

The Indigenous Origins of the Arameans of Upper Mesopotamia

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The ancient Arameans have traditionally been viewed as “camel nomads”¹ who “spread out from the fringes of the Syro-Arabian desert,”² whence a segment of “the Aramean tribes invaded northern Mesopotamia, and founded there a series of little states.”³

This view, though, emerged from a broader context about the origins of the ‘Semites’.⁴ Within this group, the Arameans are generally classified as belonging to the (North)western branch; the Akkadians, Babylonians and Assyrians, for instance, are regarded as East-Semites.

Until fairly recently, these and similar⁵ portrayals of the dawn and the nature of the Arameans have dominated mainstream scholarship. Even so, in the past decades a new generation of scholars has renounced this conventional opinion at the expense of an alternative model. Suffice it here to cite some experts who have rejected the outdated theories and confirmed the native Mesopotamian identity of the ancient Arameans, the forbears of the modern ‘Syriacs’.

Obscure toponyms under the name ‘Aram’ as referring to a conjectured Aramean territory do occur in texts dated as early as the third millennium B.C. onwards.⁶ Undisputed proof of the appellative ‘Arameans’ derives from the annals of Tiglath-Pileser I (reigned 1114-1076 B.C.).

One scholar,⁷ dating this attestation in the year 1111, divided two initial stages in the earliest history of the Arameans, viz. their “Pre-history” (ending in 1111) and their “Proto-History” (1111-912). 912 B.C. was the year in which Adad-nārāri II ascended to the Assyrian throne and started to liquidate the Aramean territorial units in Mesopotamia, which were slowly incorporated into the growing Neo-Assyrian empire.

Obviously, the first reference to a group of people labeled ‘Arameans’ in about 1111 B.C. does not exclude the fact that ‘Arameans’ did exist before this period. Indeed, it is recognized that some tribes who were later defined as ‘Aramean’ in Assyrian texts (e.g., Beth Zamani),⁸ were present in the ancient Near East before the 12th century when they emerged as a new political entity. “Just as these predecessors [*sc.* the Amorites] did,” reasoned the late Dion,

¹ W.F. Albright, “Syria, the Philistines, and Phoenicia,” in L.E.S. Edwards *et al.* (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History* II:2 (Cambridge, 1975), p. 532.

² A. Malamat, “The Aramaeans,” in D.J. Wisemann (ed.), *Peoples of Old Testament Times* (Oxford, 1973), p. 134. Already Malamat, immediately following the quoted statement, noticed between brackets: “though it is sometimes held that they came from the north.”

³ S. Moscati, *Ancient Semitic Civilizations* (New York, 1957), p. 169.

⁴ Cf. (e.g.) F. Schühlein’s entry ‘Semites’ in the Online Edition of *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1912) Vol. 13.

⁵ For instance, De Lacy O’Leary, *How Greek science passed to the Arabs* (London, 1949), p. 182 n. 1, incorrectly writes on the progenitors of the Syriac Christians that “[t]he Aramaean people were an outlying northern branch of the Arabs, nomads of the desert between Mesopotamia and Syria.”

⁶ For the most recent and comprehensive analysis of these early occurrences, see E. Lipiński, *The Aramaeans: Their Ancient History, Culture, Religion* (Peeters, 2000), pp. 26-40.

⁷ R. Zadok, “Elements of Aramean Pre-History,” in M. Cogan and I. Eph’al (eds.), *Ah, Assyria... Studies in Assyrian History and Ancient Near Eastern Historiography Presented to H. Tadmor* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991), p. 104.

⁸ Cf. E. Lipiński, *op. cit.* (n. 6), pp. 135-161, on this Aramean polity. On p. 136, the author explains that “[i]ts capital city was then Amida, modern Diyarbakır,” in Southeast-Turkey. See *ibid.*, pp. 45-50, for more examples.

