

Monasteries have played an important role in the culture of Eastern Churches. Although the word literally means 'place of isolation', they have often played an important role in the process of gathering and distributing knowledge. They were places of pilgrimage, where visitors would gather, collect inspiration and travel on. Not only lay people, also monks visited each other and exchanged knowledge and experiences.

Egypt and Syria are countries where monasticism started. The oldest Christian monasteries in the world are to be found here and some have been inhabited till the present day. One of these is Deir al-Surian (literally: Monastery of the Syrians). It was founded in the middle of the 7th century by Coptic monks and from the 9th till the 16th centuries they shared the monastery with a community of Syrian-Orthodox monks. This cohabitation probably started after Syrian monks helped in restoring the monastery after it had been plundered and damaged by Bedouins at the beginning of the 9th century. In the following centuries the monastery flourished, not in the last place because Syrian monks made important donations and commissioned renovations in the church.

The monastery collected a library that belonged to the most important ones of its time. The church was renovated and redecorated by skilful artists several times and as a result some of the paintings were made after older ones were plastered over.

In the 18th century the glory days of the monastery were over. There were no more Syrian monks who could read the Syriac manuscripts and most of the books in the library were sold to western collectors. In this way many of them ended up in the Vatican Library, the British Library and the Library of St. Petersburg. The church was renovated once more, but no skilled painters could be found or afforded and so its interior was covered in grey lime-plaster.

It lasted until 1991. Then, after a fire that damaged one of the still visible paintings in the western part of the church, an underlying painting was discovered and in the following years more discoveries were made. A internationally composed team of restorers, philologists and art historians under responsibility of Leiden University started uncovering wall-paintings and inscriptions that were hidden under the grey 18th century plaster. Not only did the church become more colourful again, like before, but the sequence of layers of painting, the inscriptions, some of them dated, opened a vast source of information concerning the history of the monastery, the development of the decorations in the church. From this it became evident that the Syriac influence on life and culture in the monastery was in fact more important than was presumed so far. Names that were already known from manuscripts from the monastery occurred in inscriptions on the walls and some pieces off puzzles fell into place.

So far only a part of the 18th century plaster has been removed and many more paintings and inscriptions are waiting to be uncovered. Specialists from several countries are continuing the work in the church in a cooperation framework of the University of Warsaw and Leiden University. This will certainly shed more light on questions concerning the interaction between the Syriac and Coptic communities in the monastery, but also on the contacts with the region of origin of the Syriac monks, Mosul and Tikrit (now in Iraq, a region systematically ransacked by the so-called Islamic State). The paintings in Deir al-Surian are the oldest surviving ones from a Syriac tradition in the Middle East and in a period that (especially Christian) cultural heritage is more and more under threat, these deserve full attention.