

Syriac language

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This article is about the Classical Syriac language. For contemporary "Syriac" dialects, see [Northeastern Neo-Aramaic](#). For other uses, see [Syriac \(disambiguation\)](#).

Syriac

ܣܘܪܝܝܬܐ *Leššānā Suryāyā*

ܣܘܪܝܝܬܐ ܣܘܪܝܝܬܐ

Leššānā Suryāyā in written Syriac (Estrangelā script)

Pronunciation /ləʃːaːnaː surjaːjaː/

Spoken in [Mesopotamia](#), [Assyria](#), [Roman Syria](#)

Ethnicity [Assyrians/Syriacs](#)

marginalized by Arabic from the 8th century, evolved into [Neo-Aramaic](#) vernaculars around AD 1200 (conventional date).

Extinct

[Afro-Asiatic](#)

[Semitic](#)

[Central Semitic](#)

[Northwest Semitic](#)

Language family

- [Aramaic](#)
- Eastern Aramaic
- **Syriac**

Writing system

[Syriac abjad](#)

Language codes

[ISO 639-2](#) [[ISO639-3:syc (classical)|syc (classical)]]

[ISO 639-3](#) [syc](#) – Syriac (classical)

This page contains [IPA](#) phonetic symbols in [Unicode](#). Without proper [rendering support](#), you may see [question marks, boxes, or other symbols](#) instead of [Unicode](#) characters.

This article contains Syriac text, written from right to left in a cursive style with some letters joined. Without proper [rendering support](#), you may see unjoined Syriac letters written left-to-right instead of right-to-left or other symbols instead of [Syriac script](#).

Syriac (ܣܘܪܝܝܬܐ *leššānā Suryāyā*) is a dialect of [Middle Aramaic](#) that was once spoken across much of the [Fertile Crescent](#). Having first appeared as a script in the 1st century AD after being spoken as an unwritten language for five centuries,^[1] **Classical Syriac** became a major literary language throughout the [Middle East](#) from the 4th to the 8th centuries,^[2] the [classical language](#) of [Edessa](#), preserved in a large body of [Syriac literature](#).

It became the vehicle of [Syriac Christianity](#) and culture, spreading throughout [Asia](#) as far as the Indian [Malabar Coast](#) and Eastern [China](#),^[3] and was the medium of communication and cultural dissemination for [Arabs](#) and, to a lesser extent, [Persians](#). Primarily a Christian medium of expression, Syriac had a fundamental cultural and literary influence on the development of [Arabic](#),^[4] which replaced it towards the end of the 8th century. Syriac remains the [liturgical language](#) of Syriac Christianity.

Syriac is a [Middle Aramaic](#) language, and as such a language of the [Northwestern branch](#) of the [Semitic family](#).

Syriac is written in the [Syriac alphabet](#), a derivation of the [Aramaic alphabet](#).

