REMARKS ON THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE MODERN ASSYRIAN LANGUAGE

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The spoken language of the Assyrian Christians has sometimes been considered to be a descendant of Syriac, the classical written language of the Christians of the Middle East. For this reason it has been referred to by some scholars as 'neo-Syriac'. In this paper I should like to present evidence that demonstrates that the modern spoken language of the Assyrians, although clearly related to Syriac, does not have such a direct linguistic relationship with it.

The first point that should be made is that modern Assyrian exists in numerous dialects, which differ from one area to another, or indeed from one village to another. In the present study all the dialects spoken by Assyrian communities residing, or originally residing, East of the Tigris will be considered as belonging to the same dialect group.

Classical written Syriac, a form of Aramaic, is a single language that is uniform in its structure. It is unlikely that the large diversity of spoken dialects of the modern Assyrian language could all be the direct descendants of this one earlier language. Syriac remained remarkably uniform throughout its history, despite the fact that it was used by Christian communities across a wide geographical area in the Near East and over a long chronological period. The writers of Syriac clearly spoke a large variety of vernacular dialects and indeed languages, though all this diversity is concealed by the literary language. It is the nature of literary languages that they serve as a uniform system of written communication that can be used by a wide range of communities that are unified culturally, religiously or politically. Literary languages are usually based on the spoken language of one particular region, in the case of Syriac this is thought to have been that of Edessa.

The traditional pronunciation of Syriac reflects linguistic developments that are not represented in the written orthographic tradition of the language, such as the elision of final vowels in certain contexts, e.g. ܕܝܼܢ (dīn) 'my judgement', ܩܛܲܠ (qṭal) 'they killed'. This is likely to be due to the fact that

the reading tradition is a closer representation of the vernacular than the orthographic tradition. Moreover, the reading tradition of Syriac exhibits regional differences, in that the western tradition of the Jacobite church is distinct from that of the eastern tradition of the Church of the East. These pronunciation traditions exhibit features that are distinctive of the modern western and eastern spoken dialects respectively, so they are likely to have had their origin in the regional vernaculars of the first millennium. One of the distinctive features, for example, is the pronunciation of an original long $\bar{a}$ vowel. In the western Jacobite tradition this was pronounced as a mid rounded vowel $\bar{o}$ whereas the eastern tradition preserved the unrounded quality $\bar{a}$. Likewise the western vernacular dialects spoken today in Syria have the rounded vowel $\bar{o}$ whereas most of the modern eastern dialects, spoken East of the Tigris, have the unrounded vowel $\bar{a}$. However, these differences in pronunciation traditions of Syriac, although apparently having their roots in the regional spoken dialects, came to be associated with the denomination of the church that a community belonged to, irrespective of the local vernacular. Examples of this can be found in the way that literary Syriac is pronounced in the Christian communities of modern Iraq. All surviving vernacular dialects in Iraq have the unrounded *a* vowel as a reflex of an original long *$\bar{a}$. Some villages on the Mosul plain joined the Jacobite church around the 7th century, such as Qaraqosh. In Qaraqosh today the Syriac that is used in the liturgy is recited with the western type pronunciation with *o* for original long *$\bar{a}$, whereas the reflex of this vowel is unrounded *a* in the local spoken Assyrian dialect.

Certain features of the grammatical structure of modern Assyrian that differ from what is found in literary Syriac can be traced back many centuries. In several dialects spoken today, for example, verbal forms have a prefixed particle with the form *k-* or variants of this, such as *ki-* and *či-*, e.g. Urmi *či-garšax* 'we pull'. This particle does not exist in literary Syriac. It is not, however, a recent development in the spoken dialects. The scholar Bar Hebraeus, writing in the 13th century, reports the occurrence of this particle (with the form *ka-*) in the speech of Eastern Christians (Moberg 1922: 205; 1907: 30; Heinrichs 2002 :249). It can be equated with the particle *qa-* which is attested in texts datable to the first millennium A.D. in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic and Mandaic, which are Aramaic dialects related to Syriac

