Classical Syriac

Estrangela Script

Chapter 1

(Last updated December 8, 2022)

1.1. What is Classical Syriac?

What is Classical Syriac? The answer to that question will often depend on the interests of the person asking the question as well as the interests of the person who answers it.

❖ For the person interested in ancient Semitic languages, Classical Syriac is a late dialect of Aramaic that was widely used in what is now southeastern Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran from the beginning of the common era into the medieval period and beyond.

❖ For the person interested in textual criticism of either the Old or New Testament, Classical Syriac is the language that was used in several important witnesses to the text of both the Old and New Testaments.

❖ For the person interested in church history, especially the patristic period, Classical Syriac is a welcome and, in some cases, surprising addition to the better-known languages that were used to produce important material for the life and faith of the Christian church.

❖ For the person interested in the history of the eastern Roman Empire, the rise and spread of Islam, or the history of the Crusades, Classical Syriac is a language that opens up lesser-known sources that are of incredible value for understanding the people, beliefs, and events associated with these periods.

❖ For members of the Assyrian Church of the East, the Syriac Orthodox Church, and others, Classical Syriac is the language used for Scripture as well as in the weekly worship of the church.[1]

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[1] For a concise description of the various churches from the Syriac tradition see Sebastian Brock, *An Introduction to Syriac Studies* (Gorgias Handbooks 4; 2nd ed.; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006), 67–78.

❖ For modern-day Assyrians, both in the Middle East and spread throughout the world because of immigration, war, systematic persecution, and even genocide, Classical Syriac is the language of their ancestors that, even though not always understood, helps to define them as a people.

Syriac is all of these things and more. But in this chapter, our focus will be on Classical Syriac as a language. What can be said about Classical Syriac from a linguistic perspective?

As was mentioned earlier, Classical Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic.[2] As a dialect of Aramaic, Classical Syriac, along with Hebrew, Phoenician, and other Canaanite dialects, belongs to the Northwest Semitic family of languages.[3] This means that Classical Syriac, like other dialects of Aramaic, shares a great deal in common with Hebrew, including cognate vocabulary, a similar manner of forming verbs, and other grammatical features. As part of the wider family of Semitic languages, Classical Syriac also shares a great deal in common with Arabic and Akkadian (i.e. the various dialects of Assyrian and Babylonian). This means that Classical Syriac is much easier to learn for someone who already knows the grammar of one of these other languages. However, in this grammar, we will assume no prior knowledge of any other Semitic language.

(For speakers of modern dialects of Aramaic, it should be kept in mind that words in modern Aramaic might not always have the same meaning as the same words in Classical Syriac. For those who know Hebrew, Akkadian, Arabic, or other Semitic languages, it should be kept in mind that cognate words in these other languages do not always have the same meaning in Classical Syriac.)

As a dialect of Aramaic, Classical Syriac is quite similar to Imperial Aramaic (i.e. the type of Aramaic used in Ezra, Daniel, and the Jewish papyri from the Egyptian fortress at Elephantine), both in its vocabulary and structure as a language. Students with a background in Classical Syriac will have a distinct advantage when learning Imperial Aramaic and vice versa. That being said, a significant amount of development took place between Imperial Aramaic and Classical Syriac, which means that the differences between the two phases need to be studied carefully. The closest dialects to Classical Syriac in the Aramaic branch of the Northwest Semitic family are Jewish Babylonian Aramaic and Mandaic.[4]

One of the most fascinating features of Classical Syriac is the tremendous amount of influence that Greek has had on the language. The traditional areas where Classical Syriac was used as a language were conquered centuries before in the fourth century BCE by the Macedonian and Greek armies of Alexander the Great and were ruled for centuries by the Greek-speaking Seleucid Empire and, subsequently, by the Greek-speaking portion of the Roman Empire.[5] While

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[2] Classical Syriac originated as the Aramaic dialect of the ancient city of Edessa (Syr. *urhāy*, modern Urfa), which is located in what is now southeastern Turkey. With the spread of Christianity, Classical Syriac became the standard literary language of Aramaic-speaking Christians and those who were influenced by Aramaic-speaking churches/missionaries.

