30. Late Imperial Aramaic

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Abstract

This chapter introduces various local forms of Aramaic in the Graeco-Roman Near East which had become written prestige languages some time after the fall of the Achaemenid Empire. It covers Qumran, Nabataean, Palmyrene, Eastern Mesopotamian and Arsacid Aramaic, since they all exhibit a considerable influence from the Achaemenid chancellery language and share a common cultural framework. By assessing the shared retentions and innovations, it becomes possible to outline principles of a fairly complex dialectal landscape characterized by diversity, close contact and extensive multilingualism. In this environment, Aramaic was used for a number of different purposes: in the Western and Eastern peripheries, that is, North Arabia and Parthia, it seems to have been confined

to official or formal functions, whereas the more innovative forms in Syria and Eastern Mesopotamia suggest that they might even have been spoken as vernaculars. Aramaic continued to dominate the Ancient Near East even in Hellenistic and Roman times.

1. Introduction

Official Aramaic (henceforth OffA), promoted by the Achaemenid chancellery, was widely accepted as a standard in the entire Persian Empire (see ch. 28−29). Beneath its surface, however, a fair amount of older variation survived. When the Greek and Roman conquests of Syria-Palestine and Arabia once again led to political stability (the suppression of the Bar Kosiba Revolt was followed by a long era of relative peace) no less than to fresh trading opportunities, several wealthy city-states emerged and remained in constant contact with their nomadic surroundings. A combination of established scribal culture and new national pride elevated local dialects throughout the former imperial territory to written languages, each further developing a distinctive branch of the official script. They maintained the Achaemenid heritage with varying degrees of precision, so the general term "Middle Aramaic" acts as the common denominator of a noticeably heterogeneous group (cf. Cook 1992). Aramaic had been reinforced as a prestige language of the elite, with the striking boom in epigraphic production as a facet of Hellenism. Orthography underwent some modernization, but it was essentially modelled according to the Achaemenid norm, which was often the only available pattern. The instances of contact-induced change spread easily, though unevenly, across the dialect continuum. Hence, many of these forms of Aramaic exhibit considerable convergence, while subtle differences in language and style persist (Gzella 2006). They, as well as similar phenomena in art, architecture, and pottery, indicate that several local centres and their peripheries coexisted, participating in a common matrix culture, maintaining their individuality, and engaging in cultural conflicts.

2. The Dead Sea material

In Post-Achaemenid and Roman Palestine, a multilingual environment, Aramaic is directly attested by the ca. 120 literary texts discovered at Qumran (officially published in Discoveries in the Judean Desert, 1955 ff.), but of controversial origin, letters and, often dated, legal documents from the 1st and 2nd c. AD (Yardeni 2000; Yadin et al. 2002), as well as inscriptions found in Jerusalem and its surroundings (Yardeni 2000), all written in square script with an increasing use of vowel letters (Beyer 1984, 1994 and 2004 proposes many alternative readings); Josephus and the New Testament also include a few words and phrases in Greek transcription. No complete scholarly descriptive grammar exists, but Cook 1998 provides a useful survey. The lexicon is treated by Beyer, who also discusses numerous issues of phonology and morphology from a broad historical perspective. Sokoloff 2003 covers the documentary material with its later reflexes.

These texts clearly witness to the existence and development of both regional dialects and literary registers. The older contracts closely resemble OffA, using, for example, the rare, archaizing, spelling {z} for /d/ (< */ḏ/) in the demonstrative 'this', and

