

# NEO-ARAMAIC GARSHUNI: OBSERVATIONS BASED ON MANUSCRIPTS

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## ABSTRACT

*The present paper is a preliminary study of key spelling features detected in the rendering of foreign words in some Neo-Aramaic Christian texts belonging to the late literary production from the region of Alqosh in Northern Iraq. This Neo-Syriac literature laid the groundwork for its written form as early as the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when scribes of the so-called 'school of Alqosh' wrote down texts for the local population. From a linguistic point of view, scribes and authors developed a Neo-Syriac literary koine based on the vernacular languages of the region of Alqosh.*

*Despite the sporadic presence of certain orthographical conventions, largely influenced by Classical Syriac, these texts lacked a standard orthography and strict conventions in spelling. Since a large number of vernacular terms have strayed over time from the classical language or, in many cases, they have been borrowed from other languages, the rendering of the terms was usually characterized by a mostly phonetic rendition, especially in the case of foreign words that cannot be written according to an original or a standard form. In these cases, scribes and authors had to adapt the Syriac alphabet to*

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*the phonetic representation of an Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Kurdish or maybe Western term. The results are hardly normalizable, since the graphic rendering of the terms often reflects the phonetic characteristics of a particular vernacular.*

*This complicated linguistic situation is well reflected in the Neo-Aramaic version of the Story of Ahiqar preserved MS London Sachau 9321, where a large amount of loanwords from a number of non-Aramaic languages shows a lively regional vocabulary to which the Neo-Aramaic dialects actively contributed.*

The present paper is a preliminary study of key spelling features detected in the rendering of foreign words in some Neo-Aramaic Christian texts. These texts belong to the late literary production deriving from the region of Alqosh in Northern Iraq.<sup>1</sup> Literary production in this region has a long tradition in manuscript form, unlike the area of Lake Urmia in Northwestern Iran. In the region of Urmia, the development of Christian literary production began in the 1830s, when British and American Protestant missionaries introduced the use of the press schools as practical remedies against widespread illiteracy. Linguistically speaking, they normalized the Aramaic dialect of Urmia, giving it a standard form called *sureth*. As E. Odisho pointed out, “the choice fell on the Urmi dialect not because it was widely spread or accepted by other inhabitants or other regions and villages or because it maintained greater affinity to the old written languages. The choice was merely because the

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<sup>1</sup>The manuscripts on which this study is mainly based have been edited in the following texts: Emanuela Braidà, “A Story of Ahiqar in Neo-Aramaic according to MS London Sachau 9321,” *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 14 (2014), forthcoming; Emanuela Braidà, “A Hagiographical Tale: *On the Hermit Barmalka* by Joseph ‘Abbaya of Alqosh”, in *Religious Poetry in Vernacular Syriac from Northern Iraq (17th-20th Centuries)*. *An Anthology*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 627 and 628, ed. A. Mengozzi (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), I, 95-108; II, 83-98; Emanuela Braidà, “A Poetic Adaptation of Historical Sources: *On an Attack by the Mongols at Karamlish* by Thomas Hanna of Karamlish”, in *Religious Poetry in Vernacular Syriac from Northern Iraq (17th-20th Centuries)*. *An Anthology*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 627 and 628, ed. A. Mengozzi (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), I, 109-31; II, 99-119.

missionaries happened to have most of their main headquarters there.”<sup>2</sup> This new literary language was written in the traditional Syriac alphabet and was not a replica of the Urmia dialect, since it mostly followed the classic models of historical and etymological spelling rather than the spoken language. Furthermore, a number of elements of other spoken dialects and many of the Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Kurdish loanwords which were already common in the everyday language were brought in. From the mid-nineteenth century several magazines were printed in the Urmia area that grew to become an example to follow for many subsequent publishing initiatives of Neo-Aramaic speakers in the diaspora. From this newly established standard written language, a spoken *koine* arose and became a widespread ‘lingua franca’ among the Assyrian speakers after the World War I.<sup>3</sup>

As for the Christian Neo-Syriac literature of Northern Iraq, it laid the groundwork for its written form as early as the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the region of Mosul, scribes of the so-called ‘school of Alqosh’ wrote down texts assiduously, translating biblical texts and transcribing – and sometimes also composing – poems for the local population. From a linguistic point of view, scribes and authors developed a Neo-Syriac literary *koine* based on the vernacular languages of the region of Alqosh. Most of their works consisted of long religious poems called *durekyatha*. There are also examples of very different kinds of compositions, including historical poems, folk songs, and lullabies, although these genres are represented only in 19<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts.<sup>4</sup>

All the neo-Aramaic manuscripts coming from the Northern Iraq area were written in the traditional East-Syriac alphabet.

