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Brilliant examples of coexistence between the components of Mosul and Nineveh – the religious buildings as a model

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Abstract

The current research deals with an identified cultural phenomenon that distinguished the society of Nineveh and this phenomenon was manifested by the culture of tolerance and religious and civil coexistence and it still exist until now and sustainable in spite of all the hard circumstances. From all the shining and brilliant aspects, part of the material heritage, i.e. the religious buildings as an evident model that sincerely embodies this unique phenomenon and expresses the openness to the values, customs, traditions and ceremonies of the city components and that was done through the neighboring, cohesion and bonds between Islam, Christianity and Eizeedi religions. So, it is noticed that these buildings embrace each other and protect each other without any sensitivity or enmity or fanaticism as the mosque is seen and a church or an Eizeedi sanctuary beside it in the heart of a Shabaki Islamic Shi'a village. Also, one can see a sanctuary visited by all the sects in Nineveh as in the case of (Khudher Elyas) shrine in Talafar.

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Introduction

The society of Nineveh is characterised by a rich and highly diverse local composition. Its religious communities include Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, and Kaka'is; its ethnic groups include Arabs, Syriacs, Kurds, Armenians, Turkmen, and Shabak; and its confessional landscape includes Sunni and Shi'i Muslims, Kaka'is, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Chaldeans, and others. This complex social mosaic has produced a distinctive image of the governorate as a space capable of accommodating multiple communities. Rather than constituting a source of weakness, such diversity has historically represented one of Nineveh's principal strengths. Against this background, the present study focuses on one manifestation of this pluralism: the interconnection, spiritual affinity, and physical adjacency observable in the construction and location of religious buildings.

The Christian communities of Mosul played a prominent role during Nader Khan's siege of the city in 1743, after he had proclaimed himself shahanshah under the name Nader Shah. At that time, Mosul was governed by Hajj Husayn Pasha al-Jalili, who, together with the city's inhabitants, mounted a determined defence against a powerful army that bombarded Mosul with thousands of projectiles. The Christian population's participation in the defence of the city

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was remembered as courageous and honourable. In recognition of this position, the Jalili governors showed particular concern for the churches of Mosul. In 1744, an imperial decree authorised the restoration of the city's churches, and Husayn Pasha al-Jalili permitted the renovation of old churches and those damaged during the siege. The works included the Old al-Tahira Church of the Syriac Orthodox, the External al-Tahira Church, the Old al-Tahira Church in Bakhdida (Qaraqosh), the Monastery of Mar Yuhanna al-Daylami at Muqurtaya in Qaraqosh, and the Chaldean Church of Simon Peter in Mosul (Ra'uf 1957, 451).

A comparable expression of Muslim-Christian fraternity appeared at the memorial gathering for the Iraqi linguist and Carmelite scholar Father Anastas Mari al-Karmali. His celebrated "Friday Council," held at the Carmelite monastery in the Suq al-Ghazl quarter of Baghdad, brought together leading scholars of Arabic, intellectuals, and notable figures from different religious communities. Among those who elegised him was Ahmad Hamid al-Sarraf, who evoked the depth of coexistence and fraternity between Muslims and Christians in Iraq by portraying mosques beside churches and turbans beside clerical caps (Awwad 1966, 267).

The study is organised into five thematic sections:

1. The adjacency of Christian churches and Islamic mosques in the city of Mosul.
2. The presence of Yazidi shrines in Shabak Shi'i Muslim villages.
3. A shared shrine in the Turkmen town of Tal Afar visited by Sunni Sufis, Shi'i Muslims, and Yazidis.
4. Examples of Christian and Muslim architects, craftsmen, stone-carvers, and calligraphers contributing to the construction and decoration of mosques and churches.
5. The role of Muslim engineers, craftsmen, and workers in rebuilding the churches of Mosul after the city's liberation from ISIS.

1. The Adjacency of Christian Churches and Islamic Mosques in Mosul

A survey of religious buildings within Mosul, its suburbs, districts, and subdistricts reveals numerous examples of churches standing immediately beside, or in very close proximity to, mosques. Similar spatial relationships can be observed between Sufi shrines, Yazidi sanctuaries, and Shabak Shi'i husayniyyas. These arrangements are material evidence of long-standing patterns of shared urban space.

- The Chaldean Church of Mar Isaiah in the Ras al-Kur quarter lies approximately 400 metres from the Umayyad Mosque, also known as the al-Musaffi Mosque.
- The Latin Church, also known as the Dominican Fathers' Church or popularly as the Clock Church, is a Catholic church in Mosul's al-Sa'a quarter. It stands only about 200 metres from the Great al-Nuri Mosque, renowned for its al-Hadba minaret, and is also near al-Saffar Mosque.
- Khazraj Mosque is located in the Khazraj quarter, one of the larger neighbourhoods in western Old Mosul. The quarter has historically been inhabited by both Muslims and Christians. The Syriac Christian Cathedral of Mar Toma is situated close to the mosque. The nearby al-'Araqda

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Mosque, in the Hammam al-Manqusha quarter on the lane leading to Mar Toma Church, is approximately thirty metres from the church's entrance.

