

## Aramaic/Syriac

### I. ARABIC AND ARAMAIC

During the first half of the 1st millennium B.C.E. Aramaic dialects spread from their original home around the Upper Euphrates (Aram Naharayim) into Syria and Mesopotamia. By the time the Achaemenid Empire was established in the 6th century B.C.E. most areas of Syria-Palestine and Mesopotamia were Aramaic-speaking. Different forms of Aramaic became the dominating spoken language of these areas until the Islamic conquest. It is, however, likely that during this period different forms of Arabic could already be heard in some regions. According to documents, there was a substantial presence of people with Arabic rather than Akkadian names in central and lower Mesopotamia from the late Assyrian period into the Achaemenid times. In Syria we hear about the presence of people called → ‘Arabs’ not only in the border regions to the desert but also in the Anti-Lebanon, the Biqā’ valley and around Ḥimṣ/Emesa in Seleucid and Roman times. Some of the rulers of these Arabs have Arabic-sounding names and it can be assumed that there were speakers of a variety of Arabic among them. Finally, in the Arabo-Nabatean kingdom there was interaction between the users of late Imperial Aramaic as a written language and large groups of speakers of Arabic dialects. The interference between Aramaic and different forms of Arabic is thus most likely to have existed more than one millennium before the Islamic conquest. During the first two centuries of Islam, Aramaic continued to be spoken in Syria and Mesopotamia by the peasantry. They were called *nabaṭ*, a word which in early Arabic sources also means Aramaic-speaker. In the cities, a bilingual situation arose soon after the conquest when Arabic increasingly became the language of the market-place and public life, whereas Aramaic continued to be spoken at home. With the growing physical separation between the different religious groups in separate quarters within the city walls, from the Crusader period and onwards, Aramaic tended to be limited especially to Christian and Jewish quarters. The religious minorities have tended to preserve the bilingual situation to a larger degree than the Muslim majority, which early on seems to have been Arabicized. Aramaic-speaking Jewish and Christian communities surrounded by Arabic-speakers

have existed until the 20th century, especially in the old cities of Iraq. The Aramaic-speaking Jewish communities migrated to Israel in the beginning of the 1950s. In the countryside, Aramaic was preserved in certain areas until quite recently. In Lebanon, Aramaic was generally spoken in the northern Christian mountain villages until the beginning of the 18th century and is still alive in the three villages of Ma’lūla, Bax’a, and Jubb ‘Adīn in the Anti-Lebanon. In Mesopotamia, Aramaic is still spoken in villages around Mosul and further north. In the south, Aramaic was probably spoken by Mandaeans until fairly recent times. In general, it can be said that the Arabization process has been faster in cities and among Muslims than in the countryside and among religious minorities. A bilingual Arabic–Aramaic situation has probably existed in many areas for a very long time but unfortunately this is poorly documented (Hopkins 1995:37–38).

The interference between Aramaic and Arabic is a much more complex phenomenon than is usually realized. Thus, we have to take into account not only the bilingual situation in many areas during the Islamic period, but also the close contacts between Aramaic- and Arabic-speakers before the Islamic conquests. Further, Aramaic is far from being one unified language. There are substantial differences between the western and eastern dialects, documented as early as the turn of the era, and also within these groups, especially the eastern one. To this is added the preservation among the Aramaic-speaking minorities of traditional literary Aramaic idioms used in religious ceremonies and formal speech. For the Christians, Eastern Aramaic Syriac has been of great importance whereas the Jews have had a mixed Eastern and Western Aramaic literary tradition. The influence of Classical Mandaean upon the spoken language of the Mandaeans is more difficult to grasp. A final problem which should be taken into account is the typological similarity between Aramaic in general and the modern spoken forms of Arabic (Fischer 1984:83), which sometimes makes it difficult to recognize borrowings. It has been suggested (Retsö 2000) that some Arabic dialects, mostly in North Africa, are in fact descendants of dialects spoken in the border regions between Syria and Arabia, originally shar-

ing many morphological and most likely also lexical features with the Aramaic complex.

An important question in connection with the borrowing from Aramaic into Arabic is which kind of Aramaic the borrowing reflects, which also may be an indication about the age of the borrowing. Aramaic has one main phonological shift which distinguishes it from Arabic, viz. the *begadkefat* shift. This means the fricativization of the plosives *b, g, d, k, p, t* to *ḅ, ḡ, ḏ, ḵ, ṗ, ṭ* when non-geminated in postvocalic position. The *begadkefat* has not affected all consonants in all dialects and its distribution shows a very complicated picture. Two other sound shifts are of importance even if they can also be found in certain forms of modern spoken Arabic: (a) the reduction of short vowels in unstressed open syllables to a murmur vowel or to zero, (b) the change *ā > o(ō)*. Of these (a) is a feature reflected in all Aramaic dialects; (b) has affected the Aramaic dialects spoken in northern-central Syria and Mesopotamia but not those in southern Syria, including Palestine, southern Mesopotamia and the north-western periphery. These sound shifts took place at different periods in different areas. The earliest traces of (a) are from the 2nd century B.C.E. in Mesopotamia. The *begadkefat* shift presupposes the existence of all short vowels and should thus have started earlier but the exact development of these two changes are difficult to follow.

Another factor to be taken into account is the sound changes in Arabic. Thus, common Semitic *p* is in all forms of Arabic represented by *f*. According to the *begadkefat* rules many varieties of Aramaic have *p* and *f* in complementary distribution. Further, common Semitic *S'* = *š* is in Arabic represented by *s*, whereas Semitic *S* is *š* in Arabic but *s* in Aramaic. It should also be noticed that both Arabic and Aramaic have *t ṭ* and *d* but in different distribution. All these factors make the tracing of Aramaic words in Arabic a difficult task and the difference between words inherited by Arabic and Aramaic on the one hand, and Aramaic words borrowed into Arabic on the other, is not as simple as has sometimes been assumed. Some of the collections of borrowings (Féghali 1918; Hobaika 1939; Freyha 1973; Nakhla 1973) should be used with caution.

## 2. ARAMAIC IN THE 'ARABIYYA

The integration of Aramaic loanwords into Arabic is reflected in the literary language, the 'arabiyya, from its earliest stages. The earliest dated text is the *Qur'ān*, but several of the Aramaisms there can also be found in the poetry ascribed to

the earliest poets from the 6th century C.E. Many of the most important and frequent words in the *Qur'ān* are clear Aramaic borrowings, which can be shown by a comparison with Syriac: 'aslam- 'to submit [to the new religion]' < *ašlem*; *bāb* 'door', 'gate' < *bābā*; *bī'a* 'church' < *bī'tā*; *rabb* 'lord', *rahmān* 'merciful' (most likely via South Arabian); *sabīl* 'way', 'path' < *šhīlā*; *sabt* 'Sabbath' < *šabtā*; *sajad-* 'prostrate' < *sgeḏ*; *safīna* 'ship' < *sfi(n)tā*; *tāḅ-lyatūḅ-* 'repent' < *tāḅ/ytūḅ* or *ntūḅ*; *tatbīr* 'destruction', from Aramaic *tḅar* 'break', cf. Arabic *ṭabar-* 'destroy'; 'asbāt, pl. of *sibt* < *šibtā* 'tribes'; 'ālam 'world' < 'ālmā; *šalāt* 'religious service, ceremony' < *šlūtā*; *zakāt* 'alms' < *zkūtā*; 'īd 'festival' < 'īḏā; *qurbān* 'offering' < *qurbānā*; *furqān* 'salvation', 'redemption' < *purqānā*; *ma-dīna* 'town' < *mdī(n)tā*; *malakūt* 'kingship' < *malkūtā*; *masīḅ* 'Christ' < *mšīḅā* (Jeffrey 1938). The Aramaic origin of these words and many others is made likely by the fact that they have no semantic cognates in Arabic from which they can be derived. Thus, for instance, *jannat-* 'garden' has no direct cognate in Arabic where the verb *janna* means 'cover'. Aramaic *gi(n)tā*, on the other hand, is clearly formed from the root GNN 'surround', 'protect'. In this case the 'arabiyya has the indigenous word *ḥadiqa* from the verb *ḥadaq-* 'surround' 'protect'. When derivations are sometimes found, it can be shown that they are derived from the loanword. Thus, the word *sūq* 'market-place' has many derivations but they are all from the noun, which must be a borrowing from Aramaic *šūqā* and then originally from Akkadian *sūqu* 'street'. In Akkadian, it is obviously connected with *siāqum* 'be narrow' whereas Arabic *sāq-* has a completely different meaning: 'lead', 'conduct'. In the 'arabiyya of the *Qur'ān* we also find several semantic borrowings which give homonyms like *daras-* 'study' (from Aramaic *draš*) or 'wipe out' (original Arabic), *katab-* 'write' (Aramaic/Hebrew) or 'sew together', 'put together' (original Arabic), *dīm* 'judgement' (Aramaic *dīnā*) or 'owe' (original Arabic), *zakā* 'be pure, innocent' (Aramaic *zkā*) or 'be fit, suitable' (original Arabic), *šalīb* 'cross' (Aramaic *šlab* 'crucify'), Arabic *šalab-* 'be hard, stiff', *šawm* 'fasting' (Aramaic *šawmā*), Arabic 'stand still', *qara* 'read aloud', 'recite' (Aramaic *qrā*) or Arabic 'gather', 'collect'. This vocabulary is also found in the earliest Islamic prose texts like Ibn 'Išḥāq's history of the Prophet (Hebbo 1984). Many of them must be very old borrowings as can be seen from the many derivations according to Arabic morphological rules, e.g. of *katab* with the meaning 'write'. In general it can be said that the Aramaic loans in the *Qur'ān* and the

earliest poetry seem to reflect an archaic form of Aramaic. There are no traces of the sound shifts mentioned. The six *begadkefat* consonants are always plosives, although the phonology of the 'arabiyya could have reproduced the fricative articulation of the Aramaic *begadkefat* consonants, including (the fricative) *b* which could be rendered *w*, as in some Mishnaic Hebrew and early Aramaic inscriptions: *gabṛā* > GWR'. Further, all instances of Aramaic *ā* are *ā* in the 'arabiyya, e.g. *fuṛqān*, thus no trace of the shift *ā* > *ō*. In western Syriac we have *purqōn-* but in eastern Syriac *porqān-*. The Aramaic *š* (= Semitic *S*<sup>1</sup>) is always *s* in these items, which shows that these words were borrowed from Aramaic before the Arabic sound shift *š* > *s* (McDonald 1974), cf. *sabbah-*, Syriac *šabbah* 'praise'. The same holds for the *p*, which in Aramaic after the *begadkefat* shift has two varieties: *p* and *f*, whereas the 'arabiyya always has *f*. The vowel reduction is also absent in Arabic, cf. *sabīl-*, Syriac *šbīl*. This does not mean that all borrowings must be from before the 2nd century B.C.E., only that the Aramaic from which the borrowings come had not been seriously affected by the sound shifts. It can be assumed that in certain cases the loanword was transformed when being integrated into the sound and syllable structure of Arabic. This especially holds for verbal borrowings where paradigmatic leveling has been at work. The verb *tāb-lyatūb-* 'repent' is an Aramaic loan, which can be seen from its meaning and from its Arabic counterpart *ṭāb-lyatūb* 'turn back'. But it should be observed that Arabic has *t* in all forms of this verb whereas Syriac, for instance, has the fricative *ṭ* in the imperfect according to the *begadkefat* shift, thus *tāb/ntūb*. The 'arabiyya has either introduced the *t* in all forms analogically, or the word was borrowed from an Aramaic dialect which had not yet undergone the *begadkefat* shift. The existence of short vowels in unstressed open syllables as in this example is most likely due to an integration of the borrowing into the verbal paradigm of the 'arabiyya. This does not explain, however, the total absence of traces of the Aramaic sound changes. A noun with the form *šbīl* could very well have been borrowed into the 'arabiyya as *\*isbīl* and an Aramaic *zakūtā* should give *\*zaxūt* in Arabic.

In the approach taken here the Aramaic cognates in the 'arabiyya are regarded as borrowings from Aramaic. The much further reaching claim that the 'arabiyya of the *Qur'ān* is in fact a transformation of a text originally written in Aramaic or even Syriac, as claimed by Luxenberg (2000),

is most difficult to verify and remains highly unlikely.

### 3. ARAMAIC IN ARABIC DIALECTS

The Arabic spoken in Syria and Mesopotamia has replaced Aramaic dialects there and it can be assumed that a bilingual situation existed for a long time and that numerous Aramaic lexemes found their way into Arabic during this period. The presence of Aramaic lexemes is well studied in Lebanese Arabic (Féghali 1918; Freyha 1973) and the dialects spoken in the Anti-Lebanon (Arnold and Behnstedt 1993) but can be found in dictionaries from the entire Syro-Palestinian area (cf. Barbot 1961). The material collected by Féghali and Freyha shows that, unlike in the 'arabiyya, most borrowings preserve the Aramaic phonology. Thus *šawb* 'heat', Syriac *šawbā* 'summer heat'; *seger* 'be ignited', Syriac *sgar*; *šaleh* 'undress', Syriac *šlah*, cf. Arabic *salax* 'pull off'; *naṭar* 'guard', Syriac *nṭar* cf. Arabic *naḍar-* 'look at'; 'observe', *labše* 'cloth', Syriac *lbāšā*, cf. Arabic *libs* 'clothes'; *baššaṭ* 'stretch', 'extend', Syriac *pšaṭ*; *faram* 'cut', Syriac *pram* (Arnold 2002). Even if most of these words can be found in Syriac, one should not assume that they are borrowed from that variety of Aramaic which is an eastern dialect (Contini 1999:102–103). It is obvious that most of the words designating everyday activities belong to a local western Aramaic dialect originally spoken in Lebanon. It should be observed that in general these words preserve Aramaic *š* and *ṭ* against Arabic *s* and *d*. There are clear traces of the *begadkefat* shift of *g* also in initial position: *gaddef* 'blaspheme', Syriac *gaddef*, cf. Arabic *jaddaf-* 'curse', 'blaspheme'. The Arabic word may in this case be an ancient borrowing from Aramaic. An example of a semantic borrowing is *šabeg* 'baptize' which has its meaning from Aramaic *šbe'*, but the form is Arabic *šabaḡ-* 'dip', 'dye'. Both these examples belong to the religious semantic field. Anti-Lebanon shows a similar picture (Arnold and Behnstedt 1993:80–92). In this area, Aramaic is still spoken in the three villages and it has been shown that the presence of Aramaic in the Arabic dialects increases the closer one gets to the villages. It is likely that this reflects earlier extension of spoken Aramaic which only quite recently has been reduced to a few places. The Aramaic words in the dialects surrounding Ma'lūla show a reflex of dialects which, unlike the Aramaic of Ma'lūla, did not have the shift *ā* > *ō*, e.g. *tiḡār* 'pot for grape syrup', Ma'lūla: *tiḡōra*, *tuḡōra* (originally from Persian), *maššān* 'extension of plough

handle', Ma'lula *maššōn*. The form *maššōn* is also found in Arabic dialects in the area.

In Mesopotamia/Iraq Aramaic is still spoken in the north around Mosul and the dialects there show many obvious lexical items with an Aramaic origin. Many of these words can probably also be found in other parts of Iraq and in Anatolia, especially in the so-called *qāltu* dialects. Unfortunately, no systematic investigation has as yet been carried out. A comparison between the works of al-Calabī (1935) and Vocke and Waldner (1984) shows only a few common items. The items collected by Calabi from the Mosul area show the preservation of Aramaic sounds, e.g. *šaq̄l* 'weight', 'measure', Aramaic *šQL* (cf. Vocke and Waldner 1984, s.v.); *dağāš* 'show', 'demonstrate', Syriac *dgaš*. Some lexemes show signs of being older loans like *sihl* 'stream of water', Syriac *šihlā*; *tamas* 'dip', Syriac *tmaš*. Aramaic *ḥ* often appears as *x*, like *fasax* 'be wide', Syriac *pšah*.

The Aramaic vocabulary is likely to be the largest foreign element in the Arabic lexicon even if the exact extent is difficult to define. There has been a tendency to draw the line somewhat too generously (Hopkins 1995:41–43; Contini 1999: 112–113). Of the 221 loanwords identified by Hebbo (1984) in the biography of the Prophet 37 percent were Aramaic or have been transmitted into the 'arabiyya via Aramaic. The general picture is that of two main strata of Aramaic loanwords: the old ones in the 'arabiyya and the more recent ones in the dialects. Quite a few of the 'arabiyya words give the impression of being early borrowings from Aramaic dialects, not affected by the characteristic sound shifts. The vocabulary in the *Qur'ān* and in early prose contains words from all aspects of life: religion, agriculture, politics, architecture, administration, and natural phenomena, even if religious terminology dominates, a fact that may be due to the content of the texts. In the dialects, the picture is somewhat different with a predominance of Aramaic words dealing with agriculture and everyday domestic life. To this is added the religious vocabulary among the Christian minorities. The Aramaic element in the Arabic dialects also includes many of the old items in the 'arabiyya, but it is uncertain whether these were borrowed from the 'arabiyya or inherited from a common ancestor. To this is then added a more recent stratum which, unlike the older one, to a large extent reflects the characteristic sound shifts in Aramaic.

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