“the Aramaeans may have remained in the obscurity of village life and ‘enclosed’ nomadism for several centuries before asserting themselves on the political scene of western Asia.”⁹

With regard to the false description of “camel nomads,” there exists no evidence and perhaps it was projected upon the Arameans with the ancient and modern Arabs (and Bedouins) in mind.¹⁰ “In point of fact,” Schniedewind noted, “the characterization of the early Arameans as ‘nomads’ is dubious. Rather, the early Arameans were semi-nomadic pastoralists.”¹¹

The pioneering study of Glenn Schwartz discarded the weak invasion or migration hypothesis, as introduced above, and proposed another framework for the early history of the Arameans.¹² After reviewing the nature of the “evidence for the early Arameans” and their city-states in Syro-Mesopotamia, he criticized the “conventional interpretation of the Aramaean appearance in the neo-Assyrian records” (281), thanks to which “[o]ur views tend to be Assyro-centric” (284). What is more, “the historical and archaeological evidence for the early Aramaeans is biased in several crucial ways” (280). Hence, under the present circumstances any attempt to reconstruct the genesis of the Aramean history will inevitably remain incomplete and partial.

Pitard, too, argued that “the traditional invasion model” is inaccurate and acknowledged that the early (prejudiced) sources about the Arameans “give no clear hint that the Arameans were newcomers into Upper Mesopotamia.”¹³ “There is simply no evidence,” he further declared, “that the populations of Upper Mesopotamia and northeast Syria were displaced by large groups of Aramean tribes that had been living previously in the desert.”¹⁴ Thus, the alleged Aramean intrusion into these lands is built upon a faulty assumption and it is far more likely that “they were the West Semitic-speaking peoples who had lived in that area throughout the second millennium [B.C.], some as pastoralists and some in villages, towns, and cities.”¹⁵

Concerning the area that largely corresponds to modern-day northeast Syria, Sader concluded: “The pastoralist Aramaeans cannot be seen anymore as ‘invaders’ bursting out of the Syro-Arabian ‘desert’, but rather as the pastoral element, an inherent part of Late Bronze Age [circa 1550-1200 B.C.] Syrian society.”¹⁶ McClellan, although disagreeing with Sader on a few minor issues, also concurs that “there is little evidence for [an] outside invasion.”¹⁷

The Arameans of old, who were ubiquitous in the northern regions of Syro-Mesopotamia, can thus be regarded as the indigenous inhabitants of Upper Mesopotamia and northeast Syria.

⁹ Paul E. Dion, “Aramaean Tribes and Nations of First-Millennium Western Asia,” in J.M. Sasson *et al.* (eds.), *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* Vol. II (Hendrickson, 1995), p. 1281.

¹⁰ G.M. Schwartz, “The Origins of the Aramaeans in Syria and Northern Mesopotamia: Research Problems and Potential Strategies,” in O.M.C. Haex *et al.* (eds.), *To the Euphrates and Beyond: Archaeological Studies in Honour of Maurits N. van Loon* (Rotterdam, 1989), pp. 282f; William M. Schniedewind, “The Rise of the Aramean States,” in Mark W. Chavalas and K. Lawson Younger, Jr. (eds.), *Mesopotamia and the Bible: Comparative Explorations* (Baker Academic, 2002), p. 280.

¹¹ W.M. Schniedewind, *op. cit.* (n. 10), p. 283.

¹² G.M. Schwartz, *op. cit.* (n. 6), pp. 275-291. For this continued lifestyle in Tur ‘Abdin, see below (n. 20).

¹³ Wayne T. Pitard, “Arameans,” in A.J. Hoerth *et al.* (eds.), *Peoples of the Old Testament World* (Baker Books, 1996²; 1994¹), p. 209.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 210 n. 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 209f.

¹⁶ H. Sader, “The 12th Century B.C. in Syria; The Problem of the Rise of the Aramaeans,” in W.A. Ward & M.S. Joukowsky (eds.), *The Crisis Years: The Twelfth Century B.C. From Beyond the Danube to the Tigris* (Kendall / Hunt Publishing Company, 1992), pp. 162. Cf. *Ibid.*, “The Aramaean Kingdoms of Syria: Origin and Formation Processes,” in G. Bunnens (ed.), *Essays on Syria in the Iron Age* (Peeters Press: Louvain, 2000), pp. 61-76.

