because of the pilgrimage centre at Qal’aat Sem’aan.

Amongst these churches around forty-five stand out from the rest. This group is scattered across these hills, with one or two churches further to the south and east and one notable exception (Resafa) located in the desert far to the east. These churches are different because they all possess a bema. Whilst they have been considered from an archaeological perspective (Baccache 1979/1980; Tchalenko 1990) and have been discussed by liturgiologists (Renhart 1995; Taft 1968), surprisingly nobody has yet used first hand knowledge of the buildings coupled with the existing Syriac texts in order to reconstruct the rituals that took place within them. The liturgiologists have not spent time visiting the remains and the archaeologists have not read all the Syriac texts. Together the churches and the texts give a fuller picture of the ritual life of the early church and the world view of those who worshipped within these buildings.

![Figure 2. Syrian 'type' church](image)

Church-building and Liturgy

At this stage it is necessary to pause for a moment and discuss church-building in fourth-century Syria. It is widely accepted by both archaeologists and art historians who have concentrated on this area that the Syrian ‘type’ was an apsed basilica built of limestone, basalt, gypsum or mud-brick depending on local resources (Figure 2).

The churches of the limestone massif all date from the fourth to the first decade of the seventh century, a span of just over two hundred years. They generally follow the type outlined above, with a few centrally planned martyria providing the exceptions, as at Qal’aat Sem’aan, the well known pilgrimage site that centred on the column that St. Simeon Stylites mounted in the fifth century (Figure 3). The apsed basilica was used for both parish and conventual churches (Figure 4) a fact that in some cases has led to disputes over whether certain churches were part of monastic foundations or instead served the local community with outbuildings for catechism classes and accommodation for the priest. These extra buildings served administrative purposes as church life came to be regulated by diocesan authorities for the first time. It was in the fourth century that Christian ritual was codified for the first time and an organised church hierarchy began to institute a fixed rite according to accepted doctrine.

Much attention has been paid to the stationary liturgy that developed in Jerusalem and which is so famously explained by the pilgrim Egeria and later commentators, but for those outside the Holy Land who wished to recreate a sacred topography, symbols had to replace the monuments themselves. This is where the church interior assumed sacred meaning and evolved into a ‘holy place’ rather than merely a place for the faithful to gather. For those who could not undertake a pilgrimage to Jerusalem the clergy enacted a weekly ceremony that symbolically drew a map of the world for the faithful. The bema played a central part in this evolution. There was no fixed size prescribed for the bema but it was usual for it to sit twelve members of clergy. At the west end was what was called by Tchalenko the ‘bema throne’. In actual fact this ‘throne’ was a lectern to hold the Bible during the Gospel reading (Figure 5). The bema was joined to the sanctuary by means of a sacred pathway known as the bet-sqaqone, which is largely thought to have been purely symbolic, although clearly visible pathways have been documented in Iraqi bema churches.

The purpose of the bema was to enable the weekly reenactment of the crucifixion and resurrection through its use in the liturgy of the word. When it was time for the Gospel reading the clergy would leave the sanctuary, which symbolised the heavenly Jerusalem, and carry the Word, that is Christ represented by His Gospel, along the bet-sqaqone to the bema. At the bema the book would be placed on the lectern, which was, and is still, known as the Golgotha. It would then denote Christ crucified in the earthy Jerusalem. The bema represented Jerusalem in its entirety, on another level it also symbolised the upper room and the events of the last supper. It was no coincidence that the usual number of seats was twelve for the apostles, with Christ presiding over them as the Gospel on the throne. The homily would be conducted from the bema and hymns sung before the clergy would take the Bible and solemnly process back along the bet-sqaqone to the sanctuary to show Christ returning to the heavenly Jerusalem. Therefore the liturgy of the word was conducted in the midst of the people.
The clergy, although removed a little as they sat above the faithful on the bema, were not closeted in the east end of the church enacting the rite purely amongst themselves as they are today. By coming out of the east end of the church and bringing the service to the people the process fostered a much closer relationship between the clergy and the laity. They were also able to illustrate the central message of the Gospel in a physical way. By this movement around the interior of the church the clergy were bodily reinforcing the fact that God made his son flesh and sent him to live amongst the people. There was less of a physical barrier between clergy and laity. This ritual of entering the midst of the people and talking from the nave gave an immediacy and visual impact that is lost today as the priest stands high up at the east end of the church, as if on a stage. The earlier intimacy is lost and the feeling is that the priest is apart from, and not standing amongst, his congregation as he prays.

