

Language and Identity: The Twin Histories of Arabic and Aramaic (and: Why did Aramaic Succeed where Greek Failed?)¹

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Before Islam

Aramaic and Arabic are both very ancient languages.² The use of the word *an-nâ-qa* ('the she-camel') in Assyrian inscriptions relating to Arab tribute and Herodotus' observation that the Arabs call Aphrodite *al-Ilat* ('the goddess') imply the existence of the Arabic definite article, and so of some form of Arabic, already in the early to mid-first millennium BC.³ However, Arabic (or rather Old Arabic, the name scholars give to pre-Islamic Arabic)⁴ seems to have been seldom written down until a century or so

¹ This article was given as a lecture at the *North American Syriac Symposium IV*, July 2003, Princeton Theological Seminary, but was written at the Institute for Advanced Studies of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. It has grown out of the very stimulating and genial seminars and discussions held with the other members of the Institute's research group on epigraphy: Hannah Cotton, Axel Knauf, Shlomo Naeh, Jonathan Price, Marjana Ričl, Seth Schwartz, Leah Di Segni, and David Wasserstein, to all of whom I am very grateful. It is also intended as a footnote to David Wasserstein's thought-provoking article in *Scripta Classica Israelica* 22 (2003), 257-72, on 'Why did Arabic succeed where Greek failed?'. In particular, I examine the position of Arabic in pre-Islamic Arabia/Levant, which Professor Wasserstein feels 'was not, at the time of the conquest by the Muslim Arabs, deeply implanted or widespread' (*ibid.*, 261), and also the position of Aramaic in the Islamic period, which survives very well until at least the 13th century and so suggests a slightly slower pace of Arabicisation than he allows for.

² Aramaic is an umbrella name for a number of closely-related dialects, such as those referred to by scholars as Palmyrene Aramaic, Nabataean Aramaic, Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, Chaldaean, Syriac (the dialect of the Edessa region), etc. Arabic in the pre-Islamic period (what scholars call Old Arabic) belongs to Ancient North Arabian, another umbrella name for a number of closely related dialects, such as those referred to by scholars as Safaitic, Hismaic, Thamudic, etc., of which Arabic was the only one to survive.

³ A. Livingstone, 'An early attestation of the Arabic definite article', *JSS* 42 (1997), 259-61; Herodotus, *History*, ed./tr. A.D. Godley (Loeb; Cambridge, MA 1926), 3.8. Arabic would seem to be the only language with a prefixed definite article *al-*, but on its own it of course does not tell us anything about the nature of Arabic in this early period; see further M.C.A. Macdonald, 'The use of the definite article in classical Arabic: some light from the *jahiliyya*', *JSS* forthcoming.

⁴ A distinction does need to be made in that there are some small divergences from classical Arabic in these pre-Islamic Arabic texts, and more might be apparent if we had more/lengthier pre-Islamic Arabic texts to compare fully with classical Arabic texts. So in this 'Before Islam' section where I write Arabic, I mean Old Arabic. See further W. Müller, 'Das Altarabische und das klassische Arabisch', in W. Fischer (ed.), *Grundriss der arabischen Philologie* I (Wiesbaden, 1982), 17-36; Christian Robin, 'Les plus anciens monuments de la langue arabe' in *id.* (ed.), *L'Arabie antique de Karib'il à Mahomet* (Aix-en-Provence,

before the advent of Islam. On the very few occasions that it was committed to writing, the script of prestige in the locality concerned was employed. Thus at Dedan in north-west Arabia, before the Nabataeans arrived there (i.e. before the end of the first century BC), an inscription was carved advertising 'the funerary monument of 'Abdsamin son of Zaydharim which Salma daughter of Aws built (*allati banâhâ Salma bint Aws*)'.⁵ The language is Arabic, but the script is the local one in use in Dedan, a derivative of the south Arabian script. At Qaryat al-Faw, the capital of Kinda and other Arab tribes (now in modern southwest Arabia), a certain 'Igl son of Haf'am wrote the dedicatory text for his brother's tomb in Arabic using the script of the nearby Sabaean kingdom:

'Igl son of Haf'am constructed for his brother Rabibil son of Haf'am the tomb: both for him and for his child and his wife, and his children and their children's children and womenfolk, free members of the folk Ghalwan. And he has placed it under the protection of (the gods) Kâhl and Lah and 'Athtar al-Shariq from anyone strong or weak, and anyone who would attempt to sell or pledge it, for all time without any derogation, so long as the sky produces rain or the earth herbage. (ca. 1st century AD)

And in 328 AD at Nemara in the basalt desert southeast of Damascus a tomb was built for Imru' al-Qays, the self-styled 'king of all the Arabs', and his deeds celebrated in a text composed in Arabic using the script of the Nabataeans, still the script of prestige in that region.⁶ Features of Arabic often surface in texts written in other north Arabian dialects or in Nabataean Aramaic from various parts of Arabia, making it clear that Arabic was widely spoken throughout the region.⁷ Nevertheless, it remained primarily a vernacular, employed by non-literate peoples and by those who, for whatever reason, preferred to write in other languages. Texts written wholly in Arabic are so rare before Islam that the commissioning of them must have been a conscious and deliberate choice. Presumably the intention was to make a statement about their ethnic and/or cultural affiliation, about their Arab identity. It is also possible that there were political connotations to using the spoken tongue rather than a foreign language, for it is noticeable that Imru' al-Qays exerted influence over a sizeable region and 'Igl ibn Haf'am came from a city used as a capital by a number of Arab tribes.

1991), 113-25; *id.*, 'Les inscriptions de l'Arabie antique et les études arabes', *Arabica* 48 (2001), 545-56; and my *Arabia and the Arabs* (London, 2001), 200-3, 233.

⁵ P. Jaussen and P. Savignac, *Mission archéologique en Arabie* (Paris, 1909-22), Lihyanite no. 384.

⁶ A.F.L. Beeston, 'Nemara and Faw', *BSOAS* 42 (1979), 1-6 (with translation of both texts); more recently see Irfan Shahid, 'Byzantium and the Arabs during the reign of Constantine: the Nemara inscription', *Byzantinische Forschungen* 26 (2000), 73-124, and Jan Retsö, *The Arabs in Antiquity* (London, 2003), 467-76. Note that the south Arabian script was used for writing Arabic even into early Islamic times (Christian Robin, 'Les graffites arabes islamiques écrits en caractères sudarabiques de Umm Laylâ', *Semitica* 26 [1976], 188-93).

⁷ Most often this is simply the use of the Arabic definite article (e.g. E. Littmann, *Semitic Inscriptions. Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria* [Leiden 1914-49], 4.1, no. 24: an altar from Salkhad for Allat 'lady of the place'/bt al-athr), but also occasionally loan words and grammatical forms (see n. 11 below and M.C.A. Macdonald, 'Reflections on the linguistic map of pre-Islamic Arabia', *AAE* 1 [2000], 36-7, 48-54).