- Bayt al-Tikriti Mosque in the Shahr Suq, or al-Qantara, quarter directly adjoins the Church of Mar Ahudama, known as the Church of the Tikritans, sharing the same wall. The Tikritan migrants who came to Mosul from Tikrit included both Muslims and Christians: the former constructed a mosque and the latter a church, and the two buildings remained contiguous. The two communities lived together from at least the fourth century AH/tenth century CE. The church, also called Mar Hudaymi or Mar Huthaymi, is regarded as one of Mosul's ancient churches. The Chaldean Church of Simon Peter, considered among the city's oldest churches, is located in the al-Mayasa quarter, about six metres west of al-Mansuriyya Mosque.
- The Syriac Catholic Church of the Virgin Fatima in the al-Faysaliyya district on Mosul's eastern bank faces the Rawdat al-Wadi/Imam Muhsin al-Hakim husayniyya at a distance of no more than five metres.
- 'Umar al-Aswad Mosque in the Shahr Suq quarter is contiguous with the Chaldean Church of Mar Bethion. The Internal al-Tahira Church of the Syriac community in Hawsh al-Bi'a stands opposite the Mosque of the Prophet Jirjis. The External al-Tahira Church of the Chaldeans in al-Shifa is approximately twenty metres from Imam Muhsin Mosque.
- The Christian Monastery of Mar Yunan lies approximately ten to fifteen metres from the Mosque of the Prophet Yunus on Tall al-Tawba (Taha 2020, 4).

2. Yazidi Shrines in Shabak Shi'i Muslim Villages

The following examples provide direct evidence of religious openness and neighbourly relations among the communities of Nineveh. Yazidi shrines have survived within Shabak Shi'i villages, where local Muslim residents have protected them and, in some cases, participated in their reconstruction and annual observances.

The shrine of Shaykh Hasan Firdaws, associated with followers of the Yazidi religion, is located in the village of al-Darawish in the Bashiqa subdistrict, north-east of Mosul. It represents a significant example of peaceful coexistence between Yazidis and Shabak. Local tradition relates that the area was once a fertile and flourishing garden inhabited by Shaykh Hasan Firdaws, a pious Yazidi figure. The shrine remained a witness to social cohesion in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Nineveh Plain. Like many sacred sites in Nineveh, it was destroyed by ISIS, but it was subsequently rebuilt with substantial contributions from the Shabak residents of al-Darawish.

Yazidi worshippers visit the shrine particularly on Wednesdays and Thursdays to light lamps and perform their religious rituals. Annual spring observances are also held there, with participation from both Yazidis and Shabak residents. The inhabitants of al-Darawish regard the shrine as an important part of their village. A Shabak religious sanctuary stands beside it, reinforcing the site's symbolic association with coexistence and mutual respect. For centuries, the Shi'i Muslim residents of the village have preserved the Yazidi shrine.

A second example is the dome and shrine of Shaykh Muhammad al-Khurasani, also associated with Yazidi followers, in the Shabak village of Barima, which belongs administratively to the Bashiqa subdistrict in north-eastern Nineveh.

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3. A Multi-Communal Shrine in Tal Afar

One particularly notable example is in the Turkmen town of Tal Afar, where Yazidis, Shi'i Muslims, and Sunni Sufis all attend a shrine.
The shrine of Khidr Ilyas is located south of Burja Bagh, about three kilometres south of Tal Afar. It is situated atop a little green hill with an ancient building that bears the name of the shrine. There are several shrines devoted to Khidr Ilyas all around Iraq, which is indicative of the general reverence that Iraqis have for this person; this devotion is not limited to Muslims. For the people who live in Tal Afar, the shrine holds particular significance. Every year, they celebrate the festival of Khidr Ilyas around the hill on the penultimate Thursday of the third week of February. Attendees include Yazidi families as well as families from Tal Afar and the neighbouring areas. Thursday is the start of the three-day celebration, which concludes on Saturday afternoon (Rashid 2017, 119–121).

4. Christian and Muslim Contributions to the Construction and Decoration of Religious Buildings

This section documents examples in which Christians and Muslims jointly contributed to the construction, restoration, ornamentation, stone-carving, and calligraphic decoration of religious buildings without sectarian reservation. Christian builders and stone-carvers participated in the repair, rehabilitation, construction, and carving of Mosul's limestone (hallan) and marble paving in many mosques. Their technical signatures remained visible from the 1930s onward. Mosul's Christian craftsmen were widely recognised for their manual skill, architectural experience, and artistic sensitivity (al-Aswad 2017, 54).

Among the most prominent was the Syriac Orthodox builder 'Abudi Jirjis 'Abd al-Mawla Tanburji, remembered by the people of Mosul as a symbol of Muslim-Christian fraternity. One of his early works was the restoration of al-Ridwani Mosque in 1921. In 1939, he repaired a dangerous cavity beneath the basin of the al-Hadba minaret of the Great al-Nuri Mosque. Because of the risk involved, Mosul's governor, Tahsin 'Ali Bey, and the Muslim officials responsible for the restoration asked him to set his own fee. He refused and reportedly replied: "This is the House of God; my payment is with the Lord of the House." He also constructed the four smaller minarets of the Great al-Nuri Mosque in 1946. King Faysal I reportedly granted him the title "Shaykh of the Builders of Mosul" and invested him with a ceremonial cloak (Nab'a 2023, 349).