partake in the OffA legal tradition (Cotton 2005, 153 f.). On the other hand, the language of the literary compositions from Qumran ("Qumran Aramaic" or, with Beyer, "Hasmonaean", after the ruling dynasty in Judaea 142−37 BC; see Fassberg 2002), dated on palaeographic grounds between the 2nd c. BC and 70 AD and heterogeneous among themselves, has been more strongly influenced by the local Judaean dialect (foreshadowing later "Jewish Palestinian"). "Qumran Aramaic" thereby contains, unsystematically, both older features eclipsed by OffA and later innovations, so this material defies a classification in purely linear terms, but has a distinctly "transitory" character between OffA and later Palestinian Aramaic. Significant examples of such interference are these: a few D and C stem infinitives prefixed by /ma-/ (Beyer 1984, 150; 2004, 18); the frequent occurrences within one text of younger and older forms of demonstrative as well as personal pronouns (*dn* 'this' [m.] instead of older *dnh*; *ʾl(y)n* or *hlyn* 'these' as opposed to *ʾlh*; *ʾnwn* 'they' [m.] coexists with *hmwn*; similarly the suffix *-h(w)n* / *-h(w)m* 'their', Nebe 1993, 310 f.) and the relative particle (*d* and *dy*: Díez Merino 1983); the rare 3m.sg. suffix *-wy* instead of *-why* (Beyer 1984, 118 n. 1; Fassberg 2002, 26); the reappearance of the ancient Western object marker *yt* (Gzella 2007, 105; Folmer 2008). An etymological /n/ which assimilates in pronunciation is less frequently represented in writing than in OffA, and the merger of */ś/ with */s/ spread from the 2nd c. BC onwards, as inconsistent spellings show (Beyer 1984, 102 f.). The truly distinctive features of "Qumran Aramaic" against other contemporary varieties, however, are the new demonstrative *dn* 'this' (m.), the frequent (Hebraizing?) 2m.sg. suffix *-kh* /-kā/ (Fassberg 2002, 24 f.), and the still productive "short imperfect" (cf. Cook 1992). The former two might be mere peculiarities of orthography, though; on the preformative /l-/ with the verb *hwy* 'to be' see Ch. 28.6. In the course of time, and in any case after 37 BC, Judaean dialectal influence gradually increased at the expense of the OffA layer and inherited spelling conventions (Beyer 1984, 34 f.). Texts from the Second Jewish Revolt, i.e., the Bar Kosiba letters and later contracts like XḤev/Se 8a and 50, provide ample evidence for this, such as the growing use of the object marker *yt*, formerly rare, and the decline of the "short imperfect" in favour of the long form; as in the Hermopolis letters, the ending /-ā/ of the emphatic state is frequently spelled with {h} instead of older {ʾ}. Close contact with Hebrew, still used as a literary idiom and briefly revived during the Jewish Revolts for nationalist purposes (Beyer 2004, 201; Cotton 2005, 153 f.), led to further mutual interference and language mixing (Gzella 2007), whereas Greek influence is restricted to a few loan words in the documentary texts. At present, there seems to be no obvious break between this and Jewish Palestinian material from the 3rd c. AD onwards, including reliable manuscripts of Midrash Bereshit Rabba and Cairo Geniza fragments.

3. Nabataean

The Nabataean kingdom, transformed into the Roman *provincia Arabia* in 106 AD, goes back to a tribe or tribal federation of unclear provenance (referred to as "Arabs" by Graeco-Roman historians) which subsequently enriched their nomadic way of life by settled forms of existence. They initially controlled the Incense Road, became part of the Hellenistic world (Hackl et al. 2003, 98−106), and were eventually absorbed

into the Umayyad Empire. Due to the prestige of their language and script, Nabataean writing enjoyed a wider diffusion across a vast, multilingual cultural area (Macdonald 2003). This situation no doubt facilitated communication among the heterogeneous population itself and international business relations. The Nabataean corpus, now comprising almost 6000 texts in total, includes brief, mostly funerary and dedicatory inscriptions (the few honorific ones refer to the king alone), some of which rather proclaim property rights of the respective tomb. All of the latter, excepting one from Petra, stem from Hegra, modern Madāʾin Ṣāliḥ (Healey 1993). The reason for this local peculiarity is unknown. There are also thousands of graffiti from Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Egypt (exceptionally also from the Greek islands and southern Italy) on the one hand (2nd c. BC−4th c. AD; references in Beyer 2004, 23, add Graf/Said 2006; many more are still unpublished) and a handful of legal papyri in the Achaemenid tradition on the other (60−122 AD; Yardeni 2000, 265−99). These papyri were hidden by their owners, presumably members of Jewish communities from the periphery of the Nabataean kingdom, in caves near the Dead Sea during the upheavals caused by the Jewish Revolts against Rome. The inscriptions on stone are all executed in a cursive type of the Aramaic alphabet and its variations. It was employed for monumental purposes and later gave rise to the Arabic script. Based on a few Nabataean-like features, Beyer (2004, 204 ff.) formally extends the corpus to some "Pseudo-Nabataean" papyri in square script. These are normally classified as Jewish Palestinian, and the similarities with Nabataean are presumably contact-induced phenomena. After the 4th c. AD, Nabataean was replaced by Greek and Arabic. Not more than a fraction of the material was known when the only full grammar appeared (Cantineau 1930−1932, now outdated). Hoftijzer/Jongeling 1995 serves as the standard dictionary; for the personal names (surviving, as the Petra papyri show, even into the Umayyad period), cf. Macdonald 1999. No comprehensive edition exists.

