CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# THE CLASSICAL SYRIAC LANGUAGE

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Syriac, the principal self-designation of which is *suryāyā*, refers to a language, known predominantly in written form, that flourished among Christian communities located primarily in Syria and Mesopotamia during Late Antiquity. Linguistically, Syriac is a dialect of the Aramaic language branch of the Semitic language family, as is reflected in another of its self-designations, ʾ*ārāmāyā* 'Aramaic'. Syriac is attested by a written corpus of tens of millions of words, making it by far the best-documented Aramaic dialect. Geographically, Syriac originated in or around Edessa (Syriac ʾ*urhāy*), present-day Urfa in south-eastern Turkey, which is reflected in yet another self-designation, ʾ*urhāyā* 'that belonging to Edessa'. From Edessa, it spread, as a language of Christianity, over most of Syria and Mesopotamia – reflected in one final self-designation, *nahrāyā* 'that belonging to (Meso)potamia' – reaching as far as Ethiopia, India, and Central Asia. Syriac is first attested in the early centuries of the Common Era. Its classical period spans from approximately the fourth through seventh centuries, ending with the rise of Arabic at the end of the seventh century. Syriac, however, continued to be spoken and written from this time up until the present day.

SYRIAC WITHIN ITS ARAMAIC (AND SEMITIC) SETTING

Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic, which is a member of the Semitic language family, which in turn belongs to the larger Afroasiatic language phylum.[1] The Semitic family also includes, *inter alia*, the ancient languages of Akkadian, Gəʿəz (Classical Ethiopic), Hebrew, Old South Arabian, Phoenician, and Ugaritic as well as modern ones, such as the languages/dialects belonging to the Modern Arabic, Modern South Arabian, and Neo-Ethiopian branches. In general, the Semitic languages exhibit more similarity to one another and so form a more uniform family than, for instance, the Indo-European family (a comparison with Romance would be more apt). Semitic phonology is characterised by a number of consonantal triads that consist of a voiceless, voiced, and 'emphatic' member. The latter, which is traditionally marked with an under-dot in Semitic studies, was most likely ejective in the proto-language but is realised as pharyngeal in many of the daughter languages, including most traditional pronunciations of Syriac. The most well-known

feature of Semitic morphology is its nonconcatenative root-and-pattern system. That is, consonantal roots are intercalated with vowels and various consonantal prefixes, infixes, and suffixes. In Syriac, for instance, the root *k-t-b* can produce such diverse words as *kṯaḇ* 'he wrote', *kṯāḇā* 'book', *kāṯoḇā* 'writer, scribe', *mak ṯḇānā* 'author, scribe', etc. Proto-Semitic word order is reconstructed as verb-subject-object (VSO) with modifiers following the head. One of the many interesting syntactic features attested in the Semitic family is the use of an infinitive in coordination with a finite verbal form of the same root to focalise the verb – the Syriac reflex of this construction is discussed below.

The classification of the Semitic family is summarised in the following stemma:[2]
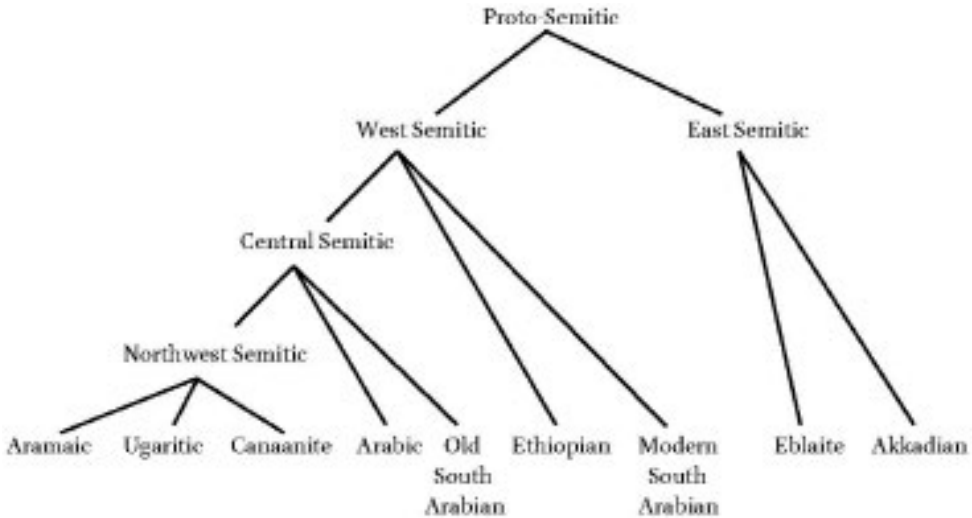
As outlined in this stemma, Aramaic is grouped as a member of the Northwest Semitic branch and is most closely related to Ugaritic, which is attested in about 2,000 alphabetic cuneiform texts from the end of the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1250–1190 BCE), and the Canaanite subgroup, which includes Hebrew, Phoenician, and a number of sparsely attested languages, such as Ammonite, Edomite, and Moabite.