[3] For a discussion of Aramaic in the context of Northwest Semitic languages, see Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Semitic Background of the New Testament, Volume 2: A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 63–74.

[4] See Muraoka §1.

[5] It should be kept in mind that Greek was the common language for culture and administration in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Even in the western part of the Empire, where Latin predominated, Greek was still used by a sizeable portion of the population and even came to have an impact on the development of Latin itself. See Geoffrey

the dominance of Greek on an everyday level was largely isolated to the Greek-speaking cities of these empires,[6] the Greek language left an incredible mark on the development of Classical Syriac as a language. This can be seen especially in the vocabulary of Classical Syriac, which has many words that are taken over directly from Greek (e.g. ܦܪܘܠܘܓܝܐ [*prōlōgyāʾ*] = προλογία [*prologia*] = prologue; ܐܩܘܠܘܬܝܐ [*ʾaqūlūṯiyāʾ*] = ἀκολουθία [*akolouthia*] = order, sequence).

Thus, in many ways, Classical Syriac is a fusion of several different worlds: the ancient with the classical; the near eastern with the Mediterranean; the Christian with the pre-Christian (both Jewish and pagan); and the Christian with the Islamic. The traces of this fusion have left an unmistakable and indelible mark on both the language and literature of Classical Syriac, which is part of what makes Classical Syriac such an exciting language to study.

1.2. Why Study Classical Syriac?

Students choose to study Classical Syriac for several reasons. But, as many students quickly find out, Classical Syriac is a much richer field of study than most initially realize. In many cases, the original reason why a person began to study Classical Syriac is not the reason why they choose to continue to study Classical Syriac.

The reasons why students choose to study Classical Syriac, for the most part, mirror the answers to the question, "What is Classical Syriac?" given above. Thus students often choose to study Classical Syriac:

- ❖ To improve one's facility in translating Aramaic texts from earlier periods or in different dialects.

- ❖ To allow them to read the Syriac Bible or manuscripts of the Syriac Bible for religious purposes, to understand interpretations that are embedded in the Syriac versions of the Bible, or to use the Syriac Bible for the textual criticism of the Old Testament, the New Testament, or the Apocrypha.[7]

- ❖ To give them access to hymns, homilies, commentaries, and other pieces of literature from the patristic period that were either originally written in Classical Syriac or survived only in Classical Syriac manuscripts.

- ❖ To give them access to material about the history of Christianity in the Sasanian (i.e. Persian) Empire before the rise of Islam.

Horrocks, *Greek: A History of the Language and Its Speakers* (2nd ed.; Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 125–6.

[6] J. N. D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom – Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 2.

[7] Note that textual criticism is a field of study that deals with the various differences that exist in the wording of the various manuscripts or witnesses that we have for a particular text. The goal, in most cases, is to reconstruct an earlier form of the text, often understood to be the original form of the text, the earliest attainable form, or the form that stands at the head of the process of transmission.

❖ To give them access to material that is valuable for understanding the rise of Islam, Christian life under Muslim rule, the Crusades, and other important aspects of history from these periods.

❖ To allow them to participate in or understand the traditional liturgy of their churches.

❖ To connect them with their ancestral language and cultural heritage.

As you begin to study Classical Syriac, it will be important to keep these reasons in mind when learning this material becomes difficult and when progress seems slow. But with hard work and a little patience, being able to read this language will be well worth it.

1.3. Purpose and Aims of this Textbook

The purpose of this textbook is to bring students to the point where they can competently translate prose texts written in Classical Syriac in the Estrangela script with the help of a dictionary (as a supplement to the vocabulary learned in this textbook) and other reference tools as needed.

❖ Students will gain a comprehensive understanding of the grammar of Classical Syriac to read Classical Syriac texts and translate them into English.
❖ Students will develop a basic knowledge of Classical Syriac vocabulary, primarily based on vocabulary found in the Peshitta version of the Gospel of Mark, to serve as a base for future study of the language.
❖ Students will learn how to translate texts that are written with vowels (eastern vowels) and, as the textbook progresses, texts that are written without vowels.