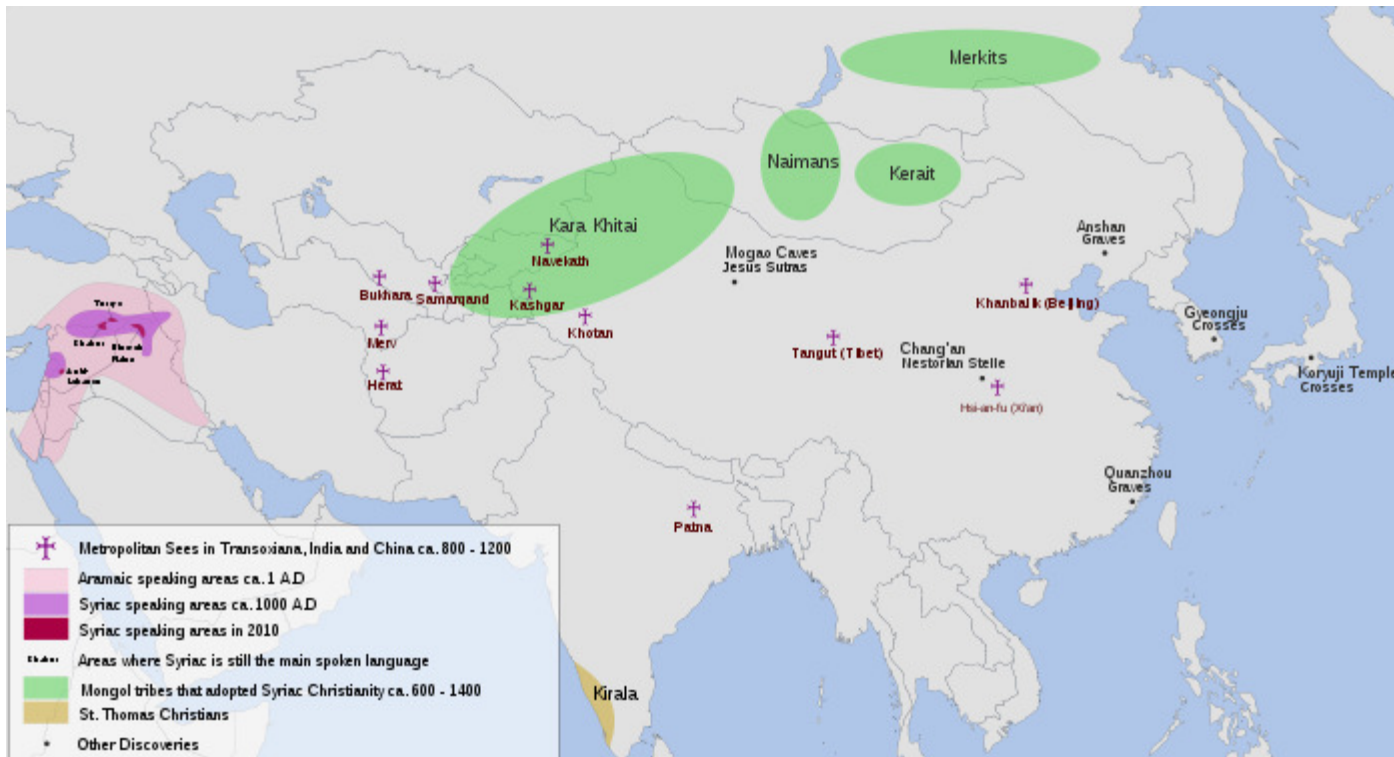
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[\[edit\]](#) Geographic distribution

Syriac was originally a local Aramaic dialect in [Persian](#) ruled [Assyria](#) ([Asuristan](#)) and northern [Mesopotamia](#) that has evolved under the influence of Christianity into its current form. Before Arabic became the dominant language, Syriac was a major language among Christian communities in the [Middle East](#), [Central Asia](#) and [Kerala](#).



Although once a major language in the [Fertile Crescent](#), Syriac is now limited to enclaves in the [Nineveh plains](#), [Tur Abdin](#), the [Khabur](#) plains and around the Syrian town of [Ma'loula](#)

[\[edit\]](#) History

The history of Syriac can be divided into three distinct periods:

- Old Syriac (the language of the kingdom of [Osroene](#)),
- Middle Syriac (ܐܪܡܝܝܬܐ *Ktābānāyā*: Literary Syriac), which divided into:
 - Eastern Middle Syriac (the literary and ecclesiastical language of Chaldean, [Syro-Malabar](#) and Assyrian Christians),
 - Western Middle Syriac (the literary and ecclesiastical language of Syriac and Maronite Christians).

[\[edit\]](#) Origins

Syriac began as an unwritten spoken dialect of [Old Aramaic](#) in [Assyria/northern Mesopotamia](#). The first evidence we have of such dialects is their influence on the written Imperial Aramaic from the 5th century BC. After the conquest of Mesopotamia and [Aramea](#) (Syria) by [Alexander the Great](#), Syriac and other Aramaic dialects lost their status as imperial languages but continued to flourish a lingua franca alongside [Ancient Greek](#).