Nabataean, at least in its consonantal garb, is closer to Achaemenid Aramaic (Healey 1993, 55−59) than the other contemporary varieties. Common features include the preservation of */n/ before consonants in writing, the use of {š} for */ś/, and the extension of the 3m.pl. "perfect" to the feminine. The relatively few innovations of Nabataean chiefly affect spelling: an increasing use of {d} instead of {z} for */ṯ/ > /d/; *plene* writing for the m.pl. ending /-īn/; mostly {ʾ} instead of {h} in the causative stem prefix. For the relative marker, older {dy}, rarely {zy} (at times both in the same text), is consistently sustained, as opposed to {d} elsewhere (see Ch. 30.4); the suffix pronouns 'our' and 'their' (masc.) are still *-nʾ* and *-hm*. However, the ancient (Western and then sub-standard?) object marker *yt*, which is not clearly attested in OffA, reappears, as it does in Jewish Palestinian (and very rarely in Palmyrene, where the object is normally unmarked, but sometimes introduced by *l*: PAT 0278:4); the personal pronoun 3m/f.pl. *ʾnw* can be used as a demonstrative besides *ʾln*. The determined m.pl. ending /-ę̄/ (cf. 30.4), by contrast, is not attested that far in the West. Occasional changes of /l/ > /n/ and /ā/ > /ǭ/ may perhaps be attributed to a dialectal substrate pronunciation. This conservatism is due both to the peripheral location of the speech area and the likely fact that the authors of Nabataean inscriptions at least from North Arabia spoke Arabic, as many words denoting items of everyday life, certain syntactic constructions, and numerous personal names indicate (Beyer 2004, 23 f.; add the "optative perfect", Gzella 2004, 242; the ʿEn-ʿAvdat and the Namara inscriptions feature entire passages of Arabic in Nabataean script). Hence, as far as the core region is concerned, Aramaic

may have been used in writing only (Rosenthal 1939, 92; Macdonald 1998, 185−188 has some caveats). Even in remote village communities it was employed for legal purposes and, according to a minority opinion, also spoken (Cotton 2005). The few Greek loanwords mostly refer to Hellenistic architecture.

4. Palmyrene

Palmyra, Aramaic Tadmor, is a caravan city located in the Syrian Desert. Urbanization of the oasis probably began in Persian times due to the creation of a direct desert route connecting the Levantine coast with Mesopotamia and promoted the rise of a prosperous mercantile elite by the 1st c. AD (Hartmann 2001, 45−64). Eventually, the Aramaic heritage met the Graeco-Roman epigraphic habit and monumental architecture. The local dialect, attested all over the Roman Empire and written in a particular Aramaic script, largely resembles the Achaemenid chancellery language with a few innovative, specifically Eastern Aramaic, traits. It has been ably described by Cantineau 1935 (synchronic) and Rosenthal 1936 (historical-comparative), but the amount of epigraphic material unearthed during the last decades and the progress in historical linguistics make a new treatment necessary. This also applies to Stark 1971 on the personal names, whereas dictionaries are more up-to-date: the glossary in Hillers/Cussini 1996 contains clear definitions with examples given in context, whereas Hoftijzer/Jongeling 1995 has a full scholarly apparatus. Almost all Palmyrene texts then published, together with their respective Greek and Latin parallel versions, but without translations, have been assembled in Hillers / Cussini 1996 (= PAT, with bibliography; add Naveh 2002, 243−245; Cussini [ed.] 2005, 89−102; 130−136). Unfortunately, this edition contains many mistakes and, despite some fresh collations, a number of outdated readings. Apart from an extensive tax tariff (PAT 0259), the corpus consists of some 3000 mostly brief and formulaic funerary, honorary, and dedicatory inscriptions, including several hundred *tesserae* (presumably "entry tickets" to ritual meals), all dated between 44 BC and AD 279/80. Honouring the great men of the city in a Hellenistic fashion with statues and busts adorning large parts of the centre was more widespread here than elsewhere in the Roman Near East. Since one of these texts was the first Semitic inscription published in modern times, the study of Palmyrene Aramaic marks the beginning of Semitic epigraphy (Daniels 1988). Some 200 texts also have a generally elegant Greek or, rarely, a Latin parallel version, each following the respective genre conventions (Gzella 2005). Palmyrene expatriates, mostly legionaries, left inscriptions all over the Roman Empire; Latin versions were much more frequent abroad, often with the Latin being the primary version and the Aramaic reduced to a mere token of identity. This extensive bilingualism is typical for Palmyrene Aramaic.