The Bema, Architecture, Archaeology and function

Half the population benefitted particularly from the bema. The women traditionally occupied the western half of the church, entering from a south-western door, whilst the men came in at the south-east and stood before the altar. It was the women that the priest would be addressing directly in his homily, whilst the men stood in front of the bema. This issue of women at the back has long been debated in the Syrian Orthodox Church with the more conservative communities of the Jezira in north-east Syria retaining the tradition until the present day. There has been much debate about the textual sources and whether this seating was followed everywhere. Archaeological evidence has been difficult to interpret because these barriers were apparently wooden and therefore have not survived. However at the church at Kafar Dar’et ‘Azze Tchalenko found a notch.
in a pillar around a metre from the floor (1953-8). He suggested that this was where the wooden barrier that separated the men from the women was attached, and this mark is still visible today forty years after Tchalenko’s survey. The pillar had fallen parallel to the bema around a third of the way along the nave, thus the back two thirds of the church would have been taken up by women (Figure 6). This division of the sexes would actually echo the male to female ratio of contemporary Syrian congregations where many men must work on Sundays. Work could have accounted for a similar ratio in late antiquity. Further investigation by the author has revealed similar notches in pillars, in this case still standing, at the nearby bema churches of Burj Heidar and Kharab Shams, in these cases located further east than at Kafar Dar’et ‘Azze. This tradition of women at the back is an obvious impediment when the ritual unfolds at the far east of the building and so this division became more of a problem when liturgical changes occurred in the seventh to ninth centuries.

This interpretation of the bema is not mere conjecture. The Expositio officiorum explains this symbolism but has not been extensively studied yet. This is due to the fact it is written in a particularly opaque form of Syriac and belongs to the East Syrian tradition which has received less attention than the West Syrian tradition because of the old view of the eastern church as heretical. This view is now recognised as stemming from ignorance concerning Assyrian traditions. The text is seemingly eighth century, with extensive references to liturgical changes instituted by the Assyrian (Nestorian) Catholicos Iso Yahv III in the seventh century but the liturgy it describes can be related to the existing monuments in Syria.

This perhaps supports the view taken by many liturgiologists that liturgical change generally moved from west to east rather than the other way around. Certainly the bema evidence offered from archaeological remains suggests that the earliest bemata were built around Antioch in the mid to late fourth century. The evidence of synagogue bemata and the Manichaean bema festival must be omitted in this case as being outside the central issues of this paper. There is evidence that the churches of Iraq have retained the bema and its associated liturgy (Dr E. Hunter, University of Manchester, pers. com.) which would perhaps suggest that the bema liturgy was connected to a particular rite which died out in western Syria after the early decades of the seventh century. The alternative is that the west Syrian bema evolved into the Byzantine ambo, another nave-platform that was moving closer towards what we recognise as the contemporary pulpit today.