While the focus of this textbook is on prose texts in Classical Syriac, students should be able to translate poetry written in Classical Syriac with little difficulty—the grammar will be mostly the same, though the vocabulary will be more difficult.

1.4. Introduction to the Syriac Alphabet[8]

Three main scripts are used to write Classical Syriac: the Estrangela script, the West Syriac script (also referred to as the Serto or Jacobite script), and the East Syriac (also referred to as the Nestorian script). Like Hebrew and earlier forms of Aramaic, each of these scripts is written from right to left. In this textbook, we will only be using the Estrangela script.[9]

The Estrangela script is the oldest Syriac script and it is the script that is used in most scholarly editions of Classical Syriac texts including the Leiden Syriac Peshitta (the standard critical

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[8] Cf. Nöldeke §2; Muraoka §§2–3; Duval §§6–15, 18–25; Mingana §§1–9; Brockelmann §§2, 10, 15; Thackston, x–iv.

[9] It will also be helpful to have at least a basic knowledge of the western script since one of the standard dictionaries of Syriac in English, J. Payne Smith's *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1999), is written in the western script. However, the dictionary by Michael Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann's Lexicon Syriacum* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2009; Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2009), is written in the Estrangela script. Ideally, all three scripts should be learned.

edition of the Syriac Old Testament)[10] and the various writings in the Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium series (e.g. the works of Ephrem the Syrian, etc.).[11] It is also the script used in Sokoloff's *A Syriac Lexicon* (i.e. the updated version of Brockelmann's *Lexicon Syriacum*). Both the West and East Syriac scripts are later developments of the Estrangela script—the West Syriac script being used in the Syriac Orthodox tradition and the East Syriac script being used in churches that trace their origin to the Church of the East.

The Estrangela script is a semi-cursive script, meaning that many of the letters are joined together to allow for continuous writing. However, in certain situations, the various letters of the Estrangela script will appear unattached and will sometimes take on a slightly modified form when attached to other letters. When learning the Estrangela script, it is important to master both the attached and the unattached forms.

Like Hebrew and Aramaic, Classical Syriac was originally written without a full system to represent the various vowel sounds that are used in Classical Syriac. This means that all of the letters of the Syriac alphabet are technically consonants. However, as will be seen in chapter 2, some of these consonants were used to represent long vowels and, eventually, two distinct systems were developed to represent all of the vowel sounds in Classical Syriac.

It is important to master all of the letters of the Estrangela script and to master them in their proper order before moving on to later chapters—otherwise, it will be very difficult to pronounce Classical Syriac properly, recognize individual words, or find words in a dictionary. In this textbook, we will be spending a significant amount of time mastering the alphabet since a failure to master the alphabet will make the other material presented in this textbook much more difficult to learn.

The following chart consists of seven columns: (a) the first column lists the unattached forms of the letters of the Estrangela script, which are the basic forms you will need to learn as you begin to study Classical Syriac; (b) the second column shows what these letters look like when they are preceded by a letter (*shin*) that has the potential to be attached to letters that come after it; (c) the third column shows what these letters look like when they are followed by a letter (*shin*) that has the potential to be attached to letters that precede it; (d) the fourth column shows what these letters look like when they have letters on either side of them; (e) the fifth column provides the transliteration for each letter (i.e. the standard representation of these forms in the Latin alphabet); (f) the sixth column provides the names for each letter as they are pronounced in Classical Syriac; and (g) the seventh column gives a reconstructed pronunciation of these letters that, in some cases, predates the current pronunciations used in West Syriac and East Syriac.[12]

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[10] http://www.brill.com/publications/peshitta-old-testament-syriac.
[11] http://www.peeters-leuven.be/search_serie_book.asp?nr=94.
[12] The pronunciation used here is closest to West Syriac, which seems to have retained an earlier pronunciation for several letters. For a video that gives the names and pronunciations of these letters using the pronunciation used here, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uo0hWol1UAo&t=84s.

						Table 1.1 – The Syriac Alphabet

Letter	Joined to right	Joined to left	Joined on both sides	Transliteration	Name	Sound
ܐ	ܐܝ	ܝܐ	ܝܐܝ	ʾ	alaf	Like the "tt" in the cockney version of "better" (i.e. beʾa)
ܒ	ܒܝ	ܝܒ	ܝܒܝ	b, b̲ (after vowel sound)	beth	b (boy), v (vile) (after vowel sound)[13]
ܓ	ܓܝ	ܝܓ	ܝܓܝ	g, g̲ (after vowel sound)	gamal	g (girl), gurgle sound (after vowel sound)[14]
ܕ	ܕܝ	ܝܕ	ܝܕܝ	d, d̲ (after vowel sound)	dalath	d (day), th (the) (after vowel sound)
ܗ	ܗܝ	ܝܗ	ܝܗܝ	h	he	h (high)
ܘ	ܘܝ	ܝܘ	ܝܘܝ	w	waw	w (way)
ܙ	ܙܝ	ܝܙ	ܝܙܝ	z	zai(n)	z (zoo)
ܚ	ܚܝ	ܝܚ	ܝܚܝ	ḥ	ḥeth	whispered h made further to the back of the throat[15]
ܛ	ܛܝ	ܝܛ	ܝܛܝ	ṭ	ṭeth	t made by pressing the tongue against the back of the front two teeth followed by a short pause[16]
ܝ	ܝܝ	ܝܝ	ܝܝܝ	y	yodh	y (yes)
ܟ	ܟܝ	ܝܟ	ܝܟܝ	k, k̲ (after vowel sound)	kaf	k (kite), ch (Ger. acht) (after vowel sound)[17]
ܠ	ܠܝ	ܝܠ	ܝܠܝ	l	lamadh	l (light)
ܡ	ܡܝ	ܝܡ	ܝܡܝ	m	mim	m (mountain)
ܢ	ܢܝ	ܝܢ	ܝܢܝ	n	nun	n (nice)

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[13] Note that in East Syriac, the second pronunciation is pronounced as a *w* as in *wall*. The *v* sound is an older pronunciation. In West Syriac, the ܒ is pronounced as a *b* whether it is preceded by a vowel or not. The dual pronunciation of ܒ (b, v) was used in an earlier version of West Syriac and is still indicated in the script. For how the two pronunciations of this letter are distinguished in the script, see section 2.3 of this textbook.

[14] This is referred to as a voiced velar fricative (ɣ). For a convenient recording of this sound, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voiced_velar_fricative.

[15] This is referred to as a voiceless pharyngeal fricative (ħ). For a convenient recording of this sound, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voiceless_pharyngeal_fricative. In East Syriac, this is pronounced as a voiceless velar fricative (x). See note 17. If the voiceless pharyngeal fricative sound is too difficult to make, simply use the East Syriac pronunciation.

[16] This is referred to as an alveolar ejective stop (t'). For a convenient recording of this sound, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dental_and_alveolar_ejective_stops. If this sound is too difficult to make, simply pronounce it like a *t* as in tall.

[17] This second sound is referred to as a voiceless velar fricative (x). For a convenient recording of this sound, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voiceless_velar_fricative.

				s	semkath	s (sight)
				ʿ	ʿe	Close to a gagging sound made at the back of the throat[18]
				p, p̲ (after vowel sound)	pe	p (put), f (fight)[19]
				ṣ	ṣadhe	an unvoiced s made close to the front of the mouth followed by a short pause[20]
				q	qof	k made near the back of the throat followed by a short pause[21]
				r	resh	r (rolled r)
				š	shin	sh (shine)
				t, t̲ (after vowel sound)	taw	t (tall), th (thin) (after vowel sound)

Note that six of the letters of the Syriac alphabet have a dual pronunciation, one when the letter is not preceded by a vowel sound and one when the letter is preceded by a vowel sound. These letters are called the BeGaDKePhaT letters. This name is a device used to memorize which letters have this dual pronunciation. The transliteration with the letter underlined represents these letters when they are preceded by a vowel sound. In the pronunciation column, the first pronunciation is the one that the letter takes when it is not preceded by a vowel sound while the second pronunciation is the sound it makes when it is preceded by a vowel sound. These letters will be discussed further in chapter 2.

1.5. Writing Syriac Letters in the Estrangela Script

While the Estrangela script can be written with a normal pen or pencil, you may want to purchase a calligraphy pen/marker to make the lines thicker or thinner when needed. The computer fonts used for the Estrangela script are nearly identical to the way these letters look in manuscripts and

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[18] This is referred to as a voiced pharyngeal fricative (ʿ). For a convenient recording of this sound, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voiced_pharyngeal_fricative. If this sound is too difficult to make, simply pronounce it like an alaf.

[19] In East Syriac, the ـ is pronounced as a *p* whether it is preceded by a vowel or not. The dual pronunciation of ـ (p, f) was used in an earlier version of East Syriac and is still indicated in the script. In some cases, ـ is pronounced as a *w* in East Syriac. This happens when the sign ـ is placed below the ـ (i.e. ـ). For example, in East Syriac, the word ܢܘܫܐ is pronounced *nawsha.*

[20] This is referred to as an alveolar ejective fricative (s'). For a convenient recording of this sound, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alveolar_ejective_fricative. The pronunciation of ṣadhe as *ts* has no basis in the history of Syriac pronunciation.

[21] This is referred to as velar ejective stop (k'). For a convenient recording of this sound, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Velar_ejective_stop. If this sound is too difficult to make, simply pronounce it like a *k* as in *kite.*

printed editions. This is quite different from Hebrew where handwritten letters often look somewhat different from how they appear in printed editions of the Hebrew Bible. This means that if you master the Estrangela script, you will have little difficulty reading actual Syriac manuscripts written in the Estrangela script. This also means that your handwriting has the potential to look very similar to the script found in Syriac manuscripts.

For instructions on how to write the letters of the Syriac alphabet in the Estrangela script, see the practice sheets for chapter 1 at https://markfrancois.wordpress.com/syriac-grammar/.

1.6. Homework

a) Memorize the names of the letters of the Syriac alphabet in their proper order. This is essential for being able to look up words in the dictionary and for mastering the alphabet in any of its forms.

b) Using practice sheet 1.1 at https://markfrancois.wordpress.com/syriac-grammar/, trace the unattached forms of the Estrangela script. Repeat until you feel confident tracing the letters using the suggested steps. For reference, use the video for writing the Estrangela script under the material for chapter 1 at https://markfrancois.wordpress.com/syriac-grammar/.

c) Using practice sheet 1.2 at https://markfrancois.wordpress.com/syriac-grammar/, write out a full line of each letter (unattached) of the alphabet. Repeat until you feel confident writing out each letter using the suggested steps.

d) Using practice sheet 1.3 at https://markfrancois.wordpress.com/syriac-grammar/, write out the letters of the Syriac alphabet (unattached) in their proper order. Start in the first column on the right, completing the entire alphabet, and start again in the second column. Cover each completed column when you move on to the next column.

e) Using practice sheet 1.4 at https://markfrancois.wordpress.com/syriac-grammar/, write out each letter of the alphabet followed by the letter *waw* (ܘ) to memorize which letters can be attached to letters that come immediately after them and to memorize their forms when they differ from their unattached forms. Repeat until completely memorized.

f) Using practice sheet 1.5 at https://markfrancois.wordpress.com/syriac-grammar/, write out each letter of the alphabet preceded by the letter *beth* (ܒ) to memorize which letters can be attached to letters that come immediately before them and to memorize their forms when they differ from their unattached forms. Repeat until completely memorized.

g) Using practice sheet 1.6 at https://markfrancois.wordpress.com/syriac-grammar/, transliterate the words from Classical Syriac to their English equivalents using the system given above in section 1.4 of the grammar above.

h) Using practice sheet 1.7 at https://markfrancois.wordpress.com/syriac-grammar/, copy the Syriac text on the lines that are provided. Pay special attention to how to write the letters that connect to each other continuously.