The Aramaic language branch comprises a diverse group of dialects that span from early in the first millennium BCE until the present day.[3] Some dialects are attested in a single inscription, such as the recently discovered inscription of KTMW from Zincirli (Pardee 2009), whereas others have a huge literary corpus, such as Syriac. Some dialects show significant difference from others, such as the various Neo-Aramaic dialects, whereas others are much more similar, such as the dialects in use around the turn of the Common Era, though there are still differences. The dialects of Aramaic are fragmented both geographically and chronologically. In fact, in the vast majority of cases, a given dialect will appear for a specific period of time in a specific place and then disappear without a trace. There are very few, if any, cases in which a dialect from an earlier period can be connected genetically to a dialect of a later period.[4]

Given the fragmented nature of the dialects, it perhaps comes as no surprise that there continues to be no agreed-upon genetic classification for the Aramaic branch of Semitic. Instead of a genetic classification, most scholars resort to the following

five-fold chronological division that was first proposed by Fitzmyer (1979), which is based almost exclusively on written texts:[5]

1   Old Aramaic (tenth century BCE–538 BCE) consists of a relatively small number of royal and funerary inscriptions from Syria, Palestine, and Mesopotamia.[6] The language of this period is characterised by dialect diversity, with several different dialect clusters represented, not to mention two groups of texts for which there is no scholarly consensus about whether they even belong to Aramaic: the Samʾalian inscriptions (KAI 214, 215) and the Deir ʿAllā plaster inscription (ed. Hoftijzer and van der Kooij 1976).

2   Achaemenid Aramaic (583 BCE–333 BCE) consists of a small number of inscriptions as well as a larger number of papyri, parchments, and ostraca, the majority of which were recovered in Egypt.[7] A variety of genres are attested among the perishable texts, including legal documents, letters, literature, historical texts, and administrative texts. Texts from this period reflect the adoption of Aramaic as the 'official' language by the Achaemenid Empire – note that this period is also termed 'Official Aramaic' (from *Reichsaramäisch*). All of the texts from this period strive for a standardised linguistic form; features of the individual dialects can, however, often still be seen hiding beneath this standard (Folmer 1995).

3   Middle Aramaic (ca. 333 BCE–ca. 200 CE) is attested in two broad categories of texts: epigraphic texts from Edessa, Ḥaṭra, and Palmyra, as well as from the Nabataean Empire, with its capital in Petra, and the literary texts of the book of Daniel, Targum Onqelos and Jonathan, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Though some dialects, such as Nabataean, hold closely to the standard of the previous Achaemenid Aramaic, the language of this period is marked by a clearer view of distinct dialects.[8]