While those interested in Arabic in the first millennium BC and early first millennium AD are restricted to meagre scraps of evidence, those concerned with Aramaic in this period have an abundance of material. And more is being found. For example, sixteen hundred Aramaic ostraca, mostly receipts and demand notices, from fourth-century BC Idumaea have turned up, and more keep appearing, presumably whenever the local bedouin, who alone know their exact provenance, need a bit of extra cash. More recently, forty-eight documents (thirty leather, eighteen wooden) from north-central Afghanistan, ancient Bactria, appeared on the antiquities market, and tell us much about the administration of the Achaemenid empire in the second half of the fourth century BC. And Aramaic texts continue to be unearthed in excavations in east Arabia, particularly in the modern Arab Emirates.⁸ However, with the Aramaic of this time we have an opposite problem to that of Arabic: we know where and when it was written, but we don't know for sure where and when it was spoken.

A famous case is that of the Nabataeans, who wrote all their monumental and funerary inscriptions, graffiti, and legal papyri in Aramaic, and yet they are usually suspected to have spoken Arabic.⁹ Fergus Millar has attacked this idea, pointing out that 'the existence of literally thousands of graffiti in Nabataean [Aramaic] from Sinai rules out any notion that the language was deployed only in official, public contexts'.¹⁰ However, the vast majority of the some six thousand published Nabataean graffiti (which constitutes approximately ninety percent of all published Nabataean texts), consist, aside from the owner's name, of only one of three words: *šlm* ('may N be greeted'), *dkyr* ('may N be remembered'), and *bryk* ('may N be blessed'), with the occasional addition of the phrase *b-tb* ('favourably'). Apart from the fact that these are also Arabic roots, the frequency with which they occur means that they must have effectively become ideograms, symbols expressive of a particular notion, so losing their identity as distinctive Aramaic words. Moreover, as well as a number of instances of Arabic loan words in Nabataean Aramaic texts,¹¹ we do have three Nabataean inscriptions written either completely or partially in Arabic, each very different. One, a rock graffito from east Egypt, is too brief to be sure

⁸ The new finds of Idumaeian ostraca will be published by Ada Yardeni and the Bactrian documents by Saul Shaked. For the Aramaic texts of East Arabia see most recently Hamad bin Seray and John Healey, 'Aramaic in the Gulf: towards a corpus', *Aram* 11 (1999), 1-14.

⁹ E.g. John F. Healey, 'Were the Nabataeans Arabs?', *Aram* 1 (1989), 43 ('the Nabataeans normally spoke a form of Arabic, while, like the Persians etc., they used Aramaic for formal purposes and especially for inscriptions').

¹⁰ Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East 31 BC-AD 337* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), 402; cf. M.C.A. Macdonald, 'Some reflections on epigraphy and ethnicity in the Roman Near East', *Mediterranean Archaeology* 11 (1998), 188: 'It seems unlikely to me that those writing graffiti in the desert would habitually do so in a literary language rather than their language of normal use', but what is a desert scribbler to do when his language of normal use has no designated script and in any case he only wants to write his name and a one-word prayer?

¹¹ M. O'Connor, 'The Arabic loanwords in Nabatean Aramaic', *JNES* 45 (1986), 213-29; Jonas Greenfield, 'Some Arabic loanwords in the Aramaic and Nabatean texts from Nahal Hever', *JSAI* 15 (1992), 10-21. There are also a few examples of the intrusion of Arabic grammatical forms, such as the use of *madhkûr* for *dkyr* (i.e. the Arabic passive participle instead of the Aramaic one) as is found in *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum* 2.1331, 2662, 2768.

of its import, though it seems to have a certain literary character.¹² The second, found on a stone in En Avdat in the Negev, concerns the offering of a certain Garmallahi son of Taymallahi to the god Obodas.¹³ He records the dedication in Aramaic, but then gives two lines of Arabic verse in praise of Obodas (though still in the Nabataean script), which may have been part of a liturgy used in the worship of the god:

For He (Obodas) acts (expecting) no reward nor predilection
 Though death has often sought us out, He afforded it no occasion
 Though I have often encountered wounding, He has not let it be my destruction

The last text is a funerary inscription from Hegra (modern Mada'in Salih) in northwest Arabia, dated to 267 AD.¹⁴ The writer, evidently an Arabic speaker, must have intended to produce an Aramaic text, but was not up to the job and the result is a mishmash of Arabic and Aramaic words, misplaced endings, and largely Arabic syntax. However, I would not wish to suggest that Arabic was the sole spoken language of the Nabataean kingdom; rather, I would stress that this realm was a polyglot entity, with different peoples in different regions speaking different languages and dialects, but with Aramaic used by all as the official language irrespective of whether they were Aramaic speakers or not. Thus, the three Nabataean Arabic texts just discussed as well as most of the texts containing Arabic loanwords come from the desert regions of the Sinai, Negev, and northwest Arabia, so it is here that some form of Arabic might have been more commonly spoken, whereas in areas like Moab and the Hawran Aramaic would have been much more entrenched.¹⁵

¹² E. Littmann and D. Meredith, 'Nabataean inscriptions from Egypt' *BSOAS* 15 (1953), no. 23.

¹³ Avraham Negev, 'Obodas the God', *IEJ* 36 (1986), 56-60; Sergio Noja, 'Über die älteste arabische Inschrift' in *Studia Semitica necnon Iranica R. Macuch dedicata* (Wiesbaden, 1989), 187-94; James Bellamy, 'Arabic verses from the first/second century: the inscription of 'En 'Avdat', *JSS* 35 (1990), 73-9; A.F.L. Beeston, 'Antecedents of classical Arabic verse?' in *Festschrift Ewald Wagner* (Beirut, 1994), 1.234-43; Manfred Kropp, 'A Puzzle of Old Arabic tenses and syntax: the inscription of 'En 'Avdat', *PSAS* 24 (1994), 165-74. Note that Negev dated the text to the late 1st/early 2nd century AD just because there were no known Nabataean inscriptions later than that date in this region, but the situation has since changed (e.g. a Nabataean inscription on plaster was found in a late 3rd/early 4th century context in excavations by Tali Gini — shown to me by her and soon to be published by A. Negev), and so there is no obstacle to positing a later date for the En Avdat text.

¹⁴ John Healey and G. Rex Smith, 'Jaussen-Savignac 17: the earliest dated Arabic document', *Atlat* 12 (1989), 77-84.

¹⁵ The regional diversity of the Nabataean kingdom is brought out by Avraham Negev, *Personal names in the Nabataean realm*, Qedem 32 (Jerusalem, 1991), 2 ('342 personal names occur only in North Arabia, 327 only in Sinai, 218 only in Edom/Moab, and 117 only in the Hawran'), and M.C.A. Macdonald, 'Languages, scripts and the uses of writing among the Nabataeans' in G. Markoe (ed.), *Splendors of the Caravan Kingdom* (New York, forthcoming); note also the latter's comment ('Some reflections', 188): 'those [Nabataean] names which are indisputably Arabic in language, rather than Aramaic (i.e. those which contain the article *al*, the word *ibn* rather than *br* for 'son of', or the *af'al* nominal formation), are very largely confined to the texts from Sinai'.