¹⁷ Thomas L. McClellan, “The 12th Century B.C. Syria: Comments on H. Sader’s Paper,” in *ibid.*, p. 170.

From north to south, the major Aramean polities in northern Mesopotamia were Beth-Zamani, Beth-Bahiani, Beth-Halupe and Laqu.¹⁸

To the best of my knowledge, there is no specialist who will deny the Aramean descent of the present-day Aramaic-speaking Christians of these areas. As a matter of fact, in his book on Tur-‘Abdin,¹⁹ the Aramaic name of a Christian enclave in Southeast-Turkey, Palmer rightly deduced from the Neo-Assyrian annals: “Not only are several of the village names still in use, even these types of farming and the same skill in metalwork are characteristic of the ancient Aramaic stock of Christians who are the hereditary inhabitants of the plateau.”²⁰ “This confirms,” corroborated another scholar, “a certain continuity, if not a direct descent, between the Aramaean world, and the Syriac world, and the Church that would bear that name.”²¹

These past decades have witnessed another reality, namely, that of a state-sponsored policy which intends to Turkify all the antique Aramaic names of the towns and the villages.²² Consequently, in the near future this process will have obliterated an essential part of the ancient-old Aramean civilization in Upper Mesopotamia and thus end its continuity.

¹⁸ Cf. on these Aramean states S.P. Brock & D. Taylor, *The Hidden Pearl: The Syriac Orthodox Church and Its Aramaic Heritage* Vol. I “The Ancient Aramaic Heritage” (Rome, 2001), Chapter 4 “The Aramaean Kingdoms.” The first part of the three films is introduced by a group of Arab Bedouins riding on their camels in or nearby Tadmor/Palmyra, an Aramean state in antiquity. This should not be misinterpreted, as sometimes has been done, since the narrator explicitly says that these 21st century Bedouins are probably unaware that they are living on holy soil today, to wit, the ancient and former Aramean lands. The rationale behind this introduction, therefore, is clearly to demonstrate that the indigenous Arameans predate the foreign Arabs in these areas.

¹⁹ Sebastian P. Brock, “Tur ‘Abdin – a Homeland of Ancient Syro-Aramaean Culture,” in H. Hollerweger, *Living Cultural Heritage. TURABDIN: Where Jesus’ language is spoken* (Linz, 1999), p. 22, put it perfectly when he explicated: “Whatever the correct original etymology of its name, Tur ‘Abdin is quintessentially ‘the mountain of the servants of God’, after whom many of the monasteries and churches that have sprung up and flourished at one period or another over the course of sixteen centuries have been named.”

²⁰ Andrew N. Palmer, *Monk and Mason on the Tigris Frontier: The Early History of Tur ‘Abdin* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 15. For the same way of life among the pastoralist Arameans in antiquity, see above.

²¹ S. de Courtois, *The Forgotten Genocide: Eastern Christians, The Last Arameans* (translated from French by V. Aurora and published by Gorgias Press, 2004), p. 279.

²² Cf. (e.g.) Fr. J.C.J. Sanders, “Atlas of Christian Aramaic Civilisation,” in *The Harp* 1:2-3 (July, 1988), p. 34: “The subjects of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s empire are not interested in Christian sites, so they omit them on the modern maps of Eastern Turkey; many times they change the names into Turkish names, and it is made an obligation for their Christian subjects too!” This Dutch scholar and Catholic cleric announced in this volume his planned project to map the “remote regions of the cradle of the Aramaic Christians” (33) for the East-Syriacs (*sc.* ‘Nestorians/Assyrians’ and ‘Chaldeans’). In the meantime, Fr. Sanders has completed his *Assyrian-Chaldean Christians in Eastern Turkey and Iran: Their Last Homeland Re-Charted* (translated from Dutch and published by A.A. Brediusstichting, 1997). It is to be hoped that for the ‘West-Syriacs’ a similar project will be undertaken.