This disappearance of the bema in Syria coincides with the desertion of the so-called ‘dead cities’ of the limestone massif, and whilst I do not wish to get involved in the long-running debate as to why the villages were seemingly abandoned at the beginning of the seventh century, this desertion seems to have occurred at much the same time as a reform of the liturgy took place. The Church at Antioch appears to have undergone liturgical change at the same time as Iso Yahv III was carrying out his changes further to the east. It has sometimes been argued that there is a link between this apparent return to the cities and the increased influence of the monasteries so, like western Europe in the middle ages, religious change was centred on the monasteries and their attendant schools. This meant that the secular community took less part in religious life.
This argument goes a long way to helping us in explaining the disappearance of the bema. No bema has yet been discovered in a monastic institution. They are always found in churches built for the lay community, and with the exception of a village called Ruweiha, said by Tchalenko to have possibly had two bema churches (Tchalenko 1990: 187) no village has more than one bema church, even though these settlements have on average two or three churches each. The case of Ruweiha is not a certain exception, for while one church in the village clearly possesses a bema today, the other church possesses an unmarked flagged floor. Tchalenko bases the evidence for a bema in this church on re-used masonry in the walls of the building and suggests that the bema was removed when the more important 'Church of Bizzos' was built. This would support the hypothesis that only one church at a time in a village possessed a bema.

This would reinforce the idea that the symbolism of the bema, and in fact the whole concept of the church interior as microcosm, was developed primarily for the education of the laity and was therefore obsolete in a monastic foundation. The implication here is that the monks were educated enough not to need the weekly reinforcement of sacred topography offered by the bema liturgy. This retreat of the learned into the monasteries and the attendant liturgical changes caused a growing remoteness between clergy and laity, and particularly affected the women who remained at the back of the church, far removed from the ritual that was now centred in the sanctuary at the east end of the building. This effect was mitigated in part by the later addition of ritual processions on Holy days, as on Palm Sunday or Good Friday. These processions around the perimeter of the church interior gave, and still give today, the faithful the chance to touch the Bible, the Cross or the vestments of the bishop as he passes, however the earlier intimacy where the clergy sat amidst the laity, albeit at one remove, has now been lost.

The contemporary Syrian Orthodox liturgy is static and conducted, with the exception of an Arabic homily, in Syriac. This Aramaic dialect was once the language of the faithful, but now it is not widely studied outside the priesthood and this adds to the distance between clergy and laity. In some cases women now sit on the south side of the church and men to the north, rather than being divided east-west, and in even more liberal communities the sexes are not segregated. Elements of the earlier rituals remain however. The lectern is still called the Golgotha, although it now stands in the sanctuary, rather than at the centre of a symbolic Jerusalem. And a prayer of entrance mentions the bema, although it seems to refer to the sanctuary which is the most commonly known meaning of the word and is used in this sense in Greek and Armenian as well as in Syriac.

The clearest sign that vestiges of bema-related liturgical practices remain is on Maundy Thursday when a ritual reenactment of the Last Supper takes place. This is played out on a wooden platform built before the sanctuary. In fact the parallel with the bema is so clear that as soon as I entered the church for this service many friends, most of whom spoke little or no English, but had some knowledge of my work, rushed up and gestured at the platform saying simply 'bema'.
As in Europe, where a perceived distance between the priesthood and the faithful led to the Vatican II reforms and other discussions of how a largely mediaeval liturgy could be reformed in order to return to the earlier roots of Christianity, the Syrian Orthodox are attempting internal reform. This process has begun through the encouragement of choirs and congregational participation in hymns and prayers rather than simply listening to the priests and deacons.

Figure 6. Bema-throne (foreground) and bema at Kafar Dar'et ‘Azze, the notched pillar is level with the bag on the left. View facing east

Figure 7. Father Na’aman on the bema at Resafa, facing east
If it continues to embrace further contact with the laity we may soon find more interaction, which can only help a younger generation of women who sometimes feel excluded by the current beliefs which prevent them even assisting at the altar. However it is extremely unlikely that the church interior will ever take on such a detailed ritual topography again.