Other Christian builders and stone-carvers included Bashir Hanna al-Aswad, who constructed Najib al-Jadir Mosque in al-Faysaliyya; Kamil Ayyub Kaskus and his son Khalil, who worked on the mosques of the Prophets Jirjis and Shith, al-Musaffi Mosque, and al-Ghazlani Mosque; Yusuf Behnam Findiqli and Yusuf Mikha Findiqli, who contributed to the minaret of the Prophet Shith Mosque; and Yusuf Mikha Findiqli, who worked on the minaret of the Prophet Jirjis Mosque. Sa'id Ibrahim 'Abd al-Ahad carved stone for the Great al-Zahra Mosque and, together with his brother Fadil, carved the arches of al-Rabi'iyya Mosque and al-Sa'igh Mosque in Hayy al-Sukkar. The Christian builder Mansur Abu Iyad and his two sons worked

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on Bilal al-Habashi Mosque. Additional craftsmen included Nu'il Yusuf, Khidr 'Ubada, Nu'man 'Ubada, Ghanim 'Ubada, 'Abd al-Ahad Sa'ur, the brothers Faraj and Kamil Sofia, Khidr al-Iksir, Ayyub Rahimu, 'Aziz Manuna, Tawfiq al-Dahin, Wadi' Kallu, Najib Kallu, Hazim Kallu, Sulayman Maqdisi, and Nabil Ra'uf Hanna al-Aswad (Ilyas 2019, 109–110).

Muslim Arab builders and stone-carvers also contributed to Christian monuments. 'Abd al-Mun'im Muhammad Yunus and his sons Mundhir and 'Umar constructed several arches in the Dominican Clock Church. Together with the author, they also restored and re-carved damaged Arabic inscriptions in the Syriac Catholic Church of Mar Toma after the period in which the building had been occupied and neglected by ISIS.

Calligraphers likewise participated in this shared artistic legacy. The Syriac Christian calligrapher Toma Qandal is credited with the inscription and Qur'anic verses on the façade of al-Aghawat Mosque during its restoration in 1865. The Muslim Arab calligrapher Yusuf Dhannun al-Mawsili executed the signboard of the Syriac Orthodox Archdiocese in Mosul in the 1980s. The author, Dr. Amer al-Jumaily, designed a bilingual Arabic-Syriac calligraphic panel incorporating a poetic line by the Lebanese poet 'Abd al-Jalil Wahbi: "We have become brothers, crescent and cross, meeting near and far." Its composition symbolised religious tolerance through the crescent, cross, and bell, and it was presented on the occasion of the second millennium of the Nativity. The author also produced façade inscriptions for the Monastery of Mar Oraha in 2000 and the Monastery of Mar Behnam in 2001.

5. Muslim Engineers, Craftsmen, and Workers in the Reconstruction of Mosul's Churches

The strength of communal life among Mosul's religious, sectarian, and ethnic groups cannot be reduced to imported ideological currents that are alien to the city's social fabric. International organisations and foreign partners contributed substantially to the restoration of Islamic and Christian religious monuments in Mosul, particularly through initiatives associated with the revival of the city's historic spirit. These projects were more than exercises in architectural reconstruction: they symbolised hope, expanded local opportunities, and strengthened professional capacities.

The people of Mosul themselves made a direct and effective contribution to rebuilding the churches and monasteries of their Christian fellow citizens. The reconstruction of the Syriac Catholic al-Tahira Church and the Dominican Clock Church involved local archaeologists, engineers, architects, craftsmen, labourers, and contracting companies. Similar participation characterised work on the Chaldean al-Tahira Church and the Syriac Orthodox Church of Mar Toma. Muslims of different denominations reportedly constituted more than 95 per cent of the personnel employed in these projects. This figure is presented not as a comparison with Christian participation, but as evidence that Mosul's society retained a deep commitment to fraternity and peace despite the political and security crises it endured.

Christian clergy and church visitors repeatedly expressed appreciation for the dedication of those involved in restoring these religious monuments, which were treated with a reverence

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comparable to that accorded to mosques and Yazidi shrines. Public scenes of joy accompanied the rebuilding of churches, the installation of altars and crosses, and the ringing of bells. The restoration of Mosul's churches therefore carried a broader message to displaced Christians: they remain an original and indispensable component of the city's social fabric.

Research Findings

1. From the medieval period through the late Ottoman era, Christian churches and Islamic mosques frequently existed in close physical proximity.
2. Long-term coexistence in towns of the Nineveh Plain facilitated the preservation of Yazidi shrines inside Shabak Shi'i Muslim villages.
3. Field investigation and visits to settlements in the Nineveh Plain revealed sustained patterns of openness and coexistence between Yazidi and Shabak communities.
4. A distinctive example was identified in Tal Afar: a shrine associated with Sunni Turkmen Sufis that is also visited by Yazidis during the annual festival.
5. The study documented notable examples of Christian and Muslim architects, builders, craftsmen, stone-carvers, and calligraphers contributing to the construction and decoration of both churches and mosques.
6. The post-liberation reconstruction of Mosul's churches relied heavily on Muslim engineers, craftsmen, and labourers, who reportedly represented approximately 95 per cent of the workforce in some projects.

Recommendations

1. Encourage and publicly support constructive examples of religious, intellectual, social, and doctrinal openness among the communities of Nineveh.
2. Promote participation by governmental bodies, civil-society organisations, and local activists in the annual festivals and commemorations associated with shrines and churches throughout Nineveh Governorate.
3. Create a national register honouring craftsmen and workers whose contributions to mosques and churches were not recorded on foundation plaques, often because of personal modesty or because they declined payment for charitable work.
4. Conserve, restore, and rehabilitate endangered religious structures damaged by time, conflict, and war, and recover the memory of shrines whose physical traces have disappeared.
5. Introduce these case studies into civic-education curricula in Nineveh schools and disseminate them through research centres and university departments of sociology, media, history, philosophy, and religious studies, so that younger generations understand the local traditions of coexistence that preceded imported ideologies of sectarianism and hatred.

