Aramaic Scripts
for Aramaic Languages

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Classical Syriac

The origin of Syriac script is not fully clear, though its development across the centuries of its flowering can be followed fairly easily thanks to dated colophons (Hatch 1946). The fullest discussion of Syriac paleography is Pirenne 1963.

Three kinds of consonants

There are three main varieties of Syriac writing. Oldest is the *Estrangelo*; during the Golden Age there came about a schism in the Syrian church, on Christological

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TABLE 47.1: *Syriac Consonants*

TRANSLIT-ERATION	IPA	NAME	NUM. VALUE	ESTRANGELO				SERTO			
				Uncon-nected	Connected right	Connected left	Medial	Uncon-nected	Connected right	Connected left	Medial
ʾ	[ʔ]	ʾālap̄	1	ܐ	ܐ	–	–	ܐ	ܐ	–	–
b, b̲/bh	[b, v]	bēt̲	2	ܒ	ܒ	ܒ	ܒ	ܒ	ܒ	ܒ	ܒ
g, ḡ/gh	[g, ɣ]	gāmal	3	ܓ	ܓ	ܓ	ܓ	ܓ	ܓ	ܓ	ܓ
d, d̲/dh	[d, ð]	dālat̲	4	ܕ	ܕ	–	–	ܕ	ܕ	–	–
h	[h]	hē	5	ܗ	ܗ	–	–	ܗ	ܗ	–	–
w	[w]	waw	6	ܘ	ܘ	–	–	ܘ	ܘ	–	–
z	[z]	zayn	7	ܙ	ܙ	–	–	ܙ	ܙ	–	–
ḥ	[ħ]	ḥēt̲	8	ܚ	ܚ	ܚ	ܚ	ܚ	ܚ	ܚ	ܚ
ṭ	[ŧ]	ṭēt̲	9	ܛ	ܛ	ܛ	ܛ	ܛ	ܛ	ܛ	ܛ
y	[j]	yūd̲	10	ܝ	ܝ	ܝ	ܝ	ܝ	ܝ	ܝ	ܝ
k, k̲/kh	[k, x]	kāp̄	20	ܟ	ܟ	ܟ	ܟ	ܟ	ܟ	ܟ	ܟ
l	[l]	lāmad̲	30	ܠ	ܠ	ܠ	ܠ	ܠ	ܠ	ܠ	ܠ
m	[m]	mīm	40	ܡ	ܡ	ܡ	ܡ	ܡ	ܡ	ܡ	ܡ
n	[n]	nūn	50	ܢ	ܢ	ܢ	ܢ	ܢ	ܢ	ܢ	ܢ
s	[s]	semkat̲	60	ܣ	ܣ	ܣ	ܣ	ܣ	ܣ	ܣ	ܣ
ʿ	[ʕ]	ʿē	70	ܥ	ܥ	ܥ	ܥ	ܥ	ܥ	ܥ	ܥ
p, p̄,/ph	[p, f]	pē	80	ܦ	ܦ	ܦ	ܦ	ܦ	ܦ	ܦ	ܦ
ṣ	[ṣ]	ṣād̲ē	90	ܨ	ܨ	–	–	ܨ	ܨ	–	–
q	[q]	qōp̄	100	ܩ	ܩ	ܩ	ܩ	ܩ	ܩ	ܩ	ܩ
r	[r]	rēš, rīš	200	ܪ	ܪ	–	–	ܪ	ܪ	–	–
š	[ʃ]	šīn	300	ܫ	ܫ	ܫ	ܫ	ܫ	ܫ	ܫ	ܫ
t, t̲/th	[t]	taw	400	ܬ	ܬ	–	–	ܬ	ܬ	–	–

grounds, with the Persian (East) Syrians becoming Nestorian Christians and the Roman (West) Syrians Monophysite (or Jacobite) Christians. From the fifth century, these two communities had nothing to do with each other, and the scripts of their manuscripts diverged, the forms being called *Nestorian* and *Serto* 'simple' respectively; there is also a very square variety used in Christian Palestinian Syriac manuscripts, which adds a reversed *p* ܩ for a Greek labial stop (Müller-Kessler 1991). Moller (1988), however, denies that every Syriac manuscript can be thus classified.

Each community applied its own system of vocalization to the consonantal script.

