

Syriac/Aramaic language and culture

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SYRIAC & ARAMAIC

The introduction of the name 'Syriac' has, admittedly, created a certain amount of ambiguity. Not only as regards the Aramaic language and culture, but also with respect to the Aramean people.

On the one hand, 'Syriac' has often been used as a synonym for the 'Aramaic' language/ culture. On the other hand, this term frequently has been applied to the literary Aramaic dialect of Edessa (and its near environment)¹ as well as to the Aramaic parlances still spoken today by various Syriac, Jewish and Mandaean religious communities originating from Mesopotamia.²

It is to be noted, however, that already in 1871 the renowned Prof. Th. Nöldeke³ asserted that the only correct name for the Syriac people and their language/culture is 'Aramean/Aramaic'. For 'Syria(ns)' is indeed, as Nöldeke pointed out, originally a Greek loanword that denotes the Aramaic name 'Aram(eans)'. The late Jonas C. Greenfield,⁴ another eminent scholar in Hebrew and Aramaic Studies, expressed a similar thought: "The use of [the name] Aramaic, rather than Syriac, has merit, since it is far from sure that these [modern Aramaic] dialects are the descendants of Syriac as known to us from the literary language of the Syriac texts."

Fergus Millar,⁵ Camden Professor of Ancient History emeritus at Oxford University, would certainly agree with these views: "Though Christian writers call the native language of Syria 'Syrian' it was actually what we call Aramaic, and it will save confusion to reserve 'Syriac' for the [Aramaic] dialect of Edessa, the script associated with it, and the literary language developed from it."

It would, therefore, be helpful to avoid this lack of clarity by distinguishing the later offshoots of the Aramaic language above all according to their respective geographical settings. In the case of the literary Aramaic dialect stemming from Edessa, for example, 'Edessene' or 'Edessan Aramaic' would be preferable instead of the by now accustomed description of '(Classical) Syriac'.⁶ Prof. Sebastian Brock,⁷ the doyen of Syriac-Aramaic Studies, basically supports this appeal when he remarked that "Ancient writers use a variety of different terms for Syriac, the most precise being 'Edessene' and 'the language of Mesopotamia'."

¹ For the literary corpus composed in Edessan Aramaic and its continued use among the present-day Syriac/Aramean communities, see in particular S.P. Brock, [An Introduction to Syriac Studies](#) (1980); E. Aydin, [A bird's eye view of the Syriac language and literature](#) (1997); J.B. Chabot, [Syriac Language and Literature](#) (1912); and S.P. Brock, "Some Observations on the Use of Classical Syriac in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Journal of Semitic Studies* 34 (1989), pp. 363-375.

² See esp. S.P. Brock *et al.*, *The Hidden Pearl: The Syrian Orthodox Church and its Aramaic Heritage* Vols. I-III (Rome, 2001).

³ Th. Nöldeke, "Die Namen der aramäischen Nation und Sprache," in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 25 (1871), p. 131: "Von den Namen dieser Nation und ihrer Sprache ist im Grunde der ursprüngliche 'aramäisch' auch der einzige, der noch für den Gebrauch der heutigen Wissenschaft streng passt." English translation: "Regarding the name of this nation and its language is the original 'Aramean' in essence also the only one [sic], that for the employment of the present-day scholarship as yet strongly fits."

⁴ See his review of K. Tsereteli, *Grammatik der modernen assyrischen Sprache (Neuostaramäisch)* (Leipzig, 1978) in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 102:1 (1982), p. 209.

⁵ "Paul of Samosata, Zenobia and Aurelian: The Church, Local Culture and Political Allegiance in Third-Century Syria," in *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), p. 6.

⁶ The illustrious Syriac-Orthodox bishop Jacob of Edessa (d. 708 AD), for instance, is well-known for his various descriptions for the Aramaic dialect of Edessa, viz. 'Edessene', 'Syriac', 'Aramaic' and '(Meso-)potamian'. Cf. L. van Rompay, "[Past and Present Perceptions of Syriac Literary Tradition](#)," in *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 3:1 (January, 2000), par. 16.

⁷ "Syriac Culture, 337-425," in A. Cameron and P. Garnsey (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History XIII, The Late Empire A.D. 337-425* (Cambridge 1998), p. 708 n. 2.

ARAMAIC LANGUAGE & CULTURE

Within the family of the so-called Semitic languages, Aramaic is generally grouped as a North-western Semitic entity. There has been much written about the classification of the Aramaic dialects and, notwithstanding some of its delimitations, the taxonomy of Fitzmyer⁸ is still widely used for the lack of better alternatives. Fitzmyer distinguishes the following five phases.⁹

1. Old Aramaic (to ca. 612)
2. Official Aramaic¹⁰ (to ca. 200 BC)
3. Middle Aramaic (to ca. 250 AD)
4. Late Aramaic (to ca. 1200 AD)
5. Modern Aramaic (to the present day)

The ‘Edessan Aramaic’ or simply ‘Edessene’ is usually considered to belong to the Middle Aramaic phase. Although this period is commonly divided into an East and West divide, discussion exists as to whether Edessan Aramaic really belongs to the Eastern group or rather should be placed somewhere on the Eastern borderline nearing the contemporary Western Aramaic dialects.

As already observed (see n. 1), Edessan Aramaic is still in use today among the Christian Arameans. It is not only widely utilized as a literary vehicle and a liturgical language, but this idiom continues to serve as a vital spoken form in certain Aramean circles, albeit to a smaller extent.