Evidence for the existence of a spoken language that differs from literary Syriac but exhibits distinctive features of modern Assyrian can be found in other medieval texts. One source is an Arabic *materia medica* work that was composed in Spain in the early eleventh century, *al-Kitāb al-Mustaʿīnī* by Ibn Baklarish. In this work the Arabic names of medicinal elements are listed together with the corresponding terms in a variety of other languages in

Arabic transcription, including what the author designates as *al-suryāniyya*, which one would assume would be 'Syriac'. What is fascinating, however, is that many of these words in *al-suryāniyya* are not at all classical Syriac, but correspond to the form that one finds in the modern spoken Assyrian dialects.[1] In the following extract, for example, the word for 'woman' in *al-suryāniyya* is said to be *baxta*, which is a lexical hallmark of the Assyrian dialects spoken east of the Tigris:

Ibn Baklarish, *al-Kitāb al-Mustaʿīnī* (MS Arcadia library 11ᵗʰ century):

لبن النسا : ... يعرف النسا ... بالسريانية بختة
'The milk of women: 'Women' in *suryāniyya* is *baxta*'

In a number of words in Ibn Baklarish's text an original final long *-ā* is represented in the transcription by *tā' marbūṭa*, which reflects the shortening of the vowel. The shortening of final vowels is a feature of the spoken Assyrian vernaculars. It is conditioned by the incidence of stress on the penultimate rather than on the final syllable. The source of this set of words, therefore, can be identified as spoken vernacular rather than the literary Syriac language, e.g. سُستة ('mare' = Syriac: ܣܘܣܬܐ *sūstā*, Modern Assyrian *susta*). Note also the shortening of the original long medial *ā* vowel in a closed syllable that is reflected in the transcription حَمُرتَة ('she ass' = Syriac: ܚܡܪܬܐ *ḥmārtā*). This also is a feature of the modern spoken dialects, in which the word has the form *xmarta*. The *ḍamma* vowel after the *mīm* in the transcription may reflect the further raising and attenuation of this vowel that is attested in several dialects (*xmərta* < *xmarta*).

The explanation for the appearance of such features of the spoken dialects in this text must be that the author Ibn Baklarish or at least the author of one of his sources gathered these vernacular forms by 'fieldwork' during the Middle Ages among the Christian communities east of the Tigris, or from speakers originating in that region.

In Modern Assyrian the past verb is inflected by a series of suffixes that contain the preposition *l-*, e.g. *grišle* 'he pulled', *grišli* 'I pulled', *qimle* 'he arose', *qimli* 'I arose'. In literary Syriac, by contrast, the past is normally expressed by a different form of verb, which has a different set of suffixes, e.g. ܩܡܬ ,ܩܡ; ܓܪܫܬ , ܓܪܫ. The use of inflectional endings with the preposition *l-* on past verbs is already attested in Aramaic documents from the Achaemenid period datable to the 5ᵗʰ century B.C., e.g.

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[1]   See G. Khan, 'Remarks on the transcriptions of Syriac Words in *Kitāb al-Mustaʿīnī* of Ibn Baklarish (According to the Arcadian Library MS)' in C. Burnett (ed.), *Proceedings of the Ibn Baklarish Symposium*, London, 2007.

*wk'n tnh kn **šmy' ly** kzy pqydy' zy btḥtyt' bšwzy' mtnsḥn*

'And here now thus **I have heard**, that the officers who are in Lower Egypt are active in the revolt' (Driver 1954, VII:3-4)

This verbal form is in origin a passive construction consisting of a passive participle and an agentive phrase (*It has been heard by me = I have heard it*). More examples of this passive type construction are occasionally found in later forms of Aramaic datable to the first millennium A.D. such as Mandaic (Nöldeke 1875 §263, Macuch 1965 §287d) and Babylonian Talmudic Aramaic (Schlesinger 1928 §30). The construction is sporadically attested also in Syriac (Nöldeke 1898 §279, Muraoka 1987 §69), e.g. ܡܢܝ ܠܟ ܚܠܟܬ 'Have you read the books?' (Nöldeke §279). In all these types of Aramaic, however, the past is far more frequently expressed by the active verbal form *qṭal*. The passive type forms are likely to be reflections of the contemporary spoken vernacular that have infiltrated the standard literary language.