Strictly speaking, Palmyrene Aramaic preserved only one morphological innovation of OffA, i.e., the extension of the 3m.pl. "perfect" to feminine subjects (PAT 0259:I:5: *whww mtgbyn* 'and they were taxed', referring to *ʿbydn*, sg. *ʿbydh*, 'articles'). To a considerable extent, its Achaemenid garb thus results from a conservative spelling practice which remained in use after the fall of that Empire. This applies especially to instances of an etymological /n/ in writing where it is likely to assimilate in pronunciation (*ʾnt* 'you' in the only attestation of this pronoun and *ʾntth* 'his wife', Cantineau

1935, 45 f.) and the use of vowel letters for long vowels only, at least in native words. Consistent modernizations are few and conform to other contemporary dialects ({ʾ} instead of {h} in the causative stem prefix and an increase of *plene* spelling of the m.pl. ending /-īn/). Orthographic variation, however, at times even within the same text, points to several innovative features of phonology and morphology also attested elsewhere in the Aramaic dialect continuum during that time. The disappearance of unstressed word-final /ī/ and /ū/ can be assumed with certainty: consider *bnwh* 'his children' in, e.g., PAT 0046, but usually written *bnwhy* (Hillers/Cussini 1996, 349) and *ʾqym* 'they have erected' instead of the more frequent *ʾqymw* etc. (Cantineau 1935, 56 f., who gives good examples, but his rather complicated explanation fails to convince, see Rosenthal 1939, 102 and, more generally, Beyer 1984, 122−125, who dates this change to ca. 100 BC). Perhaps /t/ assimilated to a following consonant (cf. *mqrh* 'he is called' in PAT 0049:1 as opposed to regular *mtqrʾ* or *mtqrh*). An etymological spelling of such forms prevails in Old and Official Aramaic, but is gradually replaced by the assimilation of the /t/ even in writing after the Achaemenid period, both in Western and in Eastern dialects (Beyer 1984, 94 n. 1; 1998, 128). At present, one cannot determine whether this is a genuine phonetic change or just an adaptation of spelling to a pronunciation which was already customary. The same goes for /ʾ/ assimilating to a preceding /t/ (Beyer 1984, 469). Judging from the writing *d* for traditional *dy* (many examples in Hillers/Cussini 1996, 356), the relative marker */dī/< */ḏī/ had turned into a proclitic /da-/ (via */dĭ/?), as it did elsewhere (cf. 30.5). A similar variation between the bound forms *brt*, as is usual in OffA and Nabataean, and *bt* 'daughter', the latter always in proper names, indicates that the pronunciation was /baṯ/ (Rosenthal 1937, 33, *pace* Cantineau 1935, 117). Further, Greek transcriptions of personal names show that /k/, /p/ and /t/ (= consistently χ, φ and θ) were aspirated in all positions; according to the relative chronology of Aramaic sound laws, they, as well as /b/, /g/ and /d/, would already have been spirantized in weak articulation, but this cannot be proved directly (Cantineau 1935, 38 f.; Beyer 1984, 125−128; *pace* Kaufman 1974, 117, spirantization thus seems to have spread in waves instead of being inherited from OffA). There is no unambiguous evidence for the disappearance of short unstressed vowels in open syllables, which had been reduced to zero in contemporary Aramaic, and for the change of /a/ to /ẹ/ near sibilants (Beyer 1984, 115 f.). Greek renderings of Palmyrene Aramaic personal names still witness to an older stage (see, e.g., Samisgeramou in PAT 1375:2 [Greek], reflecting both the original /a/ after a sibilant [< */Šamš-/ 'the Sun'] and a reflex of the 'perfect' vowel /a/ in an open syllable [< */garam/ 'he decided']), but obviously these equivalents may have been coined long before the corresponding sound laws became active and preserved afterwards (*pace* Cantineau 1935, 59).