In 132 BC, the kingdom of [Osroene](#) was founded in [Edessa](#) with Syriac as its official language. Syriac-speakers still look to Edessa as the cradle of their language.^[5] There are about eighty extant early Syriac inscriptions, dated to the first three centuries AD (the earliest example of Syriac, rather than Imperial Aramaic, is in an inscription dated to AD 6, and the earliest parchment is a deed of sale dated to AD 243). All of these early examples of the language are non-Christian. As an official language, Syriac was given a relatively coherent form, style and grammar that is lacking in other Old Eastern Aramaic dialects.

[\[edit\]](#) Literary Syriac

Further information: [Syriac literature](#)

ܡܘܨܝܘܢܐ ܕܢܝܢܝܢ ܕܝܘܒܐ ܕܝܘܒܐ ܕܝܘܒܐ ܕܝܘܒܐ ܕܝܘܒܐ



The sixth [beatitude](#) ([Matthew 5:8](#)) from an East Syriac Peshitta.

Ṭūbayhôn l'aylên daḏkên b-lebbhôn: d-hennôn neḥzôn l'allāhâ.

'Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.'

In the 3rd century, churches in Edessa began to use Syriac as the language of worship. There is evidence that the adoption of Syriac, the language of the people, was to effect mission. Much literary effort was put into the production of an authoritative translation of the Bible into Syriac, the [Peshitta](#) (ܦܫܝܬܐ *Pšîttâ*). At the same time, [Ephrem the Syrian](#) was producing the most treasured collection of poetry and theology in the Syriac language.

In 489, many Syriac-speaking Christians living in the Roman Empire fled to Persia to escape persecution and growing animosity with Greek-speaking Christians.^{[[citation needed](#)]} The Christological differences with the [Church of the East](#) led to the bitter [Nestorian schism](#) in the Syriac-speaking world. As a result, Syriac developed distinctive western and eastern varieties. Although remaining a single

language with a high level of comprehension between the varieties, the two employ distinctive variations in pronunciation and writing system, and, to a lesser degree, in vocabulary.




Syriac book script, Mt. Sinai, Egypt, ca. 10th c.

An 11th-century Syriac [manuscript](#).

Western Syriac is the official language of the [West Syrian rite](#), practiced by the [Syriac Orthodox Church](#), the [Syrian Catholic Church](#), the [Maronite Church](#), the [Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church](#), the [Mar Thoma Church](#), and the [Syro-Malankara Catholic Church](#).

Eastern Syriac is the liturgical language of the [East Syrian rite](#), practiced in modern times by the [Assyrian Church of the East](#), the [Chaldean Syrian Church](#), the [Ancient Church of the East](#), the [Chaldean Catholic Church](#), and the [Syro-Malabar Church](#).



[Abûn d-bašmayâ](#)
The [Lord's Prayer](#), *Abûn d-bašmayâ*, sung in Syriac

Problems listening to this file? See [media help](#).

Syriac literature is by far the most prodigious of the various [Aramaic languages](#). Its corpus covers poetry, prose, theology, liturgy, hymnody, history, philosophy, science, medicine and natural history. Much of this wealth remains unavailable in critical editions or modern translation.

From the 7th century onwards, Syriac gave way to [Arabic](#) as the spoken language of the region. The [Mongol](#) invasions of the 13th century further contributed to the rapid decline of the language. In many places outside of northern Mesopotamia, even in liturgy, it was replaced by Arabic.

[\[edit\]](#) Current status

Although Syriac isn't used as an everyday language, there have been several attempts to revive it. Revivals of Syriac in recent times have led to some success with the creation of newspapers in literary Syriac (ܟܬܒܢܐܝܘܬܐ *Kthābānāyā*), similar to the Arabic *Fushā* has been used since the early decades of the 20th century. Modern literary Syriac has also been used not only in religious literature but also in secular genres often with [nationalistic](#) themes.^[6]

Syriac has been recognised as an official [minority language](#) in Iraq.^[7] It is also taught in some public schools in Iraq, [Israel](#) and [Sweden](#).^{[8][9]}

Among the [Syriac churches of Kerala](#), [Malayalam](#) often replaces Syriac. Literary Syriac is often used as a spoken language by clerics who do not speak the vernacular dialects.