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<sup>2</sup>Edward Odisho, *The Sound System of Modern Assyrian* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1988), 19.

<sup>3</sup>For a comprehensive overview of this literature, see Hendrika L. Murre-van den Berg, *From a Spoken to a Written Language: The Introduction and Development of Literary Urmia Aramaic in the Nineteenth Century* (Leiden: Publication of the De Goeje Fund, 1999).

<sup>4</sup>For an introduction into this literature, see Rudolf Macuch, *Geschichte der spät- und neusyrischen Literatur* (Berlin: Gruyter, 1976); Fabrizio A. Pennacchietti, *Il Ladron e il Cherubino: Dramma Liturgico Cristiano Orientale in Siriaco e Neoaramaico* (Torino: Silvio Zamorani Editore, 1993); and Alessandro Mengozzi, *Israel of Alqosh and Joseph of Telkepe: A Story in a Truthful Language* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002).

Despite the sporadic presence of certain orthographical conventions, largely influenced by Classical Syriac, these texts lacked a standard orthography and strict conventions in spelling. However, when a Neo-Aramaic scribe could draw inspiration from his own cultural background, he showed that Classical Syriac was the basis of his literary choices, even if this language was far removed from his everyday use. Some historical spelling variants are very common in manuscripts of any period and testify the lasting use of words in classical Syriac. This is the case, for example, of the historical spelling (and probably pronunciation) of terms and names directly related to the religious tradition, as *mshlḥa*, ‘Christ’, or *ʿdta*, ‘church’, that usually retain *heth* and *ʿayn* contrary to the phonetic tendency in spelling /*h*/ with *kap* and /*ʿ*/ with *alef*, which led to phonetic spellings such as *khelma*, ‘dream’, and *ʿayna*, ‘eye’.

However, a large number of vernacular terms have strayed over time from the classical language or, in many cases, they have been borrowed from other languages, since the multilingualism represents the common linguistic context of the neo-Aramaic speaking communities. As the manuscript tradition of Alqosh represents the written record of an oral culture, the exact rendition of a term – regardless of its historical form – is often important for literary purpose (metric, rhyme) and proper understanding of the text by an audience. For these reasons, the rendering of the terms is usually characterized by a mostly phonetic rendition, especially in the case of foreign words that cannot be written according to an original or a standard form.

Since the so-called Iraqi Kurdistan is a border region, the influence of neighboring languages is very strong and evident in the pronunciation, loanwords, and sometimes even the grammar of Neo-Aramaic languages. The region in question borders Iran to the East, Turkey to the North, Iraq to the West and to the South, a fact which explains why a number of Arabic, Persian, Kurdish and Turkish terms are common in all the neo-Aramaic languages. Furthermore, the position of Neo-Aramaic speaking communities among Islamic majorities exposed them to a high number of linguistic entries in relation to the cultural prestige of Islamic languages as Arabic or Persian.

In the case of foreign words a scribe cannot resort to etymological forms and historical renderings, but he must adapt his alphabet to the phonetic representation of a term. This procedure

must adapt the Syriac alphabet to the phonetic representation of an Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Kurdish or maybe Western term. The results are hardly normalizable, since they depend on many different factors. Usually the more an author is learned, the more his transcriptions follow consistent rules, but it is also usual that a learned author tends to limit the use of foreign loanwords in favor of Aramaic synonyms, even if they are sometimes obsolete. By contrast, a less educated scribe tends to use ordinary words even though not Aramaic, transcribing them in an arbitrary way. The little or no knowledge of the spelling of the word in its original language is often evident in the variety of transcripts that may appear within a single text.

For representing phonemes extra to the original Aramaic phonologic system, the modern texts show a number of diacritics in addition to the traditional vocalization based on the system of vowel points. The most common occurrences in rendering foreign consonants are listed in the following table.