Moving a little later, we see a very different arrangement in place among the Christian communities of Palestine, Transjordan, and southern Syria. Very many of them were Aramaic speakers (and using the Estrangelo script of Aramaic),¹⁶ but the official language in these territories was now Greek. This state of affairs is nicely illustrated by a Greek inscription from Madaba that relates how, after a prolonged drought, the instruction of the bishop to construct a new cistern gave rise to a heavy rainfall. Though the inscription is in Greek, the people's response to the miraculous downpour is quoted in Aramaic: *goubba ba-goubba* 'cistern for cistern', echoing the phrase *gevīm gevīm* in 2 Kings 3.16, and thereby the rain miracles worked by Elisha (2 Kings 3:9-20) and Elijah (1 Kings 18).¹⁷ Thus this text tells us not only that many of the people of Madaba in the sixth century AD spoke Aramaic, but also that they learnt their Bible in Aramaic as well. The situation is elucidated by the famous Spanish pilgrim Egeria, who travelled in the east around the 380s AD:

In this province there are some people who know both Greek and Aramaic (*siriste*); but others known only one or the other language. The bishop may know Aramaic, but he never uses it. He always speaks in Greek and has a presbyter beside him who translates the Greek into Aramaic so that everyone can understand what he means.¹⁸

Egeria is describing a sermon given by the bishop of Jerusalem in the Church of the Anastasis, but we hear from Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339) that the martyr Procopius (d. 303) had served in his home church in Scythopolis as a translator into Aramaic,¹⁹ and so this was most likely a common practice. And indeed many an anecdote presupposes that a good proportion of the population of cities was made up of Aramaic-speakers, such as the tale of a woman who tells Porphyry of Gaza how she had never learnt Greek, but knew only Aramaic, and whose baby son starts speaking in Aramaic and is understood by all the onlookers.²⁰ Yet Aramaic inscriptions in this region are few, and in its cities are almost never encountered. Madaba, for example, which has been thoroughly excavated for a second time, has not yielded a single Aramaic inscription, even though a number of new churches decked out with Greek texts were uncovered. Rather, Aramaic inscriptions crop up in small towns and villages: at Umm el-Rus outside of Bethlehem, Horvat Qasra outside of Bet Guvrin (a cave chapel which also has inscriptions in Greek and Arabic), Tel Masos outside of Beersheba, Evron outside of Nahariyya (415 AD, constituting the earliest dated Palestinian Aramaic text), Khirbet Qastra outside of Haifa, Tel Yunis outside of Jaffa, and a number of small sites in Transjordan such as el-Queisme (outside of Amman), Khirbet el-Kursi, Ayun Musa, Khirbet el-Samra (which,

¹⁶ Greek writers refer to *hē tôn Syrôn phônē*; modern scholars use the terms Christian Palestinian Aramaic and Palestinian Syriac. For a useful study of this Aramaic dialect see Moshe Bar-Asher, 'Le syro-palestinien: études grammaticales', *JA* 276 (1988), 27-59.

¹⁷ Cf. M. Piccirillo, 'La cattedrale di Madaba', *Liber Annuus* 31 (1981), 311 (pl. 38), cf. 308 (= *IGLS* 21.2.137).

¹⁸ Translated in J. Wilkinson, *Egeria's travels to the Holy Land* (Jerusalem-Warminster, 1981), 146.

¹⁹ G. Garitte, 'Version géorgienne de la passion de S. Procope par Eusèbe', *Le Muséon* 66 (1953), 255.

²⁰ H. Grégoire and M.A. Kugener, *Marc le diacre, vie de Porphyre évêque de Gaza* (Paris, 1930), 52-5.

with eighty-five epitaphs, has the greatest concentration of Palestinian Aramaic texts), and Khirbet el-Mukhayyat (Mt. Nebo).²¹ This pattern suggests that only in the countryside could this language be used in public places and facilities, whereas in the urban centres, where the Hellenized elite held sway, Greek prevailed (despite the presence of substantial numbers of Aramaic-speakers there too). This would also explain why excavated synagogues from this place and period, found principally in rural areas, have yielded mostly Aramaic inscriptions, whereas Jewish epitaphs, found principally in urban areas, are mostly in Greek.²² Of course Greek could be used outside of cities — indeed, we have numerous Greek texts, especially graffiti and epitaphs, from very out of the way places, and we even hear sometimes of monks conversing with bedouin in Greek²³ — but the point is that Greek could not impose itself so thoroughly in such areas as it was able to do in the cities.

Moving through space rather than through time, namely to north Syria and Mesopotamia, we can see that there Aramaic (or the local dialect thereof, called Syriac) exhibited no such embarrassment about showing itself in public. Certainly there were many, as in Palestine, Transjordan, and southern Syria, who were bilingual, who had the privilege of acquiring a Greek rhetorical education, and who preferred to write in Greek. But Aramaic language and culture were not submerged by the Greek; on the contrary, Aramaic became the preferred language of literacy among the Christians of this region from the fourth century AD or even earlier, and there is a wealth of both inscriptions and literary compilations in Aramaic from this time. It was still influenced by Greek language and culture, probably more and more so through the fifth to seventh centuries, and yet despite this Aramaic maintained its cultural standing. A parallel development can be observed in Egypt and Armenia where Coptic and Armenian emerged in the fourth/fifth century (at the same time also as Palestinian Aramaic) as vehicles of Christian literature (especially translations from Greek) deployed particularly by non-Chalcedonian Christians. This has led some, most famously A.H.M. Jones,²⁴ to pose the question whether we are witnessing in this period the rise of some sort of nationalist movement. His answer was negative, and certainly there is no sense of territorial nationalism among non-Jews of this time. However, there is much ethnic chauvinism. Thus the famous logician and astronomer Severus Sebokht (d. 667) expresses his pride in being a Syrian and often polemicalises against Greek cultural prejudice. Having noted the dependence of Ptolemy

²¹ Palestinian Aramaic texts are listed with publication details in C. Müller-Kessler, *Grammatik des christlich-palästinisch-Aramäischen* (Hildesheim, 1991), 9-26, except for the recently discovered inscriptions from Horvat Qasra read by J. Naveh in A. Kloner, 'The cave chapel of Horvat Qasra', *Atiqot* 10 (1990), 139 (Hebrew)/30* (English), and further inscriptions from Khirbet el-Samra (see J.B. Humbert and A. Desreumaux, *Khirbet es-Samra I, Jordanie* [Turnhout, 1998]).

²² A point for which I am indebted to Leah di Segni.

²³ See, for example, A. Alt, *Die Griechischen Inschriften der Palaestina Tertia westlich der 'Araba* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1921), nos. 77-150, which are from small non-urban locations in the Negev; cf. H. Dunscombe Colt (ed.), *Excavations at Nessana* 1 (London, 1962), 137-93 (152 Greek inscriptions), 201-9 (10 Nabataean Aramaic inscriptions). John Moschus, 'Pratum spirituale', *Patrologia Graeca* 87.3, 3024 = ch. 155 ('Saracen' kidnapper near Dead Sea speaks Greek).