There is one instance where a bema survived beyond the seventh century. We can trace the history of this particular church because it was an important cultic centre. The church is located far to the east of the limestone massif in the Syrian desert and is the Basilica of the Holy Cross at Resafa, originally called Sergiopolis. The city was believed to have been founded on the very spot where Sergius, a Roman, was martyred for refusing to kill Christians. A martyrium was built in the city to house his relics, but the city was partitioned in the seventh century causing the relics to be translated to the basilica, which already possessed a bema. Tchalenko discovered a crypt beneath the east end of the church and has hypothesised that the relics were kept there and brought out for special festivals. On these feast days the casket containing the bones was placed upon a ciborium situated in the centre of the bema. The bema at Resafa is much larger and more elaborate than usual. It possesses a small vestibule that the clergy entered before going up another level to the benches that sat twenty four instead of twelve. This could have significance as double the amount of the apostles, but it is more likely that my Syriac tutor, an Aleppo priest, was correct when he suggested that in this case they represent the twenty four thrones of Revelation. We have documentary evidence that this site was a popular centre for pilgrims up until the thirteenth century, and the archaeological remains tell us that the bema must have continued in use throughout this period. The bema is still intact except for its ciborium, throne and benches for clerics, making it clear that it was in use for the entire working life of the church. However during the thirteenth century the Caliph ordered the evacuation of the city and so the church was abandoned with everything else at Resafa. Resafa is three to four hours drive east of Aleppo in the midst of the Syrian desert and this isolation has meant that the remains are exceptionally well preserved. However it is this isolation which may have originally led to the continuation of the bema liturgy long after it appears to have disappeared in other parts of Syria. The location of Resafa so far to the east also suggests that the church could have played a key role in the transmission of the bema to the East Syrians.

It is also perhaps this isolation that sees the only continuation of the bema liturgy in contemporary Syria. At nearby Raqqa, Father Na'aman, a Roum (Greek) Catholic priest, is the only clergyman between Aleppo and the Jezira. As such he ministers to all Christians from the Armenians to the Assyrians. Every October 7th, the eve of Saint Sergius' day, he takes a bus of the faithful out to Resafa and celebrates the Feast of Saint Sergius from the bema. A symbol perhaps of the continuity of the ancient liturgical traditions, it is fitting that the congregation should be of mixed denomination (Figure 7).

Conclusions

This study illustrates how liturgiologists and archaeologists can benefit by working together. In an area that is famed for the sheer volume of its archaeological sites it is wrong simply to discount the evidence of the buildings in favour of the few texts that remain. In many cases the churches fit exactly with the textual descriptions and fill in the missing gaps. By attempting to fit in the missing pieces and explain why the Syrian Orthodox Church has processions around the church interior on holy days, but otherwise remains essentially static when the earlier texts suggest almost an air of audience participation in the ceremonies, we are not only questioning a change in liturgical practice but also a changing world view. At some time the clergy decided that it was no longer necessary for the whole world to be contained within the four walls of the church. This symbolism was no longer needed in a world that was growing smaller and is now largely forgotten and unlikely ever to gain such prominence again.

However in a climate where the laity are demanding change the Church is looking to the past for clarity in liturgical matters. The archaeological evidence provides information on a period before textual evidence was commonplace and gives us a view of life outside the great cathedrals. There is always textual evidence at the centres of power. The churches of the limestone massif enable us to reconstruct the lives of those at a lower level. By looking at these village churches in context we can come to more informed conclusions concerning the extent to which ritual was codified in these early years of Christianity.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Seven Pillars of Wisdom Trust, the British Institute at Amman for Archaeology and History and the Louis H. Jordan bequest for comparative religion for the grants that enabled this fieldwork. Many people have offered their time and advice. I would like to thank my supervisor at SOAS, Dr A. Palmer, also Dr E. Renhart, Dr S. Brock and Dr E. Hunter for taking the time to answer specific queries. There are many people who aided me in Syria but special thanks must go to Metropolitan Grigorios Yohanna Ibrahim of Aleppo for his hospitality and to Abouna Antoine Deliapo, Farida Boulos and Samir Katerji for their continuing assistance in countless ways.

References


Scriptores Syri. Ser. 2. Tom. 91,92.