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Illustrations



Figure 1. *Views illustrating the spatial adjacency of religious buildings in Mosul.*



Figure 2. *Calligraphic composition symbolising Muslim-Christian fraternity through the crescent and cross.*

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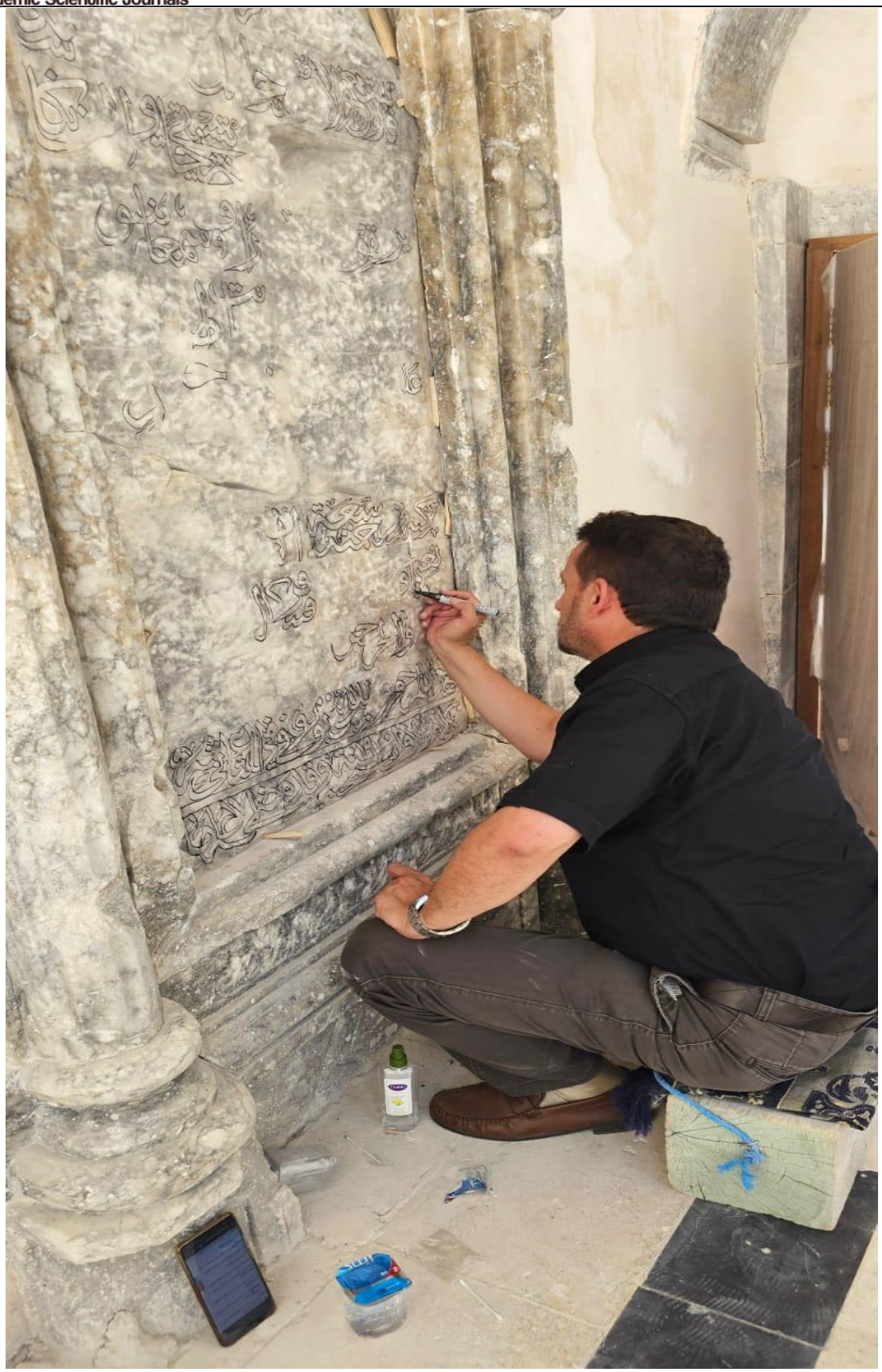


Figure 3. *Muslim calligraphers and craftsmen restoring damaged inscription bands in Mar Toma Church.*

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Figure 4. *Documentation and restoration work on damaged ecclesiastical inscriptions.*