	Neo-Aramaic/ Syriac	Arabic	Persian	Kurdish	Turkish
ʾ	ܐ	ع ا	ا	ا	ا
b/v	ܒ / ܝܒ	ب ٥	ب و	ب ڤ	ب و
g/j/gh	ܓ / ܝܓ / ܓܝ	غ ج ٥	گ ج غ	گ ج غ	گ ج غ
d/ḏ	ܕ	ذ د	ذ د	ډ د	ذ د
h	ܚ	ه	ه	ه	ه
w/b	ܘ	و	و	و	و
z	ܙ	ز	ز ژ	ز ژ	ز ژ
h/x	ܚ	ح خ	خ	خ	خ
t/	ܬ / ܬܕ	ض ظ ط	٥	٥	٥
y	ܝ	ي	ی	ی	ی
k/x/ ch (ç)	ܟ / ܟܝ / ܟܝܝ	ك خ	چ خ ك	چ خ ك	چ خ ك
l	ܠ	ل	ل	ل	ل
m	ܡ	م	م	م	م
n	ܢ	ن	ن	ن	ن ڭ
s	ܫ	س	س	س	س
ʿ	ܥ	ع	٥	٥	٥

	Neo-Aramaic/ Syriac	Arabic	Persian	Kurdish	Turkish
p/f	ܦ / ڤ	ڤ	پ	پ	پ
s/d/	ܥ / ܨ	ظ ض ص	ث	ث	ث
q	ܩ	ق	ق	ق	ق
r	ܪ	ر	ر	ر	ر
sh	ܫ	ش	ش	ش	ش
t/t	ܬ	ث ت	ت	ت	ت

The merging of *alap* /ʔ/ and *ʿayn* /ʕ/ is frequent in the case of both Syriac words and Arabic loanwords, where *alap* usually replaces an etymological *ʿayn* (e.g. ܕܡܥܡܥ instead of ܕܡܥܡܥܐ, ‘with you’; ܕܡܥܡܥܐ, ‘aqella, ‘mind, intelligence’, from Ar. عقل, ‘aql, vs. ܕܡܥܡܥܐ, ‘aqella, ‘foot’). In the middle of a word, *ʿayn* often falls (e.g. ܕܡܥܡܥܐ instead of ܕܡܥܡܥܐܐ, ‘tear’, f. 540). On the contrary, the retention of /ʔ/ is more common than the phonetic spelling /ʕ/ with terms directly related to the religious or historical tradition (e.g. ܕܡܥܡܥܐ, ‘edta, ‘church’; ܕܡܥܡܥܐ, ‘Pharaoh’) and in the case of less usual words (e.g. ܕܡܥܡܥܐ, ‘craftsman’, from Pers. صنعت گر).

The letters *begadkepat* are often marked by a dot above the consonant (*qūššāyā*) in the case of hard pronunciation and by a dot below the consonant (*rūkkakḥā*) in the case of spirantized allophone. This was not a common practice in Syriac, where the allophones of the *begadkepat* were established by precise phonological rules. Since the spirantization is no longer deduced from the syllabic pattern in Neo-Aramaic, it has to be noted in modern texts with greater consistency than in Classical Syriac. In fact, the Neo-Aramaic letters *begadkepat* rarely alternate their hard and spirantized allophones according to the rules of the Syriac phonology, but usually remain hard or spirantized in all forms of their stem pattern depending on their hard or spirantized aspect in the active participle.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the loanwords cannot fall under the rules of the Semitic phonology and their pronunciation needs to be reported unambiguously.

In the case of *beth* preceded by a vowel, both plosive and spirantized pronunciations are often marked (e.g. ܕܡܥܡܥܐ, ‘sacrifices’;

<sup>5</sup> Murre-van den Berg, *From a Spoken*, 140.

The diacritic punctuation often employed to mark the spirantized allophone /f/ is a thick dot above the letter (e.g. **فَهِجَة**,

<sup>7</sup> The form *nawsha*, hence *nosha* has been known as customary East-Syriac pronunciation of the classical word *nafša* since Barhebraeus. Th. Nöldeke, *Grammatik der neusyrischen Sprache am Urmia-See und in Kurdistan* (Leipzig: T.O. Weigel, 1868), p. 50; R. Duval, *Traité de grammaire syriaque* (Paris: F. Vieweg, 1881), pp. 29-30. I would thank Alessandro Mengozzi for this suggestion.

from Ar. فائدة, ‘advantage, interest’; فُتِيه, ‘he passed’, from the Ar. root *ftw*; فُتِيه, ‘he understood’, from Ar. root *fbm*; يَفْتِك, ‘kid’, from Ar. طفل.<sup>8</sup> Obviously *pe* without distinctive marks is used to transcribe plosive [p’], as in the case of حَفِيّ, ‘hungry ones’; فَبِي, from Pers. Kurd. پيدا, ‘manifest, visible’; Greek فَبَكَمِه, ‘philosophers’. Since most modern Eastern dialects follow the practices of Syriac, they often leave an original /f/ plosive and then unmarked (e.g. فُتِيه, from Pers. Turk. فرمان, ‘decree’; فُتِيه, ‘France’).<sup>9</sup>

