LATE ANTIQUITY

A GUIDE TO THE POSTCLASSICAL WORLD

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Aramaic

More than ethnic designations such as Aribi from Assyrian times or Greek Arabes and Sarakénos, it is linguistic characteristics that are decisive for safely establishing Arab ethnicity. Phonetic features in personal names and the names of deities provide reliable criteria. For example, Arabic phonetics are found in proper names from early Christian Palmyra such as Oubalathos, or Wahb-Allât (“Gift of Allât”) and Odenathos, or Udhayana(t) (“Little Ear”). The Nabataeans centered in Petra were ethnic Arabs writing in an Aramaic dialect with occasional Arabisms. The poetry of the prominent tribes of the Lakhmids and the Ghasanids that is preserved in Islamic literature suggests that it was linguistically identical with Arabic poetry in general, though practically nothing is known directly of their Arabic language.

Many inscriptions, all of them brief and written in ancient variants of the South Arabian alphabet, have been found in northwest Arabia and Jordan. Known as Lihyanite (Dedanite), Thamudic, and Safaitic, the former two can be dated into pre-Christian times whereas Safaitic belongs mainly to the first three centuries of the Christian era. So far, direct precursors of later Arabic are known only from a few inscriptions of some size dating from the 4th and 5th centuries, among them the oldest Arabic inscription named after the location where it originated, the Nhabrah inscription. It is dated 328 C.E. and describes the “King of all Arabs” Imrul Qays, son of ‘Atm, who was buried there and his victorious dealings with various Arab tribal groups. The script was Nabataean, and the word for son was still the Aramaic b-r, instead of Arabic b-n.

As to how much Arabic in any form was used before Islam for written literary texts, it remains a matter for speculation—such as, for instance, how much of the orally transmitted poetry was also at times fixed in writing, or whether there existed a written translation of the Bible or parts of it for use by Christian Arabs. Be this as it may, Arabic in some form served as a medium for much of late Hellenistic civilization. Cultural influences from the surrounding Hellenistic world as well as from Persia had naturally extended south into central Arabia, where Islam was to originate, and beyond it to southern Arabia, leaving a good many traces in the language. The expansion of Islam then assured the continuity and survival of earlier intellectual and artistic achievements. Arabic translations have made contributions to our knowledge of classical Greek works, and they have also preserved much information on the intellectual life of late antiquity. Many subjects are more accessible in Arabic translation than in preserved or postulated Greek originals. Thus, much late scientific writing (especially in the fields of medicine, alchemy, astrology, and musical theory) as well as late Hellenistic popular philosophy, is reflected in Arabic translation.

The spread of Arabic as a lingua franca in the early Islamic empire has been discussed primarily in historical studies on conquest and conversion. Although a formalized Arabic was used in religious contexts and came to be used in imperial administration, different regions of the Islamic empire adopted Arabic as a spoken language at different times. In some places, the original language of the region endured alongside Arabic for several centuries or even up to the present, as with Berber dialects and Persian.


F.R.

Aramaic

A Semitic language closely related to Hebrew and Arabic, Aramaic is attested uninterruptedly as a living language from about the 9th century B.C.E. to the present. For much of the time, its historical and cultural importance has far surpassed the ethnic and political power of its speakers. Spoken in ancient times in northern Arabia and Syria, Aramaic also soon conquered, linguistically and ethnically, all of Mesopotamia. It achieved the status of an official language for communication within the far-flung Achaemenid empire and replaced other languages in the Fertile Crescent. By virtue of its official status, it infiltrated the Iranian languages in their written forms and survived there in remnants often called ideograms (logograms, heterograms), that is, Aramaic words written but replaced in reading by their Persian equivalents. Official Aramaic is most amply documented by numerous Aramaic papyri and ostraca and some writings on leather found in Egypt. The early literary production in Aramaic has left a few remnants, the most accessible being the fragments of the Aramaic version of the Ahiqar story. The use of Aramaic—in the past often wrongly called Chaldaean/Kasdean—in some portions of the Hebrew Bible in the books of Ezra and Daniel has given it a special place in western civilization. Original Aramaic texts of biblical Apocrypha as well as secular documents have been discovered among the Dead Sea material. Much of this Aramaic literature is, however, preserved only in translation. In the case of the New Testament, this situation has given rise to much speculation about possible Aramaic originals.

In later antiquity, the flourishing of Aramaic in the pre-Christian Near East was succeeded by its complete linguistic dominance throughout the region, resulting
in a vast literature in a number of dialects. As the hold of Official Aramaic had been diminishing slowly but steadily in the preceding centuries, local dialects were able to establish themselves and become written languages in their own right, thus initiating another glorious period of Aramaic history that arguably surpassed that of Official Aramaic times in intellectual productivity as well as lasting influence on world civilization. When in the 7th century the religious and political victory of Islam ensured the superiority of Arabic, Aramaic struggled valiantly, and in many ways successfully, to remain alive.

The Christianization of the Near East gave pride of place among Arabic dialects to that of Edessa (Orhây [related to Osrhoënê], Arabic ar-Ruhâ, Turkish Urfa), known as Syriac. It spread widely and came to dominate the region. Its origin in northern Mesopotamia allies Syriac with the Eastern Aramaic dialects. Among other dialects of this Eastern group, Mandaic, the language of the Mandaeans, the only bona fide present survivors of ancient Gnosticism, produced a highly poetic and aesthetically haunting religious literature. The original language of the Manichaeans also was no doubt an Eastern Aramaic dialect. Inscriptions found in recent years in Hatra, the ancient Ashshur, offer some glimpses of an earlier stage of pagan Eastern Aramaic. The dialect originally used by the Sabian Gnostics of Harran, whose literature is now lost, possibly was of a similar character. The Jews of Mesopotamia employed an Aramaic dialect quite close to Mandaic in their religious discussions, which most notably resulted in the creation of the Babylonian Talmud.

Jews throughout the Near East had experienced a long process of restricting the use of their Hebrew language in favor of Aramaic. This made it necessary for them to explain Holy Scripture in Aramaic for the common people and also to employ the language for scholarly discussions and for the homiletic and didactic exposition of biblical text in the midrash literature. Among the Bible translations known as Targums, the so-called Targum Onkelos became most prominent; its conservative Aramaic hints at some kind of original or secondary Eastern Aramaic affiliation. Other more interpretative translations, such as the Targum Yerushalmi/Neofiti, are true representatives of Western Aramaic, as is the Jerusalem Talmud. In later centuries, the Jews made artificial use of Aramaic as their second holy language in important literary products such as the Zohar of the Kabbala.

The Samaritans employed their Western Aramaic dialect for the translation of the Pentateuch as well as works of their own composition, outstanding among them the poetic midrash Memar Marqa. They also developed their own quite peculiar tradition of Aramaic pronunciation. Christians in the western region used Syriac basically unchanged in their literary language, with slight differences in pronunciation. However, some of them also used their Western Aramaic dialect for biblical and religious literature; it is conveniently designated in scholarly works as Christian Palestinian Aramaic. Modern spoken dialects representing Western Christian Aramaic are known from Mâlûla and neighboring villages in the Anti-Lebanon. Christian and Jewish communities originally from Kurdistan, now mainly displaced and widely scattered all over the world, as well as Christians in the Tûr 'Abîdîn region, have continued Eastern Aramaic speech forms, as have, to a minor degree, some surviving Mandaeans.

The Aramaic script deserves to be singled out for having made a strong impact on civilization throughout much of the world. The earliest documents in Aramaic show an adaptation of the linear alphabet that was developed by the Phoenicians, speakers of a closely related group of Semitic dialects, and passed on to Asia Minor and, ultimately, Europe. That Aramaic script took on many different forms among speakers of the various dialects. A form very close to that used in Official Aramaic became what is now known as the Hebrew alphabet, which in fact is distinct from the genuinely Hebrew script of earlier times that continued in full use among the Samaritans. Aramaic writing also spread eastward to speakers of non-Semitic languages native to Iran. Different forms were developed in Mesopotamia, such as those known from the Hatran inscriptions and the writings of the Mandaeans. In Palmyra, a conservative form of the alphabet was reserved mainly for monumental inscriptions, while its more cursive development was employed throughout the region in places such as Dura-Europos on the Euphrates and Edessa. The neighboring Nabataeans centered in Petra transformed earlier Aramaic writing into a script known mainly from monumental inscriptions but now also shown to have been developed in a cursive form for use on soft writing materials. The Nabataean script is widely acknowledged to have been the starting point for the development of Arabic writing, which gives it wide and lasting importance.


R.J.

Architecture

Originally shaped by the monuments of the earlier Roman empire, the profile of late antique architecture throughout the Mediterranean world gradually evolved in the direction of a strident eclecticism as it reflected changes in the fabric of town and country life. With its roots reaching back to Hellenistic and especially Roman early and high imperial sources of inspiration, the architecture of late antiquity became dominated by religious and domestic buildings, as governmental edifices, public baths, and theaters slowly fell into disuse. After the plagues of the 6th and 7th centuries, which reduced the population of Constantinople and Asia Minor, and the subsequent Persian invasions and Arab conquests, new monuments ap-