4   Late Aramaic (ca. 200 CE–ca. 1200 CE) traditionally consisted of six dialects: Christian Palestinian Aramaic, Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, and Samaritan Aramaic in the Levant, Mandaic and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic in Mesopotamia, and Syriac geographically in between.[9] To these can be added Late Jewish Literary Aramaic, which is witnessed in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan as well as a number of Targumim to the writings (Kaufman 2013). Late Aramaic witnesses the explosion of literary texts and represents by far the largest written body of Aramaic, well surpassing that of all of the other periods combined. The internal classification of Late Aramaic remains disputed. Traditionally, Syriac was classified as a Late East Aramaic dialect along with Mandaic and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic. This was challenged by Boyarin (1981), who argued that Syriac shares several innovations with the late West Aramaic dialects of Christian Palestinian Aramaic, Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, and Samaritan Aramaic. Some scholars have rejected Boyarin's argument – or ignored it – and maintain the traditional classification that divides Late Aramaic into two branches, East and West (see e.g. Creason 2004: 392; Muraoka 2005: 1). Many scholars, however, have accepted Boyarin's proposal, at least to some degree. Most of these opt to create a new branch of Late Aramaic, often called Central or Syrian Late Aramaic, to which Syriac and Late Jewish Literary Aramaic belong (see e.g. Kaufman 1997: 117–8). In contrast, but still following Boyarin's argument, I prefer a convergence model for the Late Aramaic dialects, according to which common features that are shared by groups of dialects, such as the traditional West and East Late Aramaic, are

explained as the result of contact due to geographic proximity, not shared innovations in a putative proto-language.

5   Neo-Aramaic (primarily modern) does not denote a single, homogeneous language, but rather is a cover term for the many contemporary (or near contemporary) daughter languages of earlier Aramaic. Geographically, they span from Lake Van and Lake Urmia in the north to Damascus and Ahvāz in the south. Within this area, they are clustered in small groups. Four different dialect groups of Neo-Aramaic are currently distinguished: West Neo-Aramaic, Central Neo-Aramaic, North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA), and Neo-Mandaic. Neo-Aramaic is primarily attested in the modern period; earlier written records, however, do survive for both Christian and Jewish dialects of NENA. The Neo-Aramaic dialects are discussed in detail in chapter 16 of the present volume.

Syriac is first attested in the early decades of the Common Era and continues to be written and even spoken today. Thus, it presents a challenge for this chronological classification of Aramaic, since it spans three periods: Middle, Late, and Neo-Aramaic. This can best be addressed by looking at the periodisation of the Syriac language, to which we now turn.

PERIODISATION OF SYRIAC

The Syriac corpus can be divided into four chronological periods: Old Syriac, Early Syriac, Classical Syriac, and Post-Classical Syriac.

Old Syriac

Old Syriac refers to the inscriptions and documents written in the Syriac language that date from the first to the third centuries CE (Butts Forthcoming). Well over 100 Old Syriac inscriptions are known, the earliest of which is (probably) dated to 6 CE.[10] The inscriptions stem primarily from Edessa and the surrounding area of Osrhoene. A few were also found at Dura Europos. A vast majority of the Old Syriac inscriptions belong to funerary contexts and are either inscribed in stone or tiled in mosaic (see Figures 3.3, 3.4). In contrast to the Old Syriac inscriptions, the Old Syriac documents are written on perishable material, and thus the number that are extant is much more limited.[11] In fact, only a few Old Syriac documents have been found to date. One document, P. Dura 28, was discovered at Dura Europos, though it was likely written in Edessa, since the text specifically states that, 'one copy of it, kept as a record, would enter into the archive of Antonia Edessa' (ln. 19). The other two Old Syriac documents, known as P. Euph. 19 and 20, probably originate from Appadana (Neapolis), just north of Dura Europos on the Euphrates. These two Old Syriac documents were found in a cache that also includes 19 Greek papyri and parchments (ed. Feissel and Gascou 1989, 1995, 2000; Feissel, Gascou, and Teixidor 1997). On several of these Greek texts, there is additional writing in Syriac. P. Euph. 6 (with its duplicate P. Euph. 7), for instance, contains a bill of sale for a slave in Greek, which is followed by seven lines of Syriac summarising the sale as well as a list of witnesses and guarantors (verso), both in Syriac (see Figure 14.1).

