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).

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Leššānā Suryāyā in written Syriac (Eṣṭrangelā script)

- **Pronunciation**: /leʃːɑːnɑ: surjaːja:/
- **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).

  - Afro-Asiatic

- **Language family**
  - Semitic
    - Central Semitic
    - Northwest Semitic
  - Aramaic
  - Eastern Aramaic
  - Syriac

- **Writing system**: Syriac abjad
Syriac (ܣܘܪܝܝܐ 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, Classical Syriac became a major literary language throughout the Middle East from the 4th to the 8th centuries, 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 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, 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.
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 (كتابية: 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. 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

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

ேற்றையோன் ல’ஏலேன் ராக்கேன் றல்லுவன்: அ-ஹேன்னொன் நேஸ்வொன் ல’அல்லாஹ்.
'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 (Psittā). 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. 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.

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-ḥašmaya

The Lord's Prayer, Abûn d-ḥašmaya, sung in Syriac

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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 (كثباّي Kthābānāyā), similar to the Arabic Fuṣḥā 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 šql, SQL, has the basic meaning of taking, and so we have the following words that can be formed from this root:

- šqal: "he took"
- šeqōl: "he will take"
- šeqel: "he takes, he is taking"
- šaqel: "he has lifted/raised"
- ašqel: "he has set out"
- šeqālā: "a taking, burden, recension, portion or syllable"
- šeqle: "takings, profits, taxes"
- šaqūtā: "a beast of burden"
- 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 – ܫܐܐܠ, šeqlîn, "taxes".
- The emphatic state usually represents a definite noun – ܫܐܐܠ, šeqlê, "the taxes".
- The construct state marks a noun in relationship to another noun – ܫܐܐܠ, 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, ܒܫܡܐ ܒܢܫܐ, bar nāšâ, "man", literally "son of man").

In Old and early Classical Syriac, most genitive noun relationships are built using the construct state. Thus, ܫܐܐܠ ܡܠܟܐ, šeqlay malkûţâ, 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 ܫܐܐܠ ܒܝܫܝ ܕ-ܡܠܟܐ, šeqlê d-malkûţâ, 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 ܫܐܐܠ ܒܝܫܝ ܡܠܟܐ, šeqlêh d-malkûţâ. 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, ܒܝܫܝ ܫܐܐܠ, bîšîn šeqlê, means "the taxes are evil", whereas ܫܐܐܠ ܒܝܫܐ, šeqlê bîšē, 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 Paʿal (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 Paʿel, form of the verb, which usually carries an intensified meaning. The third is the extensive state, or Aḏeʿel, form of the verb, which is often causative in meaning. Each of these conjugations has its parallel passive conjugation: the Eṯpaʿal, Eṯpaʿal, and Eṭṭaʿal respectively. To these six cardinal conjugations are added a few irregular forms, like the Šaṭeʿel and Eṣṭaʿal, 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 | ʔ | b | g | d | h | w | z | h | t | y | k | l | m | n | s | ʃ | p | s | q | r | š | t |
| letter          | ʕ | ב | ג | ד | ה | ו | ז | ח | ט | י | ק | ל | מ | נ | ס | ש | פ | ס | ק | ר | ש | ת |
| pronunciation   | [ʕ] | [b], [v], [g], [y], [d], [ʔ], [h], [w], [z], [ḥ], [t], [j], [k], [x], [l], [m], [n], [s], [ʃ], [p], [f], [s], [q], [r], [ʃ], [t], [ʔ] |

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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 (qūṣṣāyā, or strengthening; equivalent to a dagesh in Hebrew) to mark that the
plosive pronunciation is required, and a dot is placed below the letter (rûkkāḵâ, or softening) to mark that the fricative pronunciation is required. The pairs are:

- **Voiced labial** pair – /b/ and /v/
- **Voiced velar** pair – /ɡ/ 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** – /tˤ/
- **Voiced pharyngeal fricative** – /ʕ/
- **Pharyngealized voiceless alveolar fricative** – /sˤ/
- **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** – /sˤ/
- **Voiceless postalveolar fricative** – /ʃ/  

Table of Syriac consonants

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**Fricative**

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<th>ʕ</th>
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<tr>
<td>Voiceless</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>θ</td>
<td>sˤ</td>
<td>s</td>
<td>ʃ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Approximant**

| j | w | (ʕ) |

**Trill**

| r |

### 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** – /ɔ/
- **Close-mid back rounded vowel** – /o/
- **Close back rounded vowel** – /u/

In the western dialect, /ɔ/ 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/
See also

- Assyrians portal
- Syriac Christianity portal

- Syriac alphabet
- Syriac literature
- Peshitta
- Ephrem the Syrian
- Syriac music
- Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
- Turoyo
- Syrian Arabic

References


**Footnotes**

1.  

**External links**

- Wikimedia Commons has media related to: [Syriac language](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Syriac_language)

- [Syriac dictionary.net, Syriac Dictionary in four languages](https://syriacdictionary.net)
- [Langues araméennes on wikisyr.com](https://languesARAMENNES.wikisyr.com)
- [Beth Mardutho – The Syriac Institute](https://www.bethmardutho.org)
• 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