[\[edit\]](#) Grammar

Many Syriac words, like those in other [Semitic languages](#), are built out of [triliteral](#) roots, collations of three Syriac consonants with variable vowel sets as a "glue". For example, the root ܫܩܠ, *šQL*, has the basic meaning of *taking*, and so we have the following words that can be formed from this root:

- ܫܩܠ – *šqal*: "he took"
- ܫܩܠܘܬܐ – *nešqōl*: "he will take"
- ܫܩܠ – *šāqel*: "he takes, he is taking"
- ܫܩܠ – *šaqqel*: "he has lifted/raised"
- ܫܩܠܐ – *ašqel*: "he has set out"
- ܫܩܠܐ – *šqālā*: "a taking, burden, recension, portion or syllable"
- ܫܩܠܐ – *šeqlē*: "takings, profits, taxes"
- ܫܩܠܐܬܐ – *šaqlūtā*: "a beast of burden"
- ܫܩܠܐ – *šūqālā*: "arrogance"

[edit] Nouns

Most Syriac [nouns](#) are built from [triliteral](#) roots. Nouns carry [grammatical gender](#) (masculine or feminine), they can be either singular or plural in number (a very few can be dual) and can exist in one of three grammatical states. These states correspond, in part, to the role of [grammatical cases](#) in some other languages.

- The absolute state is the basic form of the noun – ܫܥܠܝܢ, *šeqlîn*, "taxes".
- The emphatic state usually represents a definite noun – ܫܥܠܐ, *šeqlē*, "the taxes".
- The construct state marks a noun in relationship to another noun – ܫܥܠܝܗ, *šeqlay*, "taxes of...".

However, very quickly in the development of Classical Syriac, the emphatic state became the ordinary form of the noun, and the absolute and construct states were relegated to certain stock phrases (for example, ܒܪ ܢܫܐ/ܒܪ ܢܫܐ, *bar nāšâ*, "man", literally "son of man").

In Old and early Classical Syriac, most [genitive](#) noun relationships are built using the construct state. Thus, ܫܥܠܝܗ ܡܠܟܘܬܐ, *šeqlay malkûtâ*, means "the taxes of the kingdom". Quickly, the construct relationship was abandoned and replaced by the use of the relative particle ܕ, *d-*. Thus, the same [noun phrase](#) becomes ܫܥܠܐ ܕܡܠܟܘܬܐ, *šeqlē d-malkûtâ*, where both nouns are in the emphatic state. Very closely related nouns can be drawn into a closer grammatical relationship by the addition of a pronominal suffix. Thus, the phrase can be written as ܫܥܠܝܗ ܕܡܠܟܘܬܐ, *šeqlēh d-malkûtâ*. In this case, both nouns continue to be in the emphatic state, but the first has the suffix that makes it literally read "her taxes" ("kingdom" is feminine), and thus is "her taxes, those of the kingdom".

[Adjectives](#) always agree in gender and number with the nouns they modify. Adjectives are in the absolute state if they are [predicative](#), but agree with the state of their noun if [attributive](#). Thus, ܒܝܫܝܢ ܫܥܠܐ, *bīšîn šeqlē*, means "the taxes are evil", whereas ܫܥܠܐ ܒܝܫܝܐ, *šeqlē bīšē*, means "evil taxes".

[edit] Verbs

Most Syriac verbs are built on [triliteral](#) roots as well. Finite verbs carry [person](#), [gender](#) (except in the first person) and number, as well as [tense](#) and *conjugation*. The non-finite verb forms are the [infinitive](#) and the [active](#) and [passive participles](#).