TABLE 47.2: *Syriac Vowels*

NESTORIAN (EASTERN)		JACOBITE (WESTERN)		NAME	TRANSLITERATION
Diacritic	*With b*	*Diacritic*	*With b*		
◹	⊐	ˉ	⊃ or ⊇	ḥbāṣā	i, ī
˙·	⊐	ˀ	⊃ or ⊇	rbāṣā karyā, zlāmā qašyā rbāṣa	ē
˙˙	⊐			rbāṣa arrīḵā, zlāmā pšiqā	e
·	⊐	˒	⊃ or ⊇	ptāḥā	a
˙˙	⊐	ˀ	⊃ or ⊇	zqāp̄ā	ā
ȯ	ȯ⊐			ʿṣāṣā rwīḥā	o, ō
		ˊ	⊃ or ⊋	ʿṣāṣa ʿṣāṣa allīṣā	u, ū
ọ	ọ⊐				

Syriac writes the same twenty-two consonants as Hebrew (SECTION 46), but the ductus has become cursive. Most of the letters of each word are connected, so that some letters take on slightly different shapes according as they are attached to their neighbors or not; eight of the letters never connect to the following letter (for the Estrangelo and Serto scripts, see TABLE 47.1; for the Nestorian script, see TABLE 47.3).

Words are separated by spaces, but sometimes common phrases can be written closed-up, and series of particles are often written as a unit. In Serto, ʾaleph and lamadh assume each other's angle at the beginning or end of a word: ʾl- initially is ⅍, and l ʾ finally is Ⅱ.

Certain vowels are consistently notated using the consonantal script alone: every final *ā* and *ē* is marked by ⫣ ʾ, every *ī* by ⅃ *y*, and every *ū, u, ō,* and *o* by ⍺ *w* (except in the two words ⅃⊾ *kl* [kul] and ⅄⅏ *mṭl* [meṭṭul]). ⍺ *w* and ⅃ *y* also represent the diphthongs *aw* and *ay*. In words of Greek origin, α *a* is often written ⫣ ʾ, and ε *e* and αι *ai* sometimes ⍓ *h*.

Arabic written in Syriac script is called Garshuni.

Diacritical points

A number of diacritics came into use to notate phonological and morphological properties of the Syriac language (Segal 1953). The outlines of *d* ⅃ and *r* ⅃ (which were very similar throughout the history of the Semitic abjad) converged, and the two letters are distinguished by a dot below or above, even in the oldest inscriptions. From earliest times, also, a plural noun or feminine(!) verb (but not an adjective) is in most instances marked by a pair of dots (*syāmē*)—if there is an *r* in the word, they replace its dot, ⅃; otherwise, they appear wherever they will fit: ⫯⅄⅏ *malkā* 'king', ⫯⅄⅏ *malkē* 'kings'. They are used even when the singular and plural are spelled differently.

Several native Semitic words could often be written with the same consonants, and where such forms represent nouns of common origin, or different forms of a sin-

gle verb, some sort of differentiation was required. This at first took the form of a single dot placed over a letter to indicate a "fuller, stronger" syllable (usually with the vowel *a*), and under it to mark a "finer, weaker" vocalization, or none at all: ܥܒܕ *ʿbd* [ʕvaːða:] 'a work', ܥܒܕ *ʿbd* [ʕavda:] 'servant'; ܩܛܠ *qṭl* [qaːtel] 'he kills' or [qaттel] 'he murdered', ܩܛܠ *qṭl* [qтal] 'he killed'. The latter sort of differentiation was generalized to mark morphological distinctions even when those specific vowels were not involved—ܣܡ *sm* [sa:m] 'he placed'. This system is already in place in the earliest dated Syriac manuscript (411 C.E.); with the schism and the Conquest in the seventh century, further specification of vowel quality became essential, and the system of vowel points found in TABLE 47.2, first column, began to emerge. The system was perfected in East Syrian manuscripts of the ninth century.

In the West Syrian sphere, the pointing system was at first maintained; but Jacob of Edessa (later 7th century), showing how complicated it had become, proposed inserting vowel letters into the consonantal text. This scheme was never used. Instead, the vowel letters of Greek could be placed alongside the Syriac consonant letters (TABLE 47.2, second column)—above or below as space dictated; the odd orientation of the vowel signs is explained by the Syriac scribal practice of writing downward on the page, left to right (90° counterclockwise from the direction of reading). The date of introduction of the Greek vocalization cannot be established more certainly than before 1000. The vocalization systems of Syriac (etc.) are described in Morag 1961.

A further sign sporadically found is the *linea occultans*, which occasionally marks a vowelless consonant, but more often an unpronounced consonant; it is placed above or (more recently) below the affected letter, ܡܕܝܢܬܐ *md(n)t*' [məðitta:] 'city'; but a line below could also represent a "fuller" pronunciation.

There are also two optional dots that indicate stop versus fricative pronunciation of the six plosive consonants *b g d k p t*: *quššāyā*, a dot above, marks the stop; *rukkāḵā*, a dot below, marks the fricative (Segal 1989). Only a stop following a vowel or an "underlying" vowel can be fricativized, so *rukkāḵā* is an important indicator of morphological information.

The first lines of the two Syriac samples might look as follows, fully vocalized:

ܘܩܛܠܗܐ ܟܗܢܐ ܕܝܗܘܕܐ ܐܘܐܪܐܙ ܐܠܟܢܐ ܡܕܒܪܢܐ ܐܟܕ ܒܓܬ ܐܬܘܬܐ ܟܬܒܬܐ ܚܣܪܬܐ ܘܚܕܡܘܝ

ܡܩܦܐ ܘܠܝ ܘܠܚܡܝ . ܘܚܪܐܦܐܠܐ ܘܣܪܩܝ . ܡܝܢܗ ܡܝܢ ܡܫܡܠܝ

<center>SAMPLES OF CLASSICAL SYRIAC</center>

ESTRANGELO

←ܐܟܪܣܝܢ ܐܟܪ ܟܗܛܝ ܐܪܐܟܙܢܐ ܐܟܒ ܬܝܡܕܩ ܐܬܘܬܐ ܐܬܝܪܒܥ ܐܢܗܝܒܘ→
←nyš″n'w nyrm' 'nzk'd tymdq bkr 'tw″t' 'tyr″b' nyhbw

ܡܣ ܣܘܡܢ, : ܐܢܟܗ ܐܣܡܠܝܟܘ ܝܢܘ ܒܕܐ ܐܬܘܬܐ ܐܪ″ܦܣܕ ܐܢܪ″ܚ'
ms ,'swmn 'nkh : nwmylšw bkr 'tw″t' 'r″psd 'nr″h'

bhyd　　wh　　ʾyyrwsd　　tymdqw　　.nwhnm　　rqytʾd　　ʿmm″ʿl　　bhyw

rwṣd　　mryḥl

1. *Transliteration:*　wʾnš″yn　ʾmryn　dʾkznʾ　qdmyt　rkb　ʾtw″tʾ
2. *Normalization:*　w-nāšîn　āmrîn　d-aknâ　qaḏm-āyaṯ　rakkeḇ　āṯwāṯâ
3. *Gloss:*　and-men　say　that-e.g.　first-ly　devised　letters.the

1. ʿbr″ytʾ　wbhyn　sm　nmwsʾ,　hknʾ　wšlymwn　rkb
2. ʿeḇrāyāṯâ　wa-ḇ-hên　sām　nāmôs-â　hāḵannâ　wa-šlêmôn　rakkeḇ
3. Hebrew　and-in-them　he.set　law-the　likewise　and-Solomon　devised

1. ʾtw″tʾ　dspr″ʾ　ʾḥr″nʾ　wyhb　lʿm″mʾ　dʾtyqr
2. āṯwāṯâ　d-seprê　ḥrānê　w-yāḇ　l-ʿammê　d-etyaqqar
3. letters.the　of-languages　others　and-gave　to-Gentiles　to-be.honored

1. mnhwn.　wqdmyt　dswryyʾ　hw　dyhb　lḥyrm　dṣwr
2. men-hôn　w-qaḏm-āyaṯ　d-sûryāyâ　haw　d-yaḇ　l-ḥîrām　d-Ṣôr
3. by-them　and-first-ly　of-Syriac　DEMONST　that-he.gave　to-Hiram　of-Tyre

'Men say that as (Moses) first devised the Hebrew letters and wrote the law with them, so Solomon devised the letters of other languages and imparted them to the Gentiles in order to be held in honor by them. (He devised) first (the letters of) Syriac, which he gave to Hiram of Tyre.'