*Gamal* without distinctive marks can transliterate the Pers. Kurd. Turk. voiced, unaspirated, velar plosive *gāf* گ [g] (e.g. يَفْتِك, ‘liars’; فَبَكَمِه, ‘burning coal’, probably from Pers. پيگه, ‘a kettle’). A tilde under a *gamal* indicates a [j] sound as the Arabic *jim* (e.g. يَفْتِك, ‘answer’, from Ar. جواب; يَفْتِك, ‘cloth’, from Kurd. جل; يَفْتِك, from Kurd. جوانه, ‘youth, young man’). A dot below – sometimes even inside – a *gamal* is used for writing Arabic *ghayn* (e.g. يَفْتِك, ‘mistake’, from Ar. غلط; يَفْتِك, ‘to lock’, from Ar. root *ghlq*). However, /gh/ can sometimes merge in /h/ and /h/ as well (e.g. يَفْتِك, *ghaleq* and يَفْتِك, *xāleq*, ‘to create’, from Ar. root *hlq*).

The voiceless, palato-alveolar affricate /ch/ [tʃ] as Pers. Kurd. Turk. *che* چ is sometimes represented by a *kap* with three dots under the letter, particularly in printed texts (e.g. فُتِيه, *parcha*, Kurd. پارچه, *p’erçe*, ‘small piece’), while in many manuscripts it is common to render /ch/ with a tilde under a *kap* or a *gamal* (e.g. يَفْتِك, *chumendi*, ‘nothing’, composed by Kurd. çu, ‘none, not any’ and Aram. شَيْئ, ‘thing’).

In the case of words of Syriac origins, the merging of /k/ (spelled as a *kap* with a dot below) and the Syriac etymological *heth* often occurs so as to reflect the voiceless, pharyngeal fricative /ħ/ [ħ] (e.g. يَفْتِك, ‘bread’, instead of يَفْتِك; يَفْتِك, ‘five’, instead of يَفْتِك).

<sup>8</sup> Alessandro Mengozzi and Mustafa Dehqan, “A Kurdish Garshuni Poem by David of Barazne (19<sup>th</sup> Century),” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 17:1 (2014): 64, see footnote 26.

<sup>9</sup> In addition, since Old Aramaic /f/ was sometimes spelled as plosive <b> (e.g. *nefesh* > *nebish* vs. *nafsha* > *nawsha*), we can assume a further merging /f/ > /b/ > /v/ > /w/.



A sporadic merging between /k/ and /gh/ could be noted as in the case of ܐܓܗ, from Pers. اغا, ‘Agha’. On a few occasions, a merging can also be noted between /h/ and the voiceless, glottal fricative *ha*’ (e.g. ܚܝܬܐ or ܚܝܬܐ, and ܚܝܬܐ, ‘a ring in a chain’, from Ar. حلقة, ‘ring, circle’).

In the case of Arabic loanwords, *kap* with a dot can replace an etymological *ha*’ (e.g. ܚܝܬܐ, from Ar. زحام, ‘crush, crowd’) or, more frequently, a *ha*’ (e.g. ܚܝܬܐ, ‘nature’, from Ar. خلق). The frequent merging of /k/, /h/ and /h/ bears obvious witness to a common fricative pronunciation [x] of the three letters.

A merging between /h/, /h/ and the voiceless, uvular plosive /q/ can be found in very few cases (e.g. ܚܝܬܐ instead of ܚܝܬܐ, ‘history, account’, from Ar. تاريخ), although this inconsistency seems likely to be an individual preference.<sup>10</sup>

A sporadic inconsistency between /s/ and /z/ is noted, as in the case of ܚܝܬܐ instead of ܚܝܬܐ, the month of Tammuz.

In few cases /ʃ/ can merge with /s/, as in ܚܝܬܐ, ‘cage’, from Ar. قفس.

A thick dot upon a *šade* (ܫܐ) usually indicates the Ar. *dad*, as in ܫܝܬܐ, ‘green’, from Ar. خضر. Occasionally, also *zen* can be found in rendering a /d/, as in ܫܝܬܐ, ‘damage, wrong’, from Ar. ضرر, maybe due to the influence of Kurdish.

A thick dot upon a *tet* (ܬܐ) usually indicates the Ar. *za*, as in ܬܝܬܐ, ‘noon’, from Ar. ظهيرة. However the rendering of /d/ and /z/ fluctuates, and they are often interchanged.

As seen from the above examples, the written record of an oral text can raise a number of methodological difficulties. Firstly an author has to adapt the traditional Syriac alphabet to a vernacular phonological system, which lacks of normalization and standard orthography. For this reason, the graphic rendering of the terms fluctuates to such an extent that the spelling varies not only from one manuscript to another, but also within a single manuscript. The

<sup>10</sup> Odisho remarked that in Urmi [q] may shift into a voiceless unaspirated velar plosive [k], while in the *koine* it retains its original nature as a voiceless unaspirated uvular plosive. Odisho, *The Sound System*, 25.



تَدْعُبُ اَتَقَدُّ يَنْجِمُو مَجْجَلْ تَلْمُو مَجْجَدُ لَحْمُو يَتَمَبُ  
 مَلْمُخْهُ هَا مَلْمُخْت. مَجْجَت دِلْ اَتَمُ تَلْمُ هَلْمُ  
 قِيَمُ يَنْجُ يَنْجُ. جَعْدُ هَا تَلْمُ تَقِيَمُ حَ مَقُ.  
 مِلْ تَلْمُ حِلْمُ وَتَلْمُ قِيَمُ هَلْمُ قِيَمُ. كَ حِلْمُ  
 مَقْجَمُ حِلْمُ دَقْجَمُ مَقْجَمُ دِلْمُ. 18

تَدْعُوبُ سَوِيْلَهُ قَلْبُ مِيْعٍ قَدْ دَلِيْدُ هَذَا. مِيْدَسُ هَذَا  
 تَمَسُّبُ مَدُ حَاوِيْدُ نَجْد. مِيْدَسُ هَذَا مَلِكُ مَلِكِيَّةِ مَدُ مَلِكِيَّةِ  
 يَكُنْ مِيْدَسُ كَحِيْدُ تَمَسُّبُ مَسْبِيْ نَدْبُ دِيْعُ هَمِيْدُ دَلِيْسُ  
 مِيْدَسُ قَدْ تَمَ نَكَةُ دِيْعُ هَمِيْدُ تَكَمُ تِلْمَا. مِيْدَسُ  
 تَمَسُّبُ مَسْبِيْ مَدُ دَلِيْ تَحْفُج. مِيْدَسُ قَدْ نَدْبُ مَسْبِيْ  
 مَسْبِيْ مَعْدُ مَدُ نَدْبُ مَسْبِيْ قَدْ تَقْصِدُ  
 مَسْبِيْ مَسْبِيْ تَمَسُّبُ مَسْبِيْ مَدُ قَدْ. مَسْبِيْ  
 مَسْبِيْ لِحْمُ مَدُ دَلِيْ لِحْمُ. مِيْدَسُ تَمَسُّبُ نَدْبُ  
 مَسْبِيْ مَسْبِيْ مَسْبِيْ. مِيْدَسُ قَدْ مَسْبِيْ مَسْبِيْ

<sup>18</sup> See LS 9321, ff. 547-548.

<sup>19</sup>*Ad sensum.* The term **كَبَشْتَة**, *kabashṭa*, not attested elsewhere in the manuscript, could be related to the Ar. root *kbs*, ‘to press, push’, hence ‘yoke’.



ܡܝܬܬܐ, ‘she said’, where the pronunciation was almost doubtless *-a*. Moreover, the *linea occultans* – a line placed above a consonant to prevent it from being pronounced – is constantly marked throughout the text. *Linea occultans* represents a means by which the author can significantly act both on the orthography and phonology of a word retaining its historical form (e.g. ܡܝܬܬܐ; ܡܝܬܬܐ) and indicating its current pronunciation (e.g. ܡܝܬܬܐ, ‘fox’).

However, it is clear that a phonetic spelling is employed rather than a historical spelling, although impossible to tell when the changes in orthographical rendering result from deliberate choices of the writer or unconscious influence by the spoken languages of the region. The presence of Persian and Kurdish loanwords suggests that these languages were known to a certain extent. In the region of Mosul, Arabic was the most common language and the local dialect of Arabic was employed also by Christians. Literate Christians had a knowledge of Classical Syriac and written Arabic as well.

This complicated linguistic situation is well reflected in MS LS 9321, where a large amount of loanwords from a number of non-Aramaic languages shows a lively regional vocabulary to which the Neo-Aramaic dialects actively contributed.

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