The Old Syriac corpus, both inscriptions and documents, provides an important witness to an early stage of the Syriac language. Old Syriac belongs to the Middle Aramaic

Figure 14.1   P. Euphr. 6r

Source: © Adam Bülow-Jacobsen

period (ca. 333 BCE–ca. 200 CE) and shares a number of similarities with dialects of this period, at times against later Classical Syriac. This includes several orthographic features, such as the writing of the etymological voiceless lateral fricative **l* (= traditional *ś*) with <*š*>, e.g. < *ʿšryn*> 'twenty', against <*s*> in Classical Syriac, e.g. < *ʿsryn*>, and the defective writing of the historic short **u*, e.g. <*ḥšbn*> 'reckoning', against the plene writing with a *mater lectionis* in Classical Syriac, e.g. <*ḥwšbn*>. Old Syriac shares both of these orthographic features with other dialects of Middle Aramaic. In addition to regular differences such as these, the orthography of Old Syriac is not as standardised as would develop later in Classical Syriac. The morphology of Old Syriac also shares some similarities with that of Middle Aramaic against that of Classical Syriac. This is most striking with the person prefix forms of the third-person masculine prefix conjugation. In Classical Syriac this is <*n*>, e.g., *nektoḇ* 'let him write', whereas in earlier forms of Aramaic it is <*y*>, e.g., *yektoḇ* 'let him write, he will write'. Old Syriac represents a transitional stage between these two. In the earlier inscriptions, the person marker is <*y*>, while in the later inscriptions it is <*n*>; the innovative form <*n*> is first attested in the recently discovered mosaic dated to 194 CE (ed. Healey 2006; see Figure 3.4). The Old Syriac documents, all of which stem from the mid-third century, uniformly attest <*n*> as in Classical Syriac. Not only does the prefix <*y*> in the earlier inscriptions link Old Syriac with Middle Aramaic, but the occurrence of both <*y*> and <*n*> shows that Old Syriac was in a state of change and not (yet) linguistically standardised (Healey 2008).