²⁴ 'Were ancient heresies national or social movements in disguise?', *JTS* 10 (1959), 280-98.

on Babylonian science, he adds: 'That the Babylonians were Syrians I think no one will deny, so those who say that it is in no way possible for Syrians to know about these matters (astronomy) are much mistaken'. And he concludes another work by sarcastically remarking: 'Being an unlearned Syrian, I am putting these small queries to you to convey to those who assert that the whole of knowledge exists only in the Greek tongue'. When Simeon, west Syrian bishop of Harran (700-34), asked George, Chalcedonian governor of Tur Abdin, to provide him with workmen for the building of a church, the latter 'delayed a little, for he did not have much faith in the holy men of our region, of us Syrians. This was because he had been brought up in the west with the Greeks and had become accustomed [to their ways]'. And this ethnic chauvinism could blend with religious loyalties. For example, it was said that the Coptic monastery of Metras remained firm against the Chalcedonian patriarch Cyrus, since 'the inmates of it were exceedingly powerful, being Egyptians by race and all of them natives without a stranger among them; and therefore he could not incline their hearts toward him'.²⁵ In conclusion one might say that in Egypt, Armenia, and northern Syria and Mesopotamia we can see a certain coalescence of ethnic pride, local language and Monophysite Christianity to give a limited sense of identity, gradually articulated more strongly in opposition to an increasing drive by the imperial government to impose conformity to the imperial version of Christianity.²⁶ In Palestine, Transjordan and southern Syria this did not occur, presumably because of a more thorough Hellenization of this region compared to elsewhere (Roman rule, a major vehicle of Hellenization, came to Palestine some 300 years before it came to the Edessa region), and because of the assertiveness of the Greek patriarchate of Jerusalem.²⁷

As regards the status of Arabic in this time and region, its written presence was even more shadowy than that of Aramaic. There are a few literary references to its existence. For example, the probably fourth-century writer Uranius notes that the place name Mōthō means death in the speech of the Arabs (*hē arabôn phônē*); his near contemporaries Epiphanius of Salamis and Jerome refer also to its existence, the former in connection with a virgin goddess whom the inhabitants of Petra and Elusa praise in the *arabikē dialektos* and call her in Arabic (*arabisti*) Kaabou (cf. Arabic *ka'aba*, 'buxom maiden').²⁸ Also the Talmud adduces a number of words said to be from the speech of the Arabs, and a few Arabicisms enter the Aramaic language of this period.²⁹ But physical evidence is limited to the aforementioned fourth-century epitaph of Imru' al-

²⁵ For the references in this paragraph and further discussion see my *Seeing Islam as others saw it* (Princeton, 1997), 21-2.

²⁶ But this sense of identity was only limited, since there was no exact correlation between language and religion; for example, some Chalcedonians in Syria and Mesopotamia used Aramaic, and continued to do so into Islamic times.

²⁷ For this latter point see Milka Levy-Rubin, 'Society, language and culture in the patriarchate of Jerusalem' in L.I. Conrad (ed.), *Patterns of Communal Identity in the Late Antique and Early Islamic Near East* (SLAEI 4; Princeton, forthcoming).

²⁸ For these references see Retsö, *The Arabs in Antiquity*, 591, who also discusses the variants for the name of the goddess in Epiphanius.

²⁹ S. Krauss, 'Talmudische Nachrichten über Arabien', *ZDMG* 70 (1916), 321-53; J.B. Segal, 'Arabs in Syriac literature before the rise of Islam', *JSAI* 4 (1984), 104 (on *yahle*, *gayse*, and *hablatha* from Arabic *ahl*, *jaysh* and *ibl*).

Qays until we come to the sixth century AD, when we have a small clutch of Arabic texts, such as those from Zebed, Jabal SAYS, and Harran in Syria, dated 512, 529, and 569, respectively.³⁰ That from Zebed is a short Arabic addition to a Greek-Aramaic bilingual text commemorating the founding of a martyrium for Saint Sergius; the one from Jabal Usays is by a certain Qayyim ibn Mughira sent to guard this important watering hole and waystation on the route from Bostra to Palmyra on behalf of the chief of the Ghassan tribe, a major ally of the Byzantine empire; and the Harran text is a bilingual Greek-Arabic inscription, recording the building of a martyrium for a certain Saint John by one Sharahil son of Talemu, evidently an important man in the local Christian community. Perhaps the most interesting of the clutch is the grave of Saola in a church in Nebo, which bears his name carved in Greek letters and opposite this the 'rest in peace' formula written in Arabic: *bi-l-salâm*.³¹ The only plausible explanation is that the language of Saola's family was Arabic; yet he was not, as the common perception would lead us to expect, a member of some wandering Arab tribe, but someone prominent enough in the local community to be interred in one of its churches. The wide geographical spread of these four inscriptions suggests that Arabic was, though too lacking in prestige to permit its frequent use in the realm of texts, commonly spoken throughout this region, and this impression seems confirmed by the Greek papyri recently discovered in a church in Petra, which use many Arabic terms, such as the courtyard of the church named *darat al-ebad* (P. Petra 10).³²

The arrival of Islam

The Arab conquests brought the area from the Pyrenees to the western edges of modern-day India, and from Aswan in southern Egypt nearly as far north as Grozny in Chechnya under Arab rule, and dramatically improved the fortunes of Arabic, making it, over time, the language of prestige in all this area. In some cases this latter process proceeded remarkably quickly: a moderate number of Arabic theological and epigraphic texts were already being penned in the Levant by the mid-eighth century AD, and laments about the decline of local languages were being composed in Spain and Egypt as early as the ninth century.³³ There are a number of reasons for this success. First and foremost was that

³⁰ A. Grohmann, *Arabische Paläographie 2* (Vienna, 1971), 14-7; B. Gruendler, *The development of the Arabic scripts from the Nabataean era to the first Islamic century* (Atlanta, GA, 1993), 13-14. For the Zebed text see also F. Cumont, *Catalogue des sculptures et inscriptions antiques des musées royaux* (Brussels, 1913), 172-5 (no. 145), and the Jabal Usays text has recently been re-read by Christian Robin and Maria Gorea, 'Un réexamen de l'inscription arabe préislamique du Ġabal Usays', *Arabica* 49 (2002), 503-10.

³¹ E.A. Knauf, 'Bemerkungen zur frühen Geschichte der arabischen Orthographie I: eine übersehene frühhocharabische Inschrift vom Nordostrand des Toten Meeres', *Orientalia* 53 (1984), 456-8.

³² Probably reflecting Arabic *dârat al-'ibâd*, 'house of worshippers'. I am indebted to Hannah Cotton for the text of this papyrus.

³³ S.H. Griffith, 'From Aramaic to Arabic: the languages of the monasteries of Palestine in the Byzantine and early Islamic periods', *DOP* 51 (1997), 25-6 (eighth-century Christian Arabic theological texts); Hoyland, *Seeing Islam* (n. 25), 502-5 (theological texts), appendix 6 (epigraphic texts, including the Dome of the Rock), 229 and 287 (laments of linguistic decline). For examples of seventh- and early eighth-century Arabic papyri found in southern

Arabic was now a Reichssprache, a language of empire. This meant that it was spoken by the rulers and by those who wished to associate with them. It also meant that it was the language of administration, or at least it became so at the end of the seventh century by decree of the caliph 'Abd al-Malik (65-86/685-705), thereby ousting Greek, Aramaic, and Persian from the position they had occupied for many centuries. Its achievement of this status was aided by a number of factors, in particular the size of the empire, which made a lingua franca highly desirable, and also substantial emigration to newly founded garrison cities, where the presence of large numbers of Arab soldiers, rich with booty, made Arabic the standard language there and learning it a *sine qua non* for the prisoners-of-war brought there and for the hopeful entrepreneurs who flocked there to provide services for their new masters. Second, Arabic became a Kultursprache. This happened with the succession of the Abbasid dynasty in 750 AD, who instigated the translation of scientific and literary works from Greek, Aramaic, Persian, and even Sanskrit into Arabic on a truly grand scale, allowing Arabic to become a language in which research and debate in a myriad different subjects could now be conducted. Of course, Greek, Aramaic, and Latin had been imperial and cultural languages, but Arabic had one further advantage: it was also a Religionsprache. Since it was the language of the Qur'an and the language of the Prophet Muhammad, many of those who converted to Islam were eager to master Arabic so as the better to comprehend their faith. Thus the first biography of Muhammad was by Ibn Ishaq (d. 150/767), his grandfather a prisoner-of-war from 'Ayn al-Tamr in Iraq; the earliest surviving Qur'anic commentary is by Muqatil ibn Sulayman (d. 150/767), born of Persian parents; and the first Arabic grammar was by Sibawayhi (d. 180/796), a native of Balkh in modern Afghanistan. And on their tombstones Muslims from many different backgrounds proclaimed allegiance to their faith and adherence to its principles in the Arabic language.

Naturally, the spread of Arabic was neither uniform nor universal. In Spain, its initial rapid expansion faltered in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and was completely reversed after the Reconquista; vernacular Latin, which had been fast losing ground to Arabic, once more became the dominant medium of speech and writing. In Iran Persian had never ceased to be the major spoken language, though heavily Arabicized, but Arabic was for a time the chief literary language. This changed about the tenth century when, with the conversion of much of the population to Islam, Iranian dynasties felt confident enough to write once more in Persian without this being seen as a threat to Islam. In Egypt Arabic enjoyed perhaps its greatest success, reducing Coptic and Greek to a very minor role already by the eleventh century. In the Levant and Iraq Greek was almost totally ousted, but Aramaic held its ground much better, surviving in some places until today. One might argue that this latter point, the survival of Aramaic, is the more in need of explanation. As long as Arabic remained the principal language of government, culture and religion, it was just a matter of time before Greek was eclipsed, especially as Greek was not felt to be the particular language of any cohesive social group in the Middle East as Persian was of the Iranians, and so had no people or political elite with an interest in fighting for its renewal and restoration. Of course such a people and such an elite existed in the Byzantine heartlands, but they were outside the Islamic world and so

Palestine see C.J. Kraemer, *Excavations at Nessana III, Non-literary papyri* (Princeton, 1958), and A. Grohmann, *Arabic papyri from Hirbet el-Mird* (Louvain, 1963).

were not in a position to initiate a Greek revival within the Islamic world. The rest of this paper will, therefore, be devoted to an examination of some of the reasons for this tenacity of the Aramaic language in comparison to Greek.

One possible answer is that, whereas Aramaic was the spoken language of a very substantial number of people across the Middle East, Greek was more in the nature of a *lingua franca* and the mother tongue of only a relatively limited group. This is of course a highly contentious issue, and one that cannot be resolved easily, if at all, since oral records do not survive and written testimony can never give us a certain indication of what people spoke.³⁴ Greek might simply have been the equivalent of the English language today, a medium facilitating communication of many different kinds at many different levels between many different linguistic communities, but the native tongue of only a small minority of its users. Indeed, it is tempting to argue backwards and infer from the swift displacement of Greek that it must have been only a *lingua franca* for it to have been so quickly abandoned once a new *lingua franca* (Arabic) had come into being. Moreover, the large-scale translation of Greek religious texts into Coptic, Palestinian Aramaic, Syro-Mesopotamian Aramaic (Syriac), and Armenian in the fourth to sixth centuries suggests that these latter were the principal vernaculars of the provinces of the late Roman world. One reason for the survival of Aramaic would then be that as a spoken language of the Middle East Aramaic was more widespread than Greek before Islam. Certainly, it was spoken in Mesopotamia, Iraq, southwest Iran, and northeast Arabia, all regions that Greek had hardly permeated at all, and even in the thirteenth century AD Aramaic was still used across a broad swathe of the Middle East, as we are told by Gregory Abu l-Faraj (Bar Hebraeus), head of the west Syrian church³⁵ in the East at that time:

Aramaic (*al-suryâniyya*): In it spoke God and Adam. It is divided into three dialects: the most pure is *al-ârâmiyya*, which is the dialect of the people of Edessa, Harran, and Outer Syria. Then there is *al-falastîniyya*, which is the dialect of the people of Damascus, the mountains of Lebanon, and the rest of Inner Syria.³⁶ And the most ugly of the three is the

³⁴ It can of course give clues, but needs extreme caution. And in particular one must bear in mind that use of a high prestige language in an inscription is what one would expect of anyone whatever their native tongue, for inscriptions are first and foremost about showing one's social status, cultural affiliations, political allegiance, etc. Use of a lower prestige language is therefore much more significant (there has to be a good reason why one is not using the high prestige language and one of the possible reasons is that the inscriber wishes to emphasize his native language).

³⁵ In this article I generally use the terms west Syrian and east Syrian, as is the norm now, rather than Jacobite (Monophysite) and Nestorian (Diophysite), to refer to the main two branches of eastern Christianity. These are not strictly geographical terms (west Syrian Christians are chiefly to be found in Syria and northwest Mesopotamia and east Syrian Christians in Iraq and Iran, but each branch also had communities in the strongholds of the other).

³⁶ For some examples of this dialect see P. Mouterde, 'Inscriptions en Syriaque dialectal à Kamed (Beq'a)', *MUSJ* 22 (1939), 73-106, and J. Barclay, 'Melkite Orthodox Syro-Byzantine manuscripts in Syriac and Palestinian Aramaic', *Liber Annuus* 21 (1991), 205-19 (some as late as the thirteenth century).

Chaldaean dialect, *al-nabatiyya*, which is the dialect of the people of the mountains of Assyria and southern Iraq.³⁷

However, this only explains why Aramaic might have remained spoken more widely and for longer than Greek, but it does not account for the fast demise of Greek as a prestige written language. By the time of the rise of Islam, Greek had been an important language of the Middle East for some nine hundred years, and for much of that period was employed for the majority of inscriptions and creative literature (as opposed to translations) in the Levant. It did of course continue to some extent after Islam. In Palestine, in particular, Greek inscriptions and religious texts were still actively being composed in the seventh and eighth centuries.³⁸ But the large-scale translation of Greek liturgical and hagiographical works into Arabic in ninth-century Palestine (and also into Aramaic, Armenian, and Georgian) suggests that Greek was by then no longer being much used for new compositions.³⁹

Possibly a more compelling reason for Aramaic's greater durability than Greek is that the Syrian church (west and east) came to terms with Islamic rule more easily than did the Greek church. This does not mean, as has often been claimed, that they welcomed the Arab invasions. Later observations, such as that by the west Syrian patriarch Dionysius of Tellmahre (d. 845): 'If, as is true, we have suffered some harm ... nonetheless it was no slight advantage for us to be delivered from the cruelty of the Byzantines', contrast strongly with the anguish in earlier accounts like the following:

When the Arabs heard of the festival that took place at the monastery of St. Simeon the Stylite in the region of Antioch, they appeared there and took captive a large number of men and women and innumerable boys and girls. The Christians who were left no longer knew what to believe. Some of them said: 'Why does God allow this to happen?'

And behind the casual notices in Arabic sources that such and such a city surrendered without a struggle is not necessarily a welcome of the Arabs, but often a sad recognition that no help was coming:

The people of Hims were exhorting one another: 'Hold out, they are only bare-footed ones'. An old man stood up and urged them to make peace with the Muslims, but they said: 'How can we do that when the emperor is still in authority and power?'

Certainly, the heavy-handed approach of some Chalcedonian leaders must have alienated many of the Syrian church, and this is important for explaining why the latter so quickly came to an acceptance of Muslim rule. For this is where the difference in Christian

³⁷ *Mukhtasar al-duwal*, (ed.) A. Salihani (Beirut, 1890), 18.

³⁸ Leah di Segni, 'Christian epigraphy in the Holy Land: new discoveries', *Aram* 15 (2003), 247-67; R.P. Blake, 'La littérature grecque en Palestine au VIIIe siècle', *Le Muséon* 78 (1965), 367-80.

³⁹ Cyril Mango, 'Greek culture in Palestine after the Arab conquest', *Scrittura, libri e testi* (Spoleto, 1991), 151: 'in the course of the ninth century the practice of Greek all but died out in Palestine and Syria'. See the articles of S.H. Griffith in his *Arabic Christianity in the Monasteries of Ninth-Century Palestine* (London, 1992), especially his 'The monks of Palestine and the growth of Christian literature in Arabic' (first appearing in *Muslim World* 78 [1988], 1-28), and Kate Leeming, 'The adoption of Arabic as a liturgical language by the Palestinian Melkites', *Aram* 15 (2003), 239-46.

reactions is most marked. Christians writing in Aramaic, though wishing to disprove the Muslims' assertions, do so with rational argument and fair characterization of their beliefs. The east Syrian patriarch Timothy I (780-823) even goes so far as to say that the Arabs 'are today held in great honour and esteem by God and men, because they forsook idolatry and polytheism, and worshipped and honoured one God. For this they deserve the love and praise of all'. But in Greek writings the Muslims were never anything but enemies of God. They were never to replace the Persians as a topic of learned digressions and diplomatic analyses, but rather to join the ranks of pagans and Jews as an object of attack and ridicule. This was because, by the seventh century, the Greek language had become intimately linked with Greek identity and with allegiance to Chalcedon and the empire. Its outpourings were, therefore, dominated by imperial concerns, with an eye suspicious of outsiders and dissenters. This was less true of the west Syrian church, which had begun by the seventh century to distance itself from the Chalcedonian church and to found many of its own institutions, such as schools and law courts, and it was totally untrue of the east Syrian Christians in Iraq, who had no lost or diminished sovereignty to lament. As regards their faith, they had no reason to rue the Persians' passing or to expect deliverance from them. Thus it was both easier and more necessary for them to accept the change of rulers than for their Byzantine counterparts. 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's', advised the patriarch Isho'yahb III (649-59), who himself struck up good relations with his new overlords. So when the Muslims replaced the Persians, the east Syrian Christians simply set about establishing with them the same pattern of relations and agreements that they had been seeking to obtain in pre-Islamic times, desiring freedom to pursue their worship unmolested in return for political loyalty and payment of taxes. It is, then, because the Arabs were to them political as well as religious enemies that the Byzantines were so hostile.⁴⁰

A corollary of this was that many members of the Aramaic-speaking community, though they wished to keep their religious life apart, willingly participated in the cultural life of Islamic society, most visibly in the aforementioned translation movement sponsored by the Abbasid dynasty in the eighth to tenth centuries AD. Indeed, Syrian Christian clerics and physicians were some of the most high profile participants in this movement. Clerics became involved presumably because they were acquainted with Greek through their study of the Church Fathers and because Abbasid patrons could easily approach them, since they would have already had dealings with them in an official capacity as representatives of their community (patriarchs and bishops often accompanied caliphs on official tours and even on campaigns). We have, for example, the correspondence of the aforementioned patriarch Timothy relating to the caliph Mahdi's request for help in producing an Arabic version of Aristotle's *Topica*:

The royal command required of us to translate the *Topica* of the philosopher Aristotle from Aramaic into the Arabic tongue. This was achieved, with God's help, through the agency of the teacher Abu Nuh. A small part was done by us, as far as the Aramaic was concerned, whereas he did it in its entirety, both Aramaic and Arabic. The work has already reached a conclusion and has been completed. And although there were some others who were translating this from Greek into Arabic ..., nevertheless the king did not con-

⁴⁰ For the references in this paragraph and further discussion see my *Seeing Islam* (n. 25), 22-6.

sider it worth even looking at the labours of those other people on the grounds that they were barbaric, not only in phraseology, but also in sense ... However, the king entirely approved of our labours, all the more so when from time to time he compared the versions with each other.⁴¹

Many Christian physicians had an acquaintance with Greek because the inspiration for their art came from the writings of Greek medics and because they were often men of a humanist bent, interested in sciences in general. Thus, as well as a treatise on food and drink and a summary guide to medicine, Gabriel son of Bakhtisho⁴², physician to the caliph Ma'mun (198-218/813-33), composed an introduction to the discipline of logic and a work on the manufacture of perfumes.⁴³ One might also note that as demand for translations grew, the prices rose, so considerable financial advantage accrued to those most practised in this art. For example, Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Malik al-Zayyat (d. 233/847), vizier to three caliphs and member of a rich olive oil-dealing Persian family from Jilan, allegedly spent 2000 dinars a month on translators and scribes, and the sons of Musa ibn Shakir (himself a highwayman turned astronomer and friend of Ma'mun) were said to have paid a stipend of 500 dinars a month to three of the most distinguished translators of the day for translation services.⁴³ The prices were fuelled by the competition amongst scholars to come up with new research that would attract the eye and the largesse of the rich and the powerful, and the high prices on offer meant that translators might go to great lengths to try to find new manuscripts, and accounts are legion of the journeys and investigations undertaken in the quest for fresh material, such as the following by the physician and translator par excellence Hunayn ibn Ishaq (d. 260/875):

None of our contemporaries has up to this point come across a complete Greek manuscript of (Galen's) *De demonstratione*, despite the fact that Gabriel (son of Bakhtisho⁴²) spent an enormous amount of effort looking for it, just as I myself looked for it most intensively. I travelled in search of it in northern Mesopotamia, all of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt until I reached Alexandria. I found nothing except about half of it, in disorder and incomplete, in Damascus.⁴⁴

In all of this translation activity Aramaic was of crucial importance, since the movement from Greek into Arabic most often went via Aramaic.⁴⁵ The art of rendering Greek into Aramaic had been practised for centuries before the Abbasids came to power, and the syntax of Aramaic is much closer to Arabic than is the syntax of Greek, so a better end result was to be had by going from Greek to Aramaic to Arabic. Moreover, men compe-

⁴¹ Sebastian Brock, 'Two letters of the patriarch Timothy from the late eighth century on translations from Greek', *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 9 (1999), 235-6.

⁴² Ibn Abi Usaybi'a, *Tabaqat al-atibba'* (Cairo, 1882), 1.138.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1.206, 1.187 (cf. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, (ed.) H.A.R. Gibb et al., Leiden, 1960-2002, s.v., 'Musa, Banu').

⁴⁴ G. Bergsträsser, *Hunayn ibn Ishaq über die syrischen und arabischen Galen-Übersetzungen* (Leipzig, 1925), 47.