None of the present-day Aramaic dialects, often labelled as “Modern Aramaic” or “Neo-Aramaic,” seem to have been derived from the Edessene dialect. The question concerning the exact predecessor(s) of these dialects, though, is still being researched. But based on certain salient linguistic traits, the approximate origin of these vernaculars appears to date from 500-1000 A.D.; of course, this is not to deny that the Neo-Aramaic dialects have preserved much older features as well.¹¹

The contributors to *The Hidden Pearl* (see n. 2) have done a superb job in showing the role and the significance of the Aramaic language in history – the influence of which can be felt even in our modern days. A few noteworthy remarks of scholars in the field may suffice to support this fact.

“[T]he history of Aramaic represents the purest triumph of the human spirit as embodied in language (which is the mind's most direct form of physical expression) over the crude display of material power ... Great empires were conquered by the Aramaic language, and when they disappeared and were submerged in the flow of history, that language persisted and continued to live a life of its own ... The language continued to be powerfully active in the promulgation of spiritual matters. It was the main instrument for the formulation of religious ideas in the Near East, which then spread in all directions all over the world ... The monotheistic groups continue to live on today with a religious heritage, much of which found first expression in Aramaic.”¹²

“The Greeks and Romans knew the Near East mainly through the Arameans, for it was they who united and canalized the sources of its culture, bringing together Babylonian, Persian and Hebrew

⁸ J.A. Fitzmyer, “The Phases of the Aramaic Language” in *A Wandering Aramean. Collected Aramaic Essays* (Missoula: Scholars, 1979), pp. 57-84.

⁹ The dates for the respective phases, however, have been borrowed from S.A. Kaufman, “Languages, Aramaic” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. IV (1992), pp. 173–78.

¹⁰ Sometimes also referred to as ‘Imperial Aramaic’ (from the German ‘Reichsaramäisch’) or ‘Standard Aramaic’.

¹¹ For a neat introduction, see O. Jastrow, “The Neo-Aramaic Languages,” in R. Hetzron (ed.), *The Semitic Languages* (London, 1997), pp. 334-377, incl. bibliography; lacking in his reference list is the significant discussion regarding the classification of the Neo-Aramaic dialects by K. Tsereteli, “Zur Frager der Klassifikation der neuaramäischen Dialekte,” in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 127 (1977), pp. 244-253.

¹² F. Rosenthal, “Aramaic Studies During the Past Thirty Years,” in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 37 (1978), pp. 81-82.

elements and transmitting them to Christianity, and with Christianity to the West. From the West, at a later date, the Arameans [*sc.* Syriac-Orthodox & ‘Nestorians’] were to bring to the East Greek culture, especially philosophy, which became known to the Arabs through the medium of Aramaic.”¹³

The “chief historical significance” of the Aramaic language and its literature, wrote the already cited leading authority in Syriac-Aramaic studies, Prof. Brock, “might be said to lie in the fact that they provide the main link in the chain between the civilization of Antiquity (Greek as well as Mesopotamian) and that of the Arabic-speaking world today.”¹⁴

Not to forget, O’Leary similarly wrote that “Greek scientific thought had been in the world for a long time before it reached the Arabs, and during that period it had already spread abroad in various directions. So it is not surprising that it reached the Arabs by more than one route. It came first and in the plainest line through Christian Syriac writers, scholars, and scientists.”¹⁵

Without the Aramaic tongue, declared another specialist, “the expansion of Christianity in the Orient would have been unthinkable.” And this remarkable fact in itself is, indeed, among other things, “the historical debt which the world owes the Arameans.”¹⁶

In a voluminous book about the Arameans, yet another expert highlighted that “[w]e see the Aramaeans as a nation that represents one of our cultural ancestors, as one of the points of departure for us in the West ... [because] western civilization originated in the Middle East.”¹⁷

Finally, “Aramaic,” in the words of one more notable scholar, “is the only Semitic language spoken today whose history can be traced back, as a living language, to about 1000 B.C.”¹⁸

As of this writing, it is really deplorable to observe that too little attention has been and is being paid to the *still* living Neo-Aramaic dialects and the national heritage of the ancient Christian Arameans. The more so, because the final breath of life of the once so glorious Aramaic language, which has contributed so much to our world, is almost entirely blown out.

When this lack of interest in the living Aramaic parlances and Aramean people continues, in the near future only a handful of interested specialists probably will continue to study parts of what hitherto has been documented about these extinct dialects – just as few experts are currently already doing so with other previously living Aramaic dialects that are, we regret to conclude, no more...

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¹³ S. Moscati, *Ancient Semitic Civilizations* (New York, 1957), p. 179.

¹⁴ S.P. Brock, “Three Thousand Years of Aramaic Literature,” in *ARAM* 1:1 (1989), p. 23.

¹⁵ De Lacy O’Leary, *How Greek science passed to the Arabs* (London, 1949), p. 2. To explain his use of “Syriac-Aramaic” on p. 8, O’Leary gives a detailed explication about Aramaic and the Arameans in a note on p. 182. It further should be clarified here that the book does not once mention the name ‘Assyrians’ and that its writer conceives of the Syriacs as descendants not of the ‘Assyrians’ but rather of the ‘Arameans’ (cf. pp. 7f, 67f., 182, 185 and 187). This misunderstanding might have arisen in the reader’s mind due to a misinforming book review spread on the Internet by [Peter BetBasoo](#).

¹⁶ E.G.H. Kraeling, *Aram and Israel or The Aramaeans in Syria and Mesopotamia* (New York: Colombia University Press 1918), p. 139.

¹⁷ E. Lipiński, *The Aramaeans: Their Ancient History, Culture, Religion* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), pp. 12f.

¹⁸ E.Y. Kutscher, *Hebrew and Aramaic Studies* (Jerusalem, 1977), p. 90.