Early Syriac

Early Syriac refers to the traces of the pre-standardised form(s) of Classical Syriac that can occasionally be found in the earliest compositions and earliest manuscripts. Some early Syriac manuscripts, such as ms. St. Petersburg, Public Library, Cod. Syr. 1 (461/462), which contains a Syriac translation of Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History*, attest a language that is less uniform than that of the later manuscripts and that differs in places from later, standardised Classical Syriac (Van Rompay 1994). In contrast, other early Syriac manuscripts, including the earliest dated one, ms. London, Brit. Libr. Add. 12,150, which was written in Edessa in 411 (Figures 14.2–3), preserve very few, if any, such traces. Thus, early Syriac manuscripts may occasionally – though not necessarily – provide glimpses of the diversity and variety of the pre-standardised form(s) of Classical Syriac; this Early Syriac is, however, always mediated through the later standardised Classical Syriac, which even the earliest manuscripts primarily reflect. Early Syriac can also occasionally be seen in later Syriac manuscripts that preserve early compositions. Consider, for instance, the Old Testament Peshiṭta (see van Peursen 2008: 173). The Pentateuch was translated probably by ca. 150 (Weitzman 1999: 248–58); the earliest manuscript, however, stems from the fifth century (5b1 = ms. London, Brit. Libr. Add. 14,425, dated to 463/464). This manuscript, as well as others after it, does not preserve the Syriac language from the time of composition, but rather it witnesses a text that has been updated towards the standardised literary language of Classical Syriac. At the same time, however, the Old Testament Peshiṭta as we now have it, especially in certain manuscripts like 5b1 and the later 9a1 (= ms. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Or. Ms. 58), preserves some early linguistic features that were lost in the later standardised language.[12] The same is true of other early Syriac compositions that are preserved in later manuscripts, including the
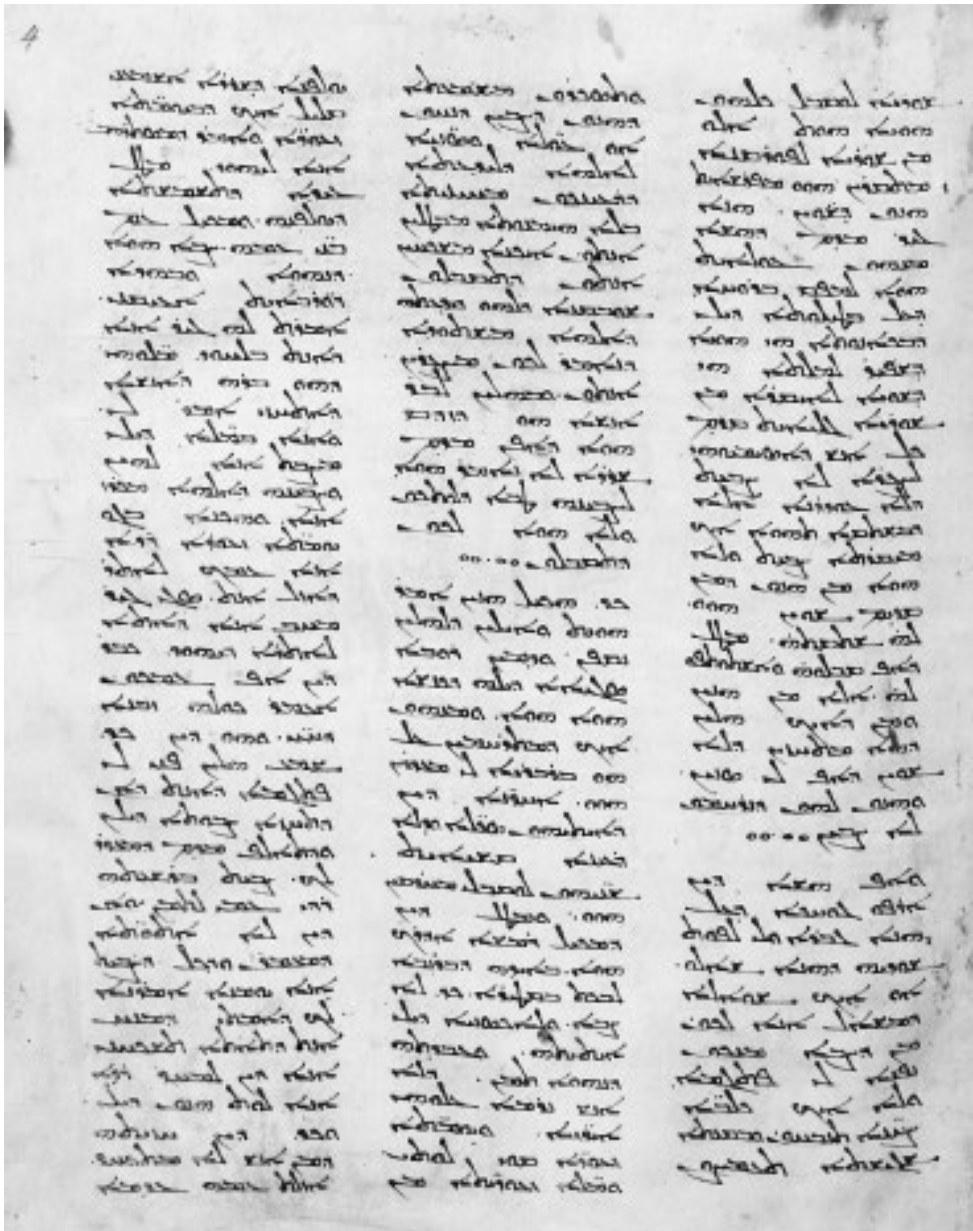
4