It has generally been assumed that the passive type of past verbal form with the inflectional suffixes containing the presposition *l-* entered Aramaic in the Achaemenid period under the influence of Old Persian, which contain similar passive constructions.[2] However, there are some features of the examples of this construction surviving in Syriac that suggest that it developed with a life of its own in the spoken language. In Old Persian and later Iranian languages, for example, the passive type construction is restricted to transitive verbs. In spoken Modern Assyrian, however, it has been extended also to past intransitive expressions, e.g. *qimle* 'He arose'. In such cases it is not appropriate to refer to it as a passive in the proper sense of the word. This is attested already in classical Syriac texts, e.g. ܩܡ ܠܗ 'He arose' (Nöldeke 1898, §279). Such an example should be regarded as the occurrence of a spoken vernacular form 'by mistake' in the literary language. It reflects the existence at an earlier period of this vernacular feature, which is generally disguised by the literary language.

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[2] For details see G. Khan (2004).

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Another indication of the early roots of the modern spoken dialects and their independence from Syriac is the fact that they have preserved some words from antiquity that are not found in the classical literary Syriac language. These include words from Akkadian, which are for the most part connected with agriculture. These include the word *miššara* 'rice paddy field', which is used in the dialect of numerous modern Assyrian villages. This is a direct descendent of the Akkadian work *mušāru*.[3] Several other such cases can be found in the dialect of Qaraqosh. In that dialect, for example, the word *baxšimə* denotes a storeroom (for grain) in the roof of a house. It is reasonably certain that this is a descendant of the Akkkadian term *bīt ḫašīmi* 'barn, storehouse'.[4] Another possible example in this dialect is *raxiṣa* 'pile of straw (usually barley)', which could well be related to Akkadian *raḫīṣu* 'pile of harvest produce (especially straw).'[5]

Some grammatical features that are found in the modern Assyrian dialects are typologically more archaic than the corresponding features in classical Syriac. In the dialect of Qaraqosh, for example, the infinitive of all verbal stems does not have an initial *m*-, by contrast with Syriac infinitives, which have acquired this prefix by analogy with the participles:[6]

	Qaraqosh	Syriac
Pa^{cc}el present (participle)	*mqaṭəl*	ܡܩܲܛܸܠ
Pa^{cc}el infinitive	*ʾaqṭolə*	ܡܩܲܛܵܠܘܿ
ʾAph^cel present (participle)	*maqṭəl*	ܡܲܩܛܸܠ
ʾAph^cel infinitive	*ʾaqṭolə*	ܡܲܩܛܵܠܘܿ

In sum, the evidence adduced above demonstrates that the dialects of Modern Assyrian are unlikely to be direct descendants of the literary Syriac language, although they are undoubtedly related to it. Rather they existed side-by-side with it for centuries. Some of the features of the modern spoken dialects that

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[3] See Krotkoff (1985: 124-126).

[4] *CAD* vol. 6, p.141; *AH*, vol. 1, p.334.

[5] Salonen (1968: 274), *AH*, vol. 2, p.943.

[6] See Khan (2002: 12)

differ from literary Syriac can be shown to have emerged at a much earlier period by the fact that they occasionally surface in written texts by a process of linguistic interference. Some features of morphology, moreover, are typologically more archaic than the corresponding features in Syriac. Likewise, some lexical items of the modern dialects are not attested in Syriac but have roots that can be traced to antiquity in the Akkadian language.

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