With the determined m.pl. ending /-ẹ̄/, like the singular written with -ʾ, the language of Palmyra exhibits the most distinctive feature of Eastern Aramaic (see 30.5). It occurs next to the still more frequent *-yʾ*, which originally rendered older /-ayyā/ (Cantineau 1935, 123 f.). One cannot say whether the latter reflects a phonetic reality or was simply preserved as a less ambiguous spelling. Other 'Eastern' characteristics, however, are absent, such as the expansion of the demonstrative pronouns by /hā-/ (*dnh*, *dh* and *ʾln* are attested for the m.sg., f.sg. and common pl. near deixis 'this') and /n-/ or /l-/ instead of older /y-/ as the preformative of the "imperfect" (Kaufman 1974, 124−6). Paradigmatic levelling led to a younger by-form of the 3m.sg. suffix with plural nouns /-ayh/ < */-ayhī/ regularly attested in the East (see Ch. 30.5) and concurring with older /-awh/

< */-awhī/ (contrast *bnyh* 'his sons' in PAT 0334:3 with *bnwh(y)* elsewhere). Palmyrene Aramaic also has the later 1pl. and 3m.pl. suffixes *-n* and *-h(w)n*. Internal passives of the G-stem "imperfect", still known in OffA, were most likely lost, just as the old jussive in favour of the "long imperfect". *Pace* Rosenthal 1936, 56.62, the only alleged example *yktb* PAT 0259:I:8 (*bis*) does not have to be analysed as an internal passive ('may it be written'), but rather as an active form with impersonal subject ('may one write') or perhaps even as a more modern spelling of a G-stem reflexive with passive meaning (instead of the expected, but unattested, writing **ytktb*; the Gt-stem of this verb is only attested in the participle *mtktb*: PAT 0259:I:5), just like *mqrh* instead of *mtqrh* (Cantineau 1935, 81−84). Since a G-stem passive "imperfect" of the verb *ktb* is also unattested in earlier periods, it is unlikely that this form constitutes a fossilized lexicalization. Again, this conforms to analogous developments in other Aramaic varieties after 400 BC (Beyer 1984, 152). The participle in a generalizing relative clause (PAT 0259:II:57: *dy hpkyn* 'who go round'), too, is more recent: OffA normally uses the "imperfect" (Gzella 2004, 198−201).

Hence, the inherited Aramaic dialect gradually underwent change in Palmyra due to active use throughout the social strata until the Romans put an end to the city's bloom in 272 (Rosenthal 1936, 105; confirmed by variation in the formulae, Gzella 2006, 26), but spelling practice often lagged behind these changes and was but slowly adapted. Loanwords could permeate the language more easily and point to the symbiosis of various traditions, Eastern and Western alike: 75 words, several of them fully integrated into the nominal system, have been identified as Greek and refer to administrative as well as architectural terms (Brock 2005); others come from Arabic (Maraqten 1995 lists 23 items, but several of them are controversial). Together with various Arabic personal and divine names, the latter point to an Arab element in the population; the few Akkadian (Kaufman 1974) and Iranian words (Cantineau 1935, 154) probably belong to the inherited Aramaic vocabulary. Apart from Graecisms in some phrases (Gzella 2005, 447−449), there is little evidence for calques in syntax and style. As regulations concerning the transfer of burial property feature prominently in funerary inscriptions ("cession texts"), a couple of usual Aramaic words carry a special, legal, meaning attested only here. All in all, then, the Palmyrene texts reflect the cosmopolitan character of the speech community without overshadowing its national awareness.

5. Eastern Mesopotamian

Towards the end of the 2nd c. BC, when Seleucid power faded, Eastern Mesopotamia, too, saw at least two local dialects turn into written languages using Aramaic scripts (Gzella 2006, 32−38). Another variety is incidentally attested by a cuneiform incantation text from Uruk (Beyer 2004, 25−27) whose Eastern character is evidenced by at least the plural ending /-ē̦/. In Edessa, an early stage of Syriac appeared and served as the official idiom of the Abgarid dynasty that ruled 132 BC−242 AD. Following the end of paganism, it became and remained the *lingua franca* of most of the Christian Middle East as late as the Middle Ages. Another variety, here labelled "Eastern Mesopotamian" (= EM), dominated the area between Hatra, which after an inconspicuous past acted as the capital of a Parthian kingdom between ca. 165 and 240/241 AD, and

the ancient city of Assur. It exhibits a comparable level of standardization, but disappeared with the sack of Hatra (Drijvers 1977). Apart from three contracts on parchment reflecting Achaemenid legalese, Syriac is attested by some 100 funerary, dedicatory and memorial inscriptions dated between 6 and 252 AD (Drijvers/Healey 1999; add Healey 2006), EM appears in ca. 600 texts of similar genres and bearing dates 44 BC−238 AD (Beyer 1998 and 2002; add al-Jadir 2006, 305−311; Moriggi 2010; more await publication). Modern editions include grammatical sketches and brief glossaries, Hoftijzer/Jongeling 1995 give a full discussion of the vocabulary. Despite Hellenistic influence in art and architecture, no bilingual epigraphic culture has emerged. The underlying linguistic situation defies a complete reconstruction, but in all likelihood there were many other forms of Eastern Aramaic in active use in this area: for example in Dura Europos, where, even though Greek was employed for official purposes throughout, different manifestations of Aramaic have been discovered (Beyer 1984, 47 f.; 2004, 28), including what appears to be the oldest witness of Jewish Babylonian (pDura 151 from ca. 200 AD, Yardeni 2000, 187).

Syriac and the EM varieties are much more innovative than the direct successors to OffA, which suggests that another language, presumably Greek, interrupted the use of the Achaemenid chancellery idiom. Due to the prestige of OffA, some traditional spellings were taken over when then orthography was fixed: etymological /n/ in a few cases, *brt* for /bat̲/ (cf. 30.4) and, in early Syriac, {š} for */ś/ (Beyer 1984, 103). The use of vowel letters increased; in EM in particular it was (perhaps under Iranian influence?) extended to short vowels (notably /ẹ̆/ and /ọ̆/), although unsystematically and with local variations. This practice points to the loss of short unstressed vowels in open syllables after the end of the 2nd c. AD throughout (e.g., *qwdm* /qọḏām/ 'before' as opposed to later *qdm* /qḏām/: Beyer 1984, 128−136; 1998, 125 f.). At least in Hatra (evidence is less unambiguous for early Syriac), as in Palmyra, unstressed word-final /ī/ and /ū/ dropped out in pronunciation but not in writing; *dy* alternates with *d* in the relative marker, so older */dī/ had presumably turned into /da-/ (< */dĭ/?), supposedly an Eastern innovation which later spread to other parts (Cook 1992, 9; cf. Beyer 1984, 548 f.). There is no direct evidence for the spirantization of stops and /a/ > /ẹ/ near sibilants (see Ch. 30.4). Various instances of phonetic assimilation are consistently reproduced in spelling; in EM, /aw/ and /ay/ were always monophthongized. Morphology, too, reflects several diagnostic features of Eastern Aramaic, most importantly, /ẹ̄/ spelled *-ʾ* as the determined m.pl. ending. This innovation precedes OffA but was then eclipsed by it (Rosenthal 1939, 173 f.; Beyer 2004, 50). The expansion of the demonstrative pronouns by a deictic element /hā-/ (Nebe 2006) is only securely attested from Roman times onwards as a distinctive feature, as is the preformative of the 3rd person "imperfect". The latter is still /y-/ in the oldest Syriac inscriptions, but changed to /n-/ (as in classical Mandaic) shortly before 200 AD (Healey 2008 perceptively suggests internal variation), while EM has /l-/ (like Jewish Babylonian, cf. already pDura 151:18). The forms *zdq* < *ṣdq* 'just' and *ṭwl* /ṭọl(l)/ < */ṭẹl(l)/ 'shadow' are also typically Eastern (Beyer 1984, 98), and the suffixes *-n* (1pl.) and *-h(w)n* (3m.pl.) common Post-Achaemenid developments. The 3m.sg. suffix with plural nouns is regularly /-ẹh/ < */-ayhī/, a by-form first evidenced by the cuneiform Uruk-text and also occasionally attested at Palmyra (see Ch. 30.4; Beyer 1984, 150 f.).

Orthographic modernizations and grammatical peculiarities thus indicate that in Edessa and Eastern Mesopotamia several local dialects of Aramaic (some of which

may already have taken on their distinctive shape long before) turned into administrative languages with but a limited influence from the Achaemenid standard. Thereby non-Greek identity was asserted and the immediately preceding Seleucid tradition downgraded (Healey 2008). The few Greek loanwords, as opposed to a fair number of Iranian elements, and the absence of any public epigraphic habit distinct from earlier practice point into the same direction (Gzella 2006, 34 f.). Consequently, these "Eastern" forms of Aramaic have to be distinguished from the "Late Imperial Aramaic" varieties in the strict sense.

6. Post-Achaemenid Iran

During the Achaemenid period Aramaic language and script had become so firmly rooted in the area extending from the Iranian plateau far into what is now Chinese Turkestan that its heritage survived until the Islamic conquest. Most Iranian languages eventually adopted writing systems related to the OffA ductus (Skjærvø 1995). Under the Seleucids (3rd−2nd c. BC) Aramaic was still employed for coin legends, and around the same time the Indian king Aśoka had parallel versions of his rock edicts, found in Afghanistan, composed in a variety of Aramaic imitating, not altogether successfully, the Imperial standard (Gzella 2004, 39−41). While their linguistic status is unclear, the phenomenon of "alloglottography" appears clearly in Iran from the 1st c. BC onwards: Parthian or Middle Persian words, the "heterograms" (at times they constitute entire texts), were represented by their corresponding Aramaic forms, but alternated with native words and endings or ungrammatical constructions (e.g., MLKYN MLKA 'king of kings' is un-Aramaic, but corresponds to a straightforward Iranian word order *šāhān šāh*). This indicates that they were read as Iranian (Skjærvø 1995, 286−288). The orthography of the ca. 600 "frozen" forms in part still reflects Achaemenid spelling practice (e.g., ZNE < *znh* 'this' with traditional {z} instead of later {d}). This principle applies to most of the material (one of the Awroman land sale documents, more than 2500 ostraca with wine receipts from Nisa and several inscriptions from Cappadocia, Media, Georgia and the heartland, Beyer 1984, 43 n. 2; 2004, 24 f.). A gradual shift led from an imperfect learning of Aramaic to truly heterographic writing. Although Parthian became the administrative language of the Arsacid dynasty, other idioms were also in use, depending on region and situation (Schmitt 1998, 164 f.).

The Arsacid inscriptions from 2nd c. AD Elymais, the Šimbar valley and Xuzistan (Gzella 2008), by contrast, cannot be verified as Iranian. They exhibit a particular, strikingly cursive script, and a language seemingly close to Achaemenid Aramaic ({z} instead of later {d} in the demonstrative pronoun *znh* and the relative marker *dy*; determined m.pl. ending *-yʾ* /-ayyā/; long unstressed word-final vowels still written cf. 30.4; "imperfect" preformative /y-/), but also an advanced use of vowel letters ({y} for /ĕ/, {w} for /ŏ/ and {ʾ} for word-medial /ā/) and peculiar local titles. Eastern innovations presumably did not reach this peripheral region, and Aramaic may not have been used as a vernacular at all here, but employed by the native elite of a Parthian client kingdom for representative purposes.

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