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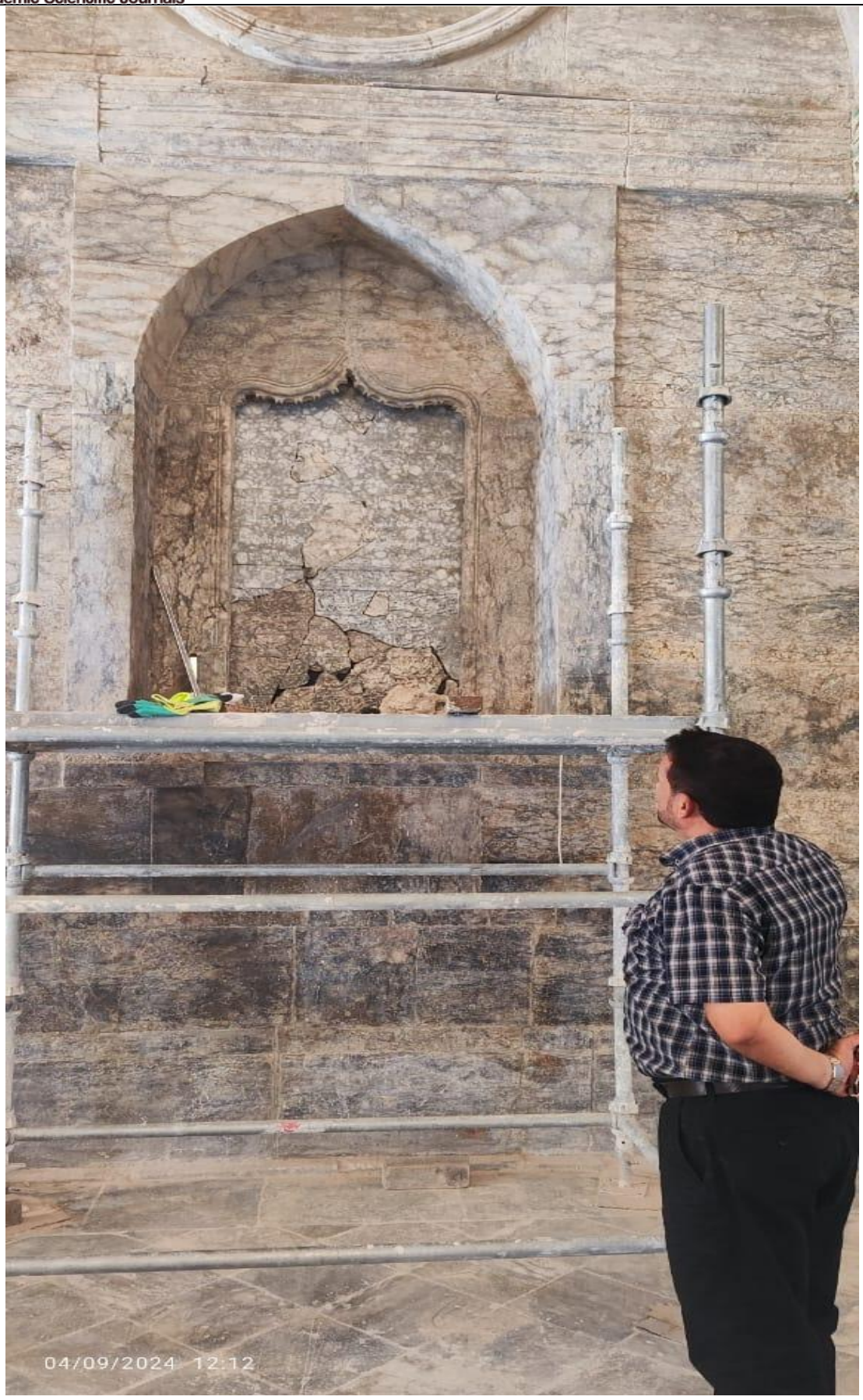


Figure 5. Restoration of Syriac and Arabic inscription panels in the Internal al-Tahira Church.

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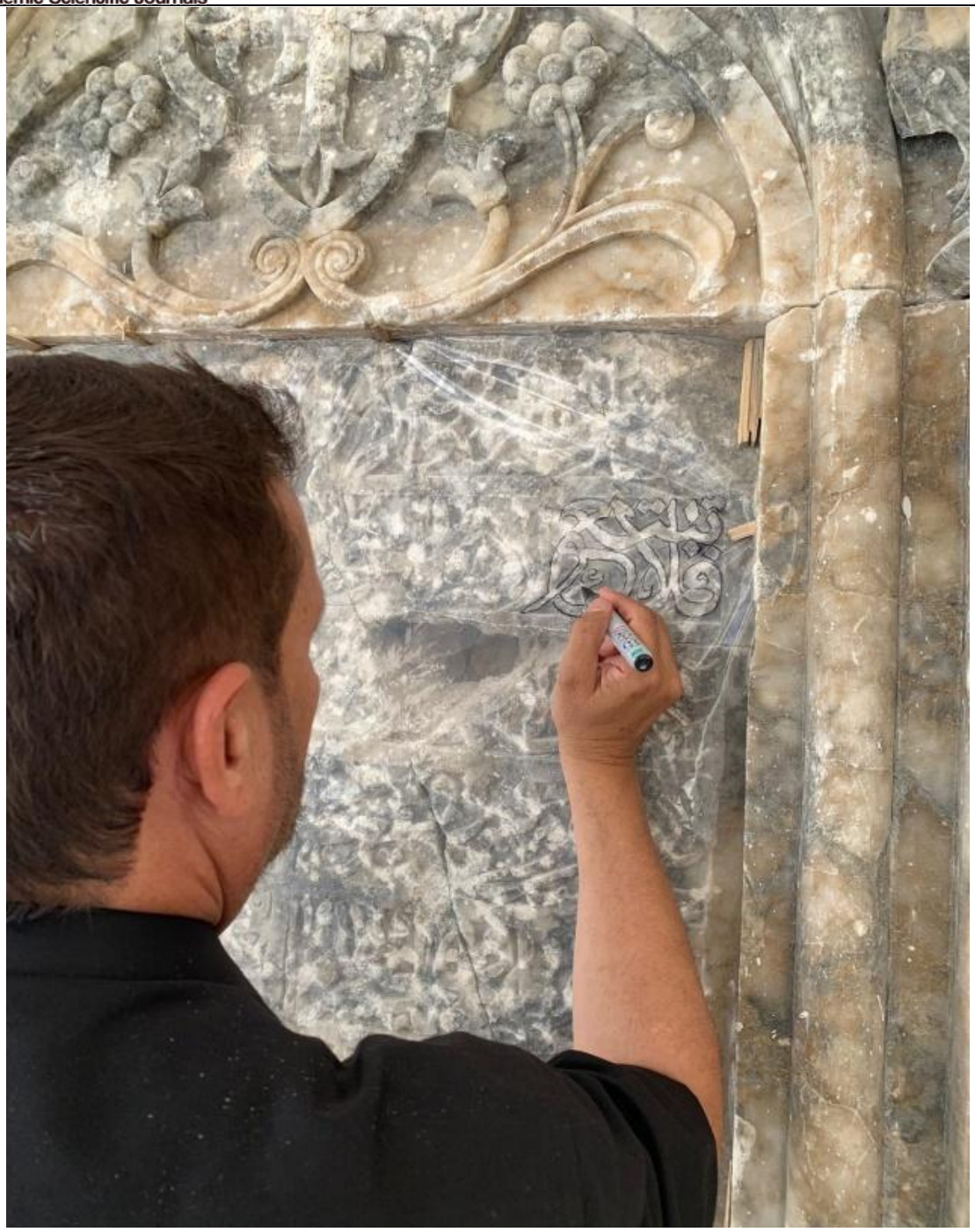


Figure 6. *Church restoration and the reinstallation of a bell after the liberation of Mosul.*

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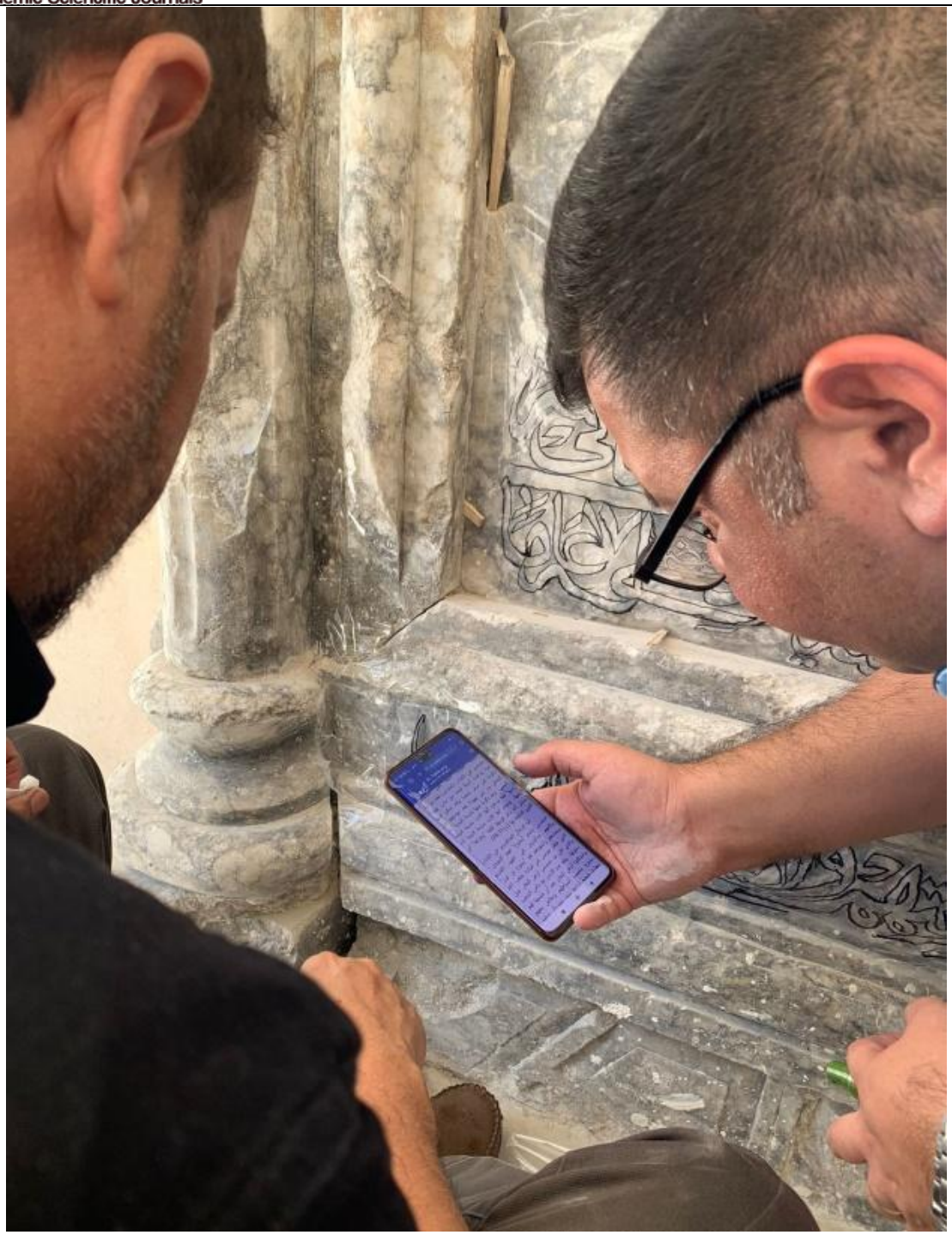


Figure 7. The shrine of Khidr Ilyas in Tal Afar, visited by multiple communities.

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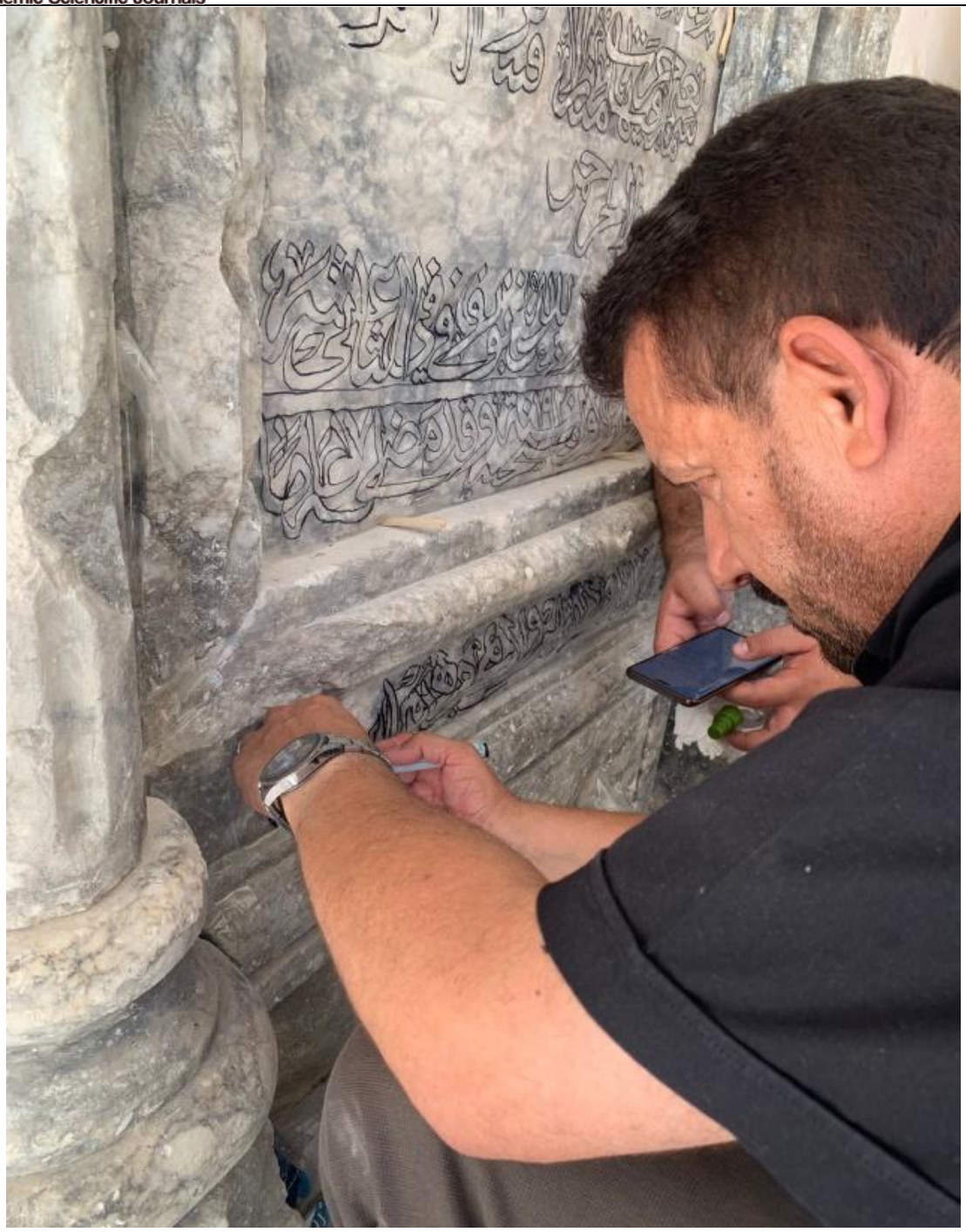


Figure 8. *The shrine of Shaykh Hasan Firdaws in the Shabak village of al-Darawish.*

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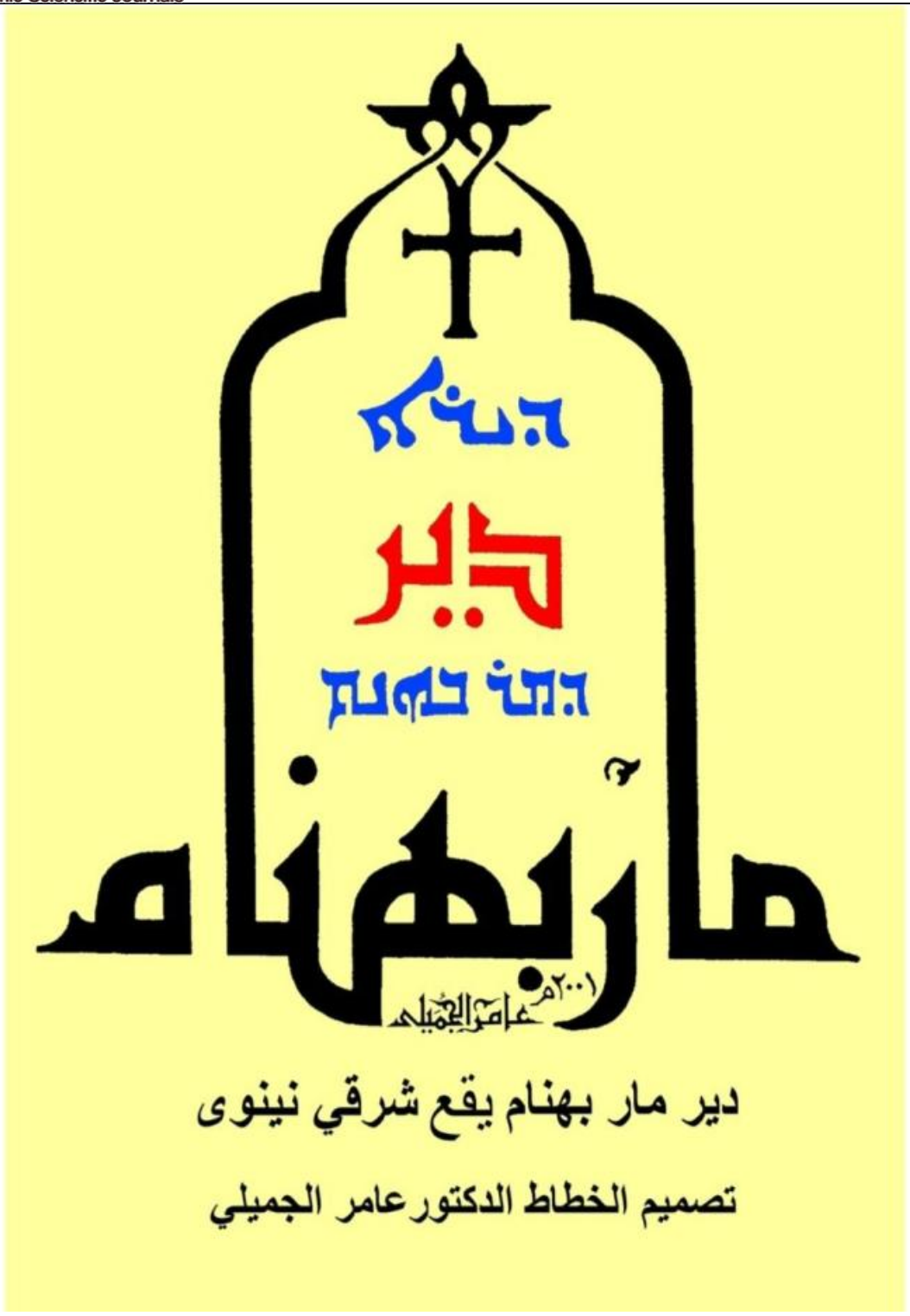
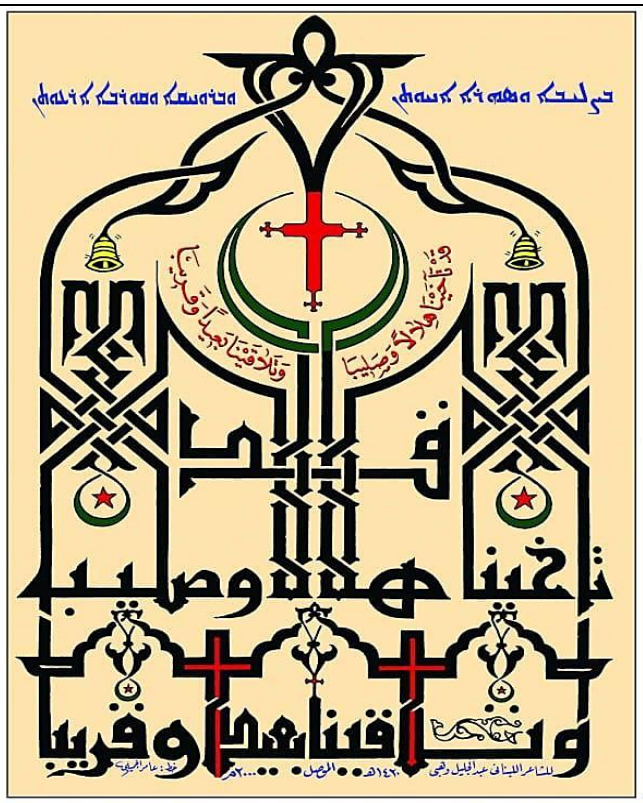


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خط كوفي مظفور وخط نسخ وخط سرياني (سطرنجيلي)
المضمون: بيت شعري للشاعر اللبناني عبد الجليل وهبي:
قد تآخينا هلالاً وصليبا وتلاقينا بعيدا وقريبا
تكوين يرمز الى التسامح الديني بين المسلمين ممثلين برمزهم الديني الهلال،
والمسيحيين ممثلين برمزهم الديني الصليب، فضلاً عن توظيف الناقوس.

تصميم وخط الخطاط العراقي الدكتور عامر الجميلي / قسم الآثار / كلية الآداب / جامعة الموصل
وقام بترجمة البيت الشعري الى اللغة السريانية وعلى الوزن الشعري اربعة على اربعة ٤/٤ نيافة المطران
غريغوريوس صليبا شمعون مطران السريان الارثوذوكس في الموصل.
وكتبت اللوحة احتفالاً بالالفية الثانية للميلاد.

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