—*From Ishodad of Merv's commentary on Genesis (9th century), quoted in Coxon 1970: 16.*

SERTO

nylmšm　nm　nwhnm　.nyr″dḥd　ʾtw″tʾbw　.ntwld　ʾr″pesᐊ

lkl　ʾylmš″m　ʾr″psw　.nyrysbw　nyrysḥ　nyd　nwhnm　nyrymgw

ʾḥktšm　nwhl　ʾbtkb　ʾmšrtmd　ʾtwʾ　ʾnšlb　ʾnmtltm　ʾspwṭ

ʾwh　ʾl　ʾr″ysḥ　ʾr″psw　.ʾynmrʾw　ʾytpwgʾw　ʾymwrw　ʾynwyld　ʾmkʾ

nwhl　ʾbtktmd　ʾtrwṣ　ʾytyb　ʾnšlb　ʾnmtltm　ʾspwṭ　lkl

ʾybrʾw　ʾyyrwsw　ʾyrbʿld　ʿmkʾ　ʾḥktšm

1. Transliteration: sepr″ʾ   hlyn   dlwtn.   db'tr'wtʾ   dhdr″yn.
2. Normalization: sep̄rê   hālên   da-lwāt̠-an   d-b-at̠rawwāt̠ā   da-ḥd̠ār-ayn
3. Gloss: scripts   those   that-at-us   that-in-places   that-around-us

1. mnhwn.   mn   mšmlyn   wgmyryn   mnhwn   dyn   ḥsyryn
2. men-hôn   man   mšamlên   wa-ḡmîrîn   men-hôn   dên   ḥassîrîn
3. from-them   some   complete   and-perfected   from-them   however   incomplete

1. wbṣyryn.   wsprʾʾ   mš″mlyʾ   lkl   t̠wpsʾ   mtltmnʾ   blšnʾ
2. wa-b̠ṣîrîn   w-sep̄rê   mšamlayyâ   l-kol   t̠ûp̄sâ   met̠lat̠mānâ   b-leššānâ
3. and-imperfect and-scripts complete   to-each type   pronounced   with-tongue

1. ʾtwt   dmtršmʾ   bktbʾ   lhwn   mštkh'   ʾkmʾ   dlywnyʾ
2. at̠ût̠â   d-met̠rašmâ   ba-kt̠āb̠â   l-hôn   meštakh̠â   akmâ   da-l-yawnāyâ
3. letters   that-inscribed   in-writing   to-them   existing   such.as   that-of-Greek

1. wrwmyʾ   wʾgwptyʾ   wʾrmnyʾ.   wsprʾʾ   ḥsyrʾʾ   lʾ   hwʾ
2. w-rômāyâ   w-egupt̠āyâ   w-armānāyâ   w-sep̄rê   ḥassîrê   lâ   wâ
3. and-Latin   and-Egyptian   and Armenian   and-scripts incomplete not   (was)

1. lkl   t̠wpsʾ   mtltmnʾ   blšnʾ   bytyʾ   ṣwrtʾ   dmtktbʾ
2. l-kol   t̠ûp̄sâ   met̠lat̠mānâ   b-leššānâ   baytāyâ   sûrtâ   d-met̠kat̠bâ
3. to-each   type   pronounced   with-tongue   proper   form   that-written

1. lhwn   mštkhʾ   ʾkmʾ   dlˤbryʾ   wswryyʾ   wʾrbyʾ
2. l-hôn   meštakh̠â   akmâ   da-l-ˤeb̠rāyâ   wa-sûrāyâ   w-arbāyâ
3. to-them   existing   such.as   that-of-Hebrew   and-Syriac   and-Arabic

'As for the scripts (used) by us or our neighbors, some are complete and perfect,
but others are incomplete and imperfect. For complete scripts, each distinct
sound has its own written letter, as in Greek, Latin, Coptic, and Armenian; but
incomplete scripts do not have, for each distinct sound, their own written form,
as in Hebrew, Syriac, and Arabic.'

  —*Bar Hebraeus (1225/6–1286), "Book of Rays," tractate 4, chap. 1, sec. 1*
                              (Moberg 1922: 191–92, 1907: 3–4).

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