⁴⁵ This is often stated explicitly; e.g. Ibn al-Qifti, *Akhbar al-'ulama'* (Cairo, 1326/1908), 125 (a work of Democritus translated 'into Aramaic and then into Arabic'); Ibn al-Nadim, *Fihrist*, (ed.) G. Flügel (Leipzig, 1872), 249 (Aristotle's *De interpretatione* and *Topica*), 250 (his *Physica Auscultatio*), 251 (his *De generatione et corruptione*), all translated from Greek into Aramaic by Hunayn, thence by others into Arabic.

tent in all three languages were far more likely to be native Aramaic-speakers than Greek- or Arabic-speakers. As late as the thirteenth century we find scholars like the west Syrian Christian Theodore of Antioch, bilingual in Aramaic and Latin, who journeyed to Mosul to study (under Kamal al-Din ibn Yunus) the works of the great Muslim philosophers Farabi and Ibn Sina and the Greek scientists Euclid and Ptolemy.⁴⁶ Most renowned and accomplished of all was Theodore's co-religionist and contemporary, Gregory Abu l-Faraj (Bar Hebraeus), who was as happy to translate books from Arabic to Aramaic as from Aramaic to Arabic.⁴⁷ This is surely one of the factors that enabled Aramaic to remain a language of culture in the Middle East and indeed it was very highly regarded by Islam. Muslim scholars were generally of the opinion that Aramaic was the first language of the world before the incident of Babel led to man's linguistic disunity,⁴⁸ that Jesus spoke Aramaic and God revealed the New Testament in it,⁴⁹ and that the Arabic script was derived from that of Aramaic.⁵⁰ A number of Muslim lexicographers drew attention to the considerable number of words in Arabic that had come originally from Aramaic, and this applied also to words in the Qur'an itself.⁵¹

By virtue of their participation in the translation movement, and in Middle Eastern intellectual life in general, Syrian Christians interacted with Muslims in a variety of different ways. As early as the late seventh century we hear from Jacob, bishop of Edessa, about Christians being tutors to Muslim children,⁵² and at a later time and a higher level it is easy to think of many examples of Christians studying with Muslims and vice versa. Thus the west Syrian Christian philosopher Yahya ibn 'Adi (d. 363/974) deepened his knowledge of the subject by attending the classes of the celebrated Muslim philosopher

⁴⁶ Bar Hebraeus, *Mukhtasar al-duwal*, 477.

⁴⁷ As well as translating from Aramaic to Arabic/Arabic to Aramaic (see *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. 'Ibn al-'Ibri') Bar Hebraeus also based a number of his works on Muslim models (e.g. his *Ethicon* on Ghazali's *Ihya' 'ulum al-din* and his *Ktaba d-hawat hekmta* on Ibn Sina's *Kitab al-shifa'*).

⁴⁸ A number of the traditions to this effect are collected by Milka Rubin, 'The language of creation or the primordial language: a case of cultural polemics in Antiquity', *JJS* 49 (1998), 330-3. Arguments about the oldest/best language were rife in early Islam, Muslims generally pointing to the inimitability of the Qur'an and the fact that Adam, even if he spoke Aramaic on earth, used Arabic in paradise. Aramaic-speakers responded with a number of texts, such as Elias of Nisibis' grammatical disputation (see below) and the five-volume work on rhetoric by Antony of Tagrit (fl. 9th c.), which he says he composed in order to refute those 'who call our Aramaic language meager, narrow, stunted and feeble, and who designate our literature poor and niggardly' (Sebastian Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature* [Kottayam, 1997], 67).

⁴⁹ E.g. Abu Bakr al-Baqillani, *al-Insaf*, (ed.) Shaykh al-Kawthari (Cairo, 1369/1950), 94.

⁵⁰ By three men from the tribe of Tayyi' whence it went to the people of Anbar and of Hira, to Ukaydir, the Christian king of Dumat al-Jandal, and to the people of Hijaz, and so to all the Arab world, according to Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-buldan* (Beirut, 1987), 659-60; cf. Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi, *al-'Iqd al-farid*, (ed.) 'Abd al-Majid al-Tarhini (Beirut, 1987), 4.240.

⁵¹ E.g. Ibn Durayd, *Jamharat al-lugha*, (ed.) R.M. Ba'albakki (Beirut, 1987), 1.319, 2.746, 3.1325-26; Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, *al-Itqan* (Beirut, 1996), 1.397, 400-404, 406; *id.*, *al-Muzhir* (Cairo, 1954), 1.282.

⁵² Hoyland, *Seeing Islam* (n. 25), 162.

Abu Nasr al-Farabi (d. 339/950), who had himself studied with the acclaimed east Syrian Christian translator Abu Bishr Matta ibn Yunus (d. 328/940).⁵³ Research projects, especially translation of technical treatises frequently written on poorly preserved manuscripts, necessitated cooperation, and we see a good illustration of this in the appointment of the aforementioned Hunayn ibn Ishaq:

He was selected to carry out translation work and he was entrusted with it. The one who selected him was the caliph Mutawakkil (232-47/847-61) and he arranged for him editorial secretaries knowledgeable in translation. They would translate and Hunayn would scrutinize what they had translated. (Employed thus) were Stephen son of Basil and Musa ibn Khalid al-Turjman.⁵⁴

Broadening our view somewhat, we can find numerous instances of Syrian Christian and Muslim scholars depending upon and borrowing from one another in their research. Ibn al-Nadim makes clear that he used the writings and library of Yahya ibn 'Adi for the chapter in the section of his bibliographical compendium that dealt with the lives of the Greek philosophers. And in putting together his bilingual world chronicle *Elias*, bishop of Nisibis, takes the *History* of Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi (d. ca. 232/847) as the chronological basis for his exposition of the Islamic period.⁵⁵ Moreover, members of both groups would often engage in debate with one another, both privately and publicly. For example, the Abbasid caliph Wathiq (227-32/842-47) once called upon those assembled at his court to explain to him how one acquired knowledge of medicine and its principles, whether by dint of intelligence or oral instruction, and there present, as well as Muslim courtiers, were the east Syrian Christian physicians Ibn Bakhtisho' and Hunayn ibn Ishaq, and the Jewish physicians Ibn Masawayh and his son Mikha'il.⁵⁶ Furthermore, we possess two accounts of logical/grammatical debates between Christians and Muslims. The first was held in 932 AD between the aforementioned Abu Bishr Matta and Abu Sa'id al-Sirafi in the salon of the Abbasid vizier Abu l-Fath Ibn al-Furat before a very august assembly of scholars on the subject of logic. The second debate took place in 1026 AD in Nisibis between the aforementioned bishop Elias and Ibn 'Ali al-Maghribi, vizier to Nasr al-Dawla, the local ruler of Diyarbakir and Mayyafariqin, on the subject of Arabic and Aramaic syntax.⁵⁷ Both debates are evidently literary fictions in the form that

⁵³ On these characters see *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. 'Yahya b. 'Adi', 'al-Farabi', 'Matta b. Yunus'.

⁵⁴ Ibn Abi Usaybi'a, *Tabaqat al-atibba'*, 1.189.

⁵⁵ E.g. Ibn al-Nadim, *Fihrist*, 246, 249; Elias of Nisibis, *Chronography*, ed./tr. E.W. Brooks (CSCO; Paris, 1910), uses al-Khwarizmi's *History* from year 11 AH (1.130) to year 168 AH (1.185), and probably a bit longer, but there are four folios missing at this point.

⁵⁶ 'Ali ibn Husayn al-Mas'udi, *Muruj al-dhahab*, ed./tr. C. Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille (Paris, 1866-74), 7.173ff.

⁵⁷ D.S. Margoliouth, 'The discussion between Abu Bishr Matta and Abu Sa'id al-Sirafi on the merits of logic and grammar', *JRAS* 1905, 79-129; Samir Khalil Samir, 'Deux cultures qui s'affrontent: une controverse sur l'*i'rab* au XIe siècle entre Elie de Nisibe et le vizir Abu l-Qasim', *MUSJ* 49 (1975-76), 619-49 (in another session between Elias and the vizier the former cites Hunayn ibn Ishaq's *Kitab al-nuqat* to the effect that Arabic lacks numerous technical terms as compared to Aramaic, Greek, and Persian — see L. Cheikho in *al-Mashriq* 20, 1922, 373).

we have them — in each case one party speaks for the majority of the time, always has the upper hand, and makes triumphant assertions, such as Elias' statement that 'the Muslims have much useful scientific knowledge translated from the Syrians, but the Syrians have no knowledge translated from the Arabs' and that 'the syntax of the Syrians is better, more beneficial and advantageous (than that of the Arabs)' — but both reflect the fact that such debates took place, since they were evidently regarded as perfectly plausible by their readers.

A final reason for the durability of Aramaic vis-à-vis Greek is that for the first few centuries of Islam the Aramaic language and Syrian Christianity continued to spread. Already in the fifth century we find in attendance at the synods of the east Syrian church bishops of Teheran, Isfahan, Merv, Herat, and 'of the tents of the Kurds'. The sixth-century merchant Cosmas Indicopleustes remarks upon east Syrian Christian communities that he encountered in Socotra, Ceylon, and the west coast of India. The Hsi-an Fu stele, dated 781 AD, relates how east Syrian missionaries met with the Chinese emperor in 635 and were given permission to disseminate their creed. And a list drafted by Elias, bishop of Damascus, in the late ninth century enumerates thirty metropolitan provinces of the church of the east, stretching across Asia from Syria and Palestine to Central Asia, India, and China. The destruction of the Abbasid caliphate by the Mongols in 1259 encouraged many Christians to believe that the Muslim world had been fatally weakened, and some in the east Syrian church hoped to form a Mongol-Christian alliance against the Mamluks of Egypt that would restore Christianity to its former primacy in the Middle East. This was not so unlikely as it might sound; the Mongols were initially willing to enter into relations with the Christian West, seeing in the Frankish rulers possible allies against their principal enemies, the Muslim kingdoms of the Mamluks and the Seljuk Turks. Some of their princes took Christian wives; for example, Toktu Khan married Maria daughter of the Byzantine emperor Andronicus II, and Uzbeg Khan married a daughter of Andronicus III. In 1281 a Uighur Christian was consecrated head of the east Syrian church, taking the name Yahballaha, with bishops from as far apart as Jerusalem and Tangut in attendance. And his life-long friend, Barsawma, a Uighur Christian from Beijing, was dispatched in 1287 by Arghun, grandson of Hulagu and ruler of Iraq and Iran for Kublai Khan, to form alliances with the pope and the princes of Europe.⁵⁸ This led to a further spread of east Syrian Christianity in Central Asia and China at this time, and this has left a physical mark in the form of some 700 tombstones inscribed in the Aramaic script and language or in the Aramaic script and Turkic language, found chiefly in the Kirghiz capital Bishkek and nearby Tokmak and in the former Mongolian administrative town of Almalyk on the Kazakhstan-Chinese border. This, together with the testimony of the thirteenth-century Franciscan traveler Wilhelm of Rubruk, tells us that Aramaic also played an important role as a liturgical language for the Christians of this area. Wilhelm of Rubruk even brought with him, for the attention of the Mongol khan Sartaq, a letter from King Louis IX of France translated into Aramaic, suggesting that

⁵⁸ For the references cited here see H.C. Luke, *Mosul and its Minorities* (London, 1925), 70-91; for an overview of the east Syrian church's expansion into Central Asia see S.H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia I: Beginnings to 1500* (San Francisco, 1992), and Erica Hunter, 'The church of the East in Central Asia', *BJRL* 78.3 (1996), 129-42.

Aramaic was, or at least was perceived by some to be, a lingua franca in the Mongol empire.⁵⁹

Yet this optimism had always been somewhat ill founded. All the while that it was expanding eastwards in the eighth to thirteenth centuries, the core territories of the east Syrian church in Iraq and Iran had been contracting, particularly in central and southern Iraq where the heavily Arabized garrison towns of Kufa and Basra and the dazzling new city of Baghdad had attracted many converts. Moreover, having backed the wrong side, the Christians suffered to some extent once the Muslims gained the upper hand against the Crusaders and the Mongols. Thus at Erbil in 1310 a force of irregular Christian cavalry in the Mongol service was besieged in the citadel by an armed Muslim mob and eventually massacred, with some Christian civilians killed and churches destroyed in the process. And the campaigns of Timur Lang in the late fourteenth century were also very detrimental to Christians. This depressing situation has tended to induce historians of the Aramaic language and of its speakers to halt their narratives at the end of the thirteenth century, thus giving rise to the impression that new writing in Aramaic stopped at this time, which was in no way the case. Fortunately, this trend is starting to be reversed and a number of recent publications highlight the continued creativity of this ancient tongue. David Wilmshurst has brought to our attention the historical information that can be gleaned from the colophons of the some two and a half thousand east Syrian manuscripts penned during the supposed 'dark ages'.⁶⁰ The participation of the local Christian population in repelling a Persian invasion of Mosul in 1743 earned the gratitude of the Ottoman sultan, who issued an edict to the effect that the churches in the province of Mosul be rebuilt, and of the provincial governor Husayn Pasha, who supported this rebuilding. In consequence, we have a large number of Aramaic inscriptions from this period, some composed in classical poetic metres; one is even a dialogue poem in the metre of the fourth-century master, Saint Ephrem, demonstrating that knowledge of and ability to write in classical styles was still alive.⁶¹ And a recently published volume of poetry in neo-Aramaic shows that the language was not fossilized, but was still developing and being used for creative personal expression.⁶²

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⁵⁹ For the references cited here and further discussion see Wassilios Klein, 'Syriac writings and Turkic language according to Central Asian tombstone inscriptions', *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 5.2 (2002). For bibliography on Aramaic inscriptions from central and eastern Asia see Sebastian Brock, 'Aramaic inscriptions: a preliminary checklist', *AION* 38 (1978), 269-71.

⁶⁰ *The Ecclesiastical Organization of the Church of the East 1318-1913* (CSCO 582; Louvain, 2000).

⁶¹ Amir Harrak, 'Commemorating church history during the Ottoman period: Aramaic monumental inscriptions from the Assyrian heartland', paper given at the *North American Syriac Symposium IV*, 2003, Princeton Theological Seminary. Harrak makes the interesting point that there are few Syriac inscriptions from the province of Mosul before 1743, not because few inscriptions were written, but because the Persian campaigns were so destructive and the subsequent rebuilding was so frenzied that even lintels and tombstones were used.

⁶² A. Mengozzi (ed.), *Israel of Alqosh and Joseph of Telkepe. A Story in a Truthful Language: Religious Poems in Vernacular Syriac, North Iraq, 17th century* (CSCO 590; Louvain 2001).