Syriac has only two true [morphological](#) tenses: perfect and imperfect. Whereas these tenses were originally [aspectual](#) in [Aramaic](#), they have become a truly temporal [past](#) and [future](#) tenses respectively. The [present tense](#) is usually marked with the [participle](#) followed by

the [subject pronoun](#). However, such pronouns are usually omitted in the case of the third person. This use of the participle to mark the present tense is the most common of a number of *compound* tenses that can be used to express varying senses of tense and aspect.

Syriac also employs verb *conjugations* such as are present in other [Semitic languages](#). These are regular modifications of the verb's root to express other changes in meaning. The first conjugation is the ground state, or *Pə`al* (this name models the shape of the root). form of the verb, which carries the usual meaning of the word. The next is the intensive state, or *Pa`el*, form of the verb, which usually carries an [intensified](#) meaning, The third is the extensive state, or *Ap̄`el*, form of the verb, which is often [causative](#) in meaning. Each of these conjugations has its parallel [passive](#) conjugation: the *Etpə`el*, *Etpa`al* and *Ettaḫ`al* respectively. To these six cardinal conjugations are added a few irregular forms, like the *Šap̄`el* and *Eštap̄`al*, which generally have an extensive meaning.

[\[edit\]](#) Phonology

Phonologically, like the other Northwest Semitic languages, Syriac has 22 consonants and 3 vowels. The consonantal phonemes are:

transliteration	<u>ʿ</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>g</u>	<u>d</u>	<u>h</u>	<u>w</u>	<u>z</u>	<u>h</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>y</u>	<u>k</u>	<u>l</u>	<u>m</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>s</u>	<u>ʿ</u>	<u>p</u>	<u>s</u>	<u>q</u>	<u>r</u>	<u>š</u>	<u>t</u>	
letter	ܐ	ܒ	ܓ	ܕ	ܗ	ܘܘܘܘ	ܙ	ܚ	ܛ	ܝ	ܟ	ܠ	ܡ	ܢ	ܣ	ܥ	ܦ	ܨ	ܩ	ܪ	ܫ	ܬ	
pronunciation	[ʔ]	[b], [v]	[g], [ɣ]	[d], [ð]	[h]	[w]	[z]	[ħ]	[tʰ]	[j]	[k], [x]	[l]	[m]	[n]	[s]	[ʕ]	[p]	[f]	[sʰ]	[q]	[r]	[ʃ]	[t], [θ]



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Phonetically, there is some variation in the pronunciation of Syriac in its various forms. The various Modern Eastern Aramaic vernaculars have quite different pronunciations, and these sometimes influence how the classical language is pronounced, for example, in public prayer. Classical Syriac has two major streams of pronunciation: western and eastern.

[\[edit\]](#) Consonants

Syriac shares with [Aramaic](#) a set of lightly contrasted [plosive/fricative](#) pairs. In different variations of a certain lexical root, a root consonant might exist in plosive form in one variation and fricative form in another. In the [Syriac alphabet](#), a single letter is used for each pair. Sometimes a dot is placed above the letter (*quššāyâ*, or *strengthening*; equivalent to a [dagesh](#) in [Hebrew](#)) to mark that the

plosive pronunciation is required, and a dot is placed below the letter (*rûkkākâ*, or *softening*) to mark that the fricative pronunciation is required. The pairs are:

- [Voiced labial](#) pair – /b/ and /v/
- Voiced [velar](#) pair – /g/ and /ɣ/
- Voiced [dental](#) pair – /d/ and /ð/
- [Voiceless](#) velar pair – /k/ and /x/
- Voiceless labial pair – /p/ and /f/
- Voiceless dental pair – /t/ and /θ/

As with other [Semitic languages](#), Syriac has a set of five [emphatic consonants](#). These are consonants that are articulated or released in the [pharynx](#) or slightly higher. The set consists of:

- [Voiceless pharyngeal fricative](#) – /ħ/
- [Pharyngealized voiceless dental plosive](#) – /tʰ/
- [Voiced pharyngeal fricative](#) – /ʕ/
- Pharyngealized [voiceless alveolar fricative](#) – /sʰ/
- [Voiceless uvular plosive](#) – /q/

Syriac also has a rich array of [sibilant consonants](#):

- [Voiced alveolar fricative](#) – /z/
- [Voiceless alveolar fricative](#) – /s/
- [Pharyngealized voiceless alveolar fricative](#) – /sʰ/
- [Voiceless postalveolar fricative](#) – /ʃ/

Table of Syriac consonants

	Labial	Dental	Alveolar	Post- alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyn- geal	Glottal
	plain	emphatic	plain						
Nasal	m		n						
Plosive	voiced	b	d			g			
	voiceless	p	t	tʰ		k	q		ʔ

<u>Fricative</u>	<u>voiced</u>	v	ð		z		y	ʕ	
	<u>voiceless</u>	f	θ	s ^ʕ	s	ʃ	x	ħ	h
<u>Approximant</u>				l		j	w	(ʕ)	
<u>Trill</u>				r					

[edit] Vowels

As with most [Semitic languages](#), the vowels of Syriac are mostly subordinated to consonants. Especially in the presence of an [emphatic consonant](#), vowels tend to become mid-centralised.

Classical Syriac had the following set of distinguishable vowels:

- [Close front unrounded vowel](#) – /i/
- [Close-mid front unrounded vowel](#) – /e/
- [Open-mid front unrounded vowel](#) – /ɛ/
- [Open front unrounded vowel](#) – /a/
- [Open back unrounded vowel](#) – /ɑ/
- [Close-mid back rounded vowel](#) – /o/
- [Close back rounded vowel](#) – /u/

In the western dialect, /ɑ/ has become /o/, and the original /o/ has merged with /u/. In eastern dialects there is more fluidity in the pronunciation of [front vowels](#), with some speakers distinguishing five qualities of such vowels, and others only distinguishing three. Vowel length is generally not important: [close vowels](#) tend to be longer than [open vowels](#).

The [open vowels](#) form [diphthongs](#) with the [approximants](#) /j/ and /w/. In almost all dialects the full sets of possible diphthongs collapses into two or three actual pronunciations:

- /aj/ sometimes [monophthongized](#) to /e/
- /aw/ usually becomes /aw/
- /aj/ usually becomes /aj/, but the western dialect has /oj/
- /aw/ sometimes [monophthongized](#) to /o/

[[edit](#)] See also



[Assyrians portal](#)



[Syriac Christianity portal](#)

- [Syriac alphabet](#)
- [Syriac literature](#)
- [Peshitta](#)
- [Ephrem the Syrian](#)
- [Syriac music](#)
- [Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium](#)
- [Turoyo](#)
- [Syrian Arabic](#)

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[edit] Footnotes

1. [^] ["Ancient Scripts: Syriac"](#).
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9. [^] ["Syriac...a language struggling to survive". *Voices of Iraq*. 28 December 2007. Retrieved 30 September 2011.](#)

[edit] External links



- [Syriacdictionary.net, Syriac Dictionary in four languages](#)
- [Langues araméennes on wikisyr.com](#)
- [Beth Mardutho – The Syriac Institute](#)

- [New Aramaic Bibel in mp3 and Worshipsongs](#)
- [Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies](#)
- [Payne Smith's Compendious Syriac Dictionary](#)
- [Ethnologue report on Syriac](#)
- [Suryoyo Online – Online Journal of Syrian Orthodox Church, Syriac Studies and Aramaeans](#)
- [Introduction To The Syriac-Aramaic Language](#) – an introduction and resources from a popular Maronite website
- [Syriac–English–French Online Dictionary](#) – poor general coverage
- [Beth Sapra: A Scribe's Library](#): contains two old Syriac grammars in the public domain and the Gospels in Syriac
- [Other Public Domain Syriac grammars](#) at the [Internet Archive](#)