Figure 14.2 BL Add 12150, f.4r (dated AD 411)
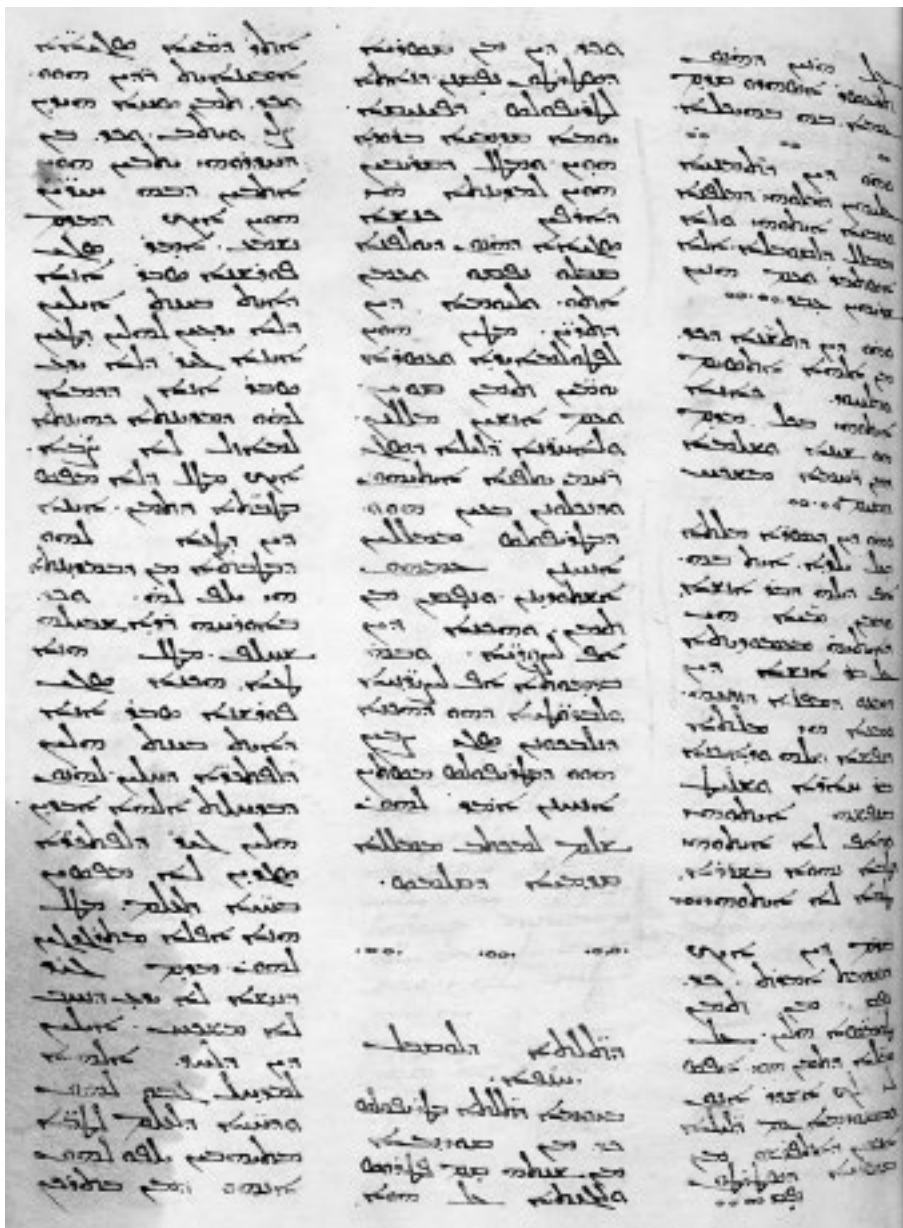
Source: © The British Library Board

Figure 14.3   BL Add 12150, f.53r

Source: © The British Library Board

Old Syriac Gospels (ed. Kiraz 1996), the *Odes of Solomon* (ed. Charlesworth 1973), the *Acts of Thomas* (ed. Wright 1871a: 2.171–333), the *Books of the Laws of the Countries* (ed. Drijvers 1965), as well as perhaps the *Letter of Mara bar Serapion* (ed. Cureton 1855: 43–8, 70–6, 101–2), unless it is a later rhetorical exercise or the like (see McVey 1990; Chin 2006). Thus, while we do not have direct, unmediated access to the pre-standardised form of Classical Syriac, we can occasionally find traces of it in the earliest manuscripts and the earliest compositions.

Classical Syriac

Classical Syriac refers to the standardised literary language that emerges most clearly in the works of the fourth-century authors Aphrahaṭ (fl. 337–345) and Ephrem (d. 373), as preserved in manuscripts from as early as the fifth and sixth centuries. Jacob of Edessa (d. 708) often serves as a convenient endpoint for Classical Syriac, since he is thought to have been among the last generation of individuals who learned Syriac as a first language before the advent of an Arabic-speaking political context.[13] Classical Syriac is a remarkably uniform and homogeneous language. It is difficult, for instance, in the current state of research to identify more than a few geographic and even diachronic differences within Classical Syriac. This is at least partly due to the lack of grammatical studies that address these topics – a point to which I return below.[14] It is, however, also in large part a result of the standardisation of the language. Still, there are occasional hints at variation and diversity even in the Classical Syriac corpus. For instance, the earliest Syriac translation of *Kalila and Dimna*, which was made from Middle Persian in the sixth century, preserves a number of non-standard features (ed. Schulthess 1911). Texts such as this, however, represent outliers to the highly standardised language of Classical Syriac. One interesting feature of this standardisation is the orthography of Classical Syriac: not only is it extremely stable, especially with native Syriac words, but it is also conservative, resembling the Aramaic of centuries earlier more than its late Aramaic sister dialects (Beyer 1966). As a standardised, literary language, Classical Syriac, as we know it, does not reflect exactly the spoken variety (or better, varieties) of the language in Late Antiquity. Questions remain, however, as to the degree of difference between the written and spoken varieties. One can imagine a hypothetical continuum from, say, present-day English, where the spoken and written varieties are very similar though not exactly the same, to present-day Arabic, where a diglossic situation exists with the written (*fuṣḥā*) and spoken (*ʿāmmiyya*) being mutually incomprehensible (the classic statement on diglossia is Ferguson 1959). The distance between the written form of Classical Syriac, which we know, and the spoken varieties, to which we have little to no access, will have varied diachronically and geographically. Thus, it is entirely possible – and perhaps even likely – that there was minimal distance between the written and spoken varieties, comparable, say, to modern English, for someone like Ephrem, who was active in the fourth century in Nisibis and then Edessa. This may well even be reflected in how far Ephrem can push his written Syriac, not only in poetry but also in prose. More distance between the written and spoken varieties, perhaps even comparable to the diglossic situation of modern Arabic, may, however, have been the case for people such as Aḥob Qaṭrāyā and Gabriel Qaṭrāyā, who lived in the sixth and seventh centuries in Beth Qaṭrāyē, where we have some evidence for the presence of a different variety of Aramaic, which existed alongside

Persian and Arabic (Contini 2003).[15] Finally, we should not draw too sharp of lines between Classical Syriac and what comes before and after it, since all of the witnesses to Early Syriac have been thoroughly revised towards Classical Syriac during the transmission process and since Post-Classical Syriac – to which we now turn – often, if not always, looks to Classical Syriac as its literary and linguistic model.

Post-Classical Syriac

Post-Classical Syriac refers to the language beginning from around the eighth century and extending to the present day. The Arab Conquests in the seventh century (Seleucia-Ctesiphon fell in 637) did not lead to the death of Syriac, whether as a spoken or a written language. Rather, Post-Classical Syriac was written – and probably also spoken – throughout the mediaeval period. Written Syriac even witnessed what has been termed a renaissance beginning in the eleventh century and climaxing in the thirteenth (Teule and Tauwinkl 2010). This renaissance culminated with the polymath Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286), who wrote over forty works on a wide range of topics, including exegesis, theology, philosophy, history, grammar, and science, mostly in Syriac, but also in Arabic (Takahashi 2005). Post-Classical Syriac continues to be in use today among Syriac Christians both in the Middle East and the worldwide diasporas (Brock 1989a; Kiraz 2007). Notwithstanding this uninterrupted use, a key socio-linguistic difference exists with Post-Classical Syriac compared to the earlier periods of Syriac: Post-Classical Syriac was never a primary spoken language and perhaps not a native language either. For many users of Post-Classical Syriac, especially in the earlier part of this period, Arabic served as the primary spoken language and often the native language. In addition, for the pockets of the population that continued to speak a variety of Aramaic as their native language, there must have been an ever-growing distance between the written and spoken forms of Aramaic. An important piece of evidence for this diglossic situation comes from the early written attestations of Neo-Aramaic beginning in the sixteenth century. These consist of a body of religious poetry written in a NENA *koine* based on the dialect of Alqosh (and possibly also of Telkepe) (see the texts in Mengozzi 2002, 2011). These texts witness a fully developed Neo-Aramaic, the incipient form(s) of which must stretch back centuries earlier, given the amount of time necessary for the witnessed changes, such as the restructuring of the verbal system, to take place. What is more, the NENA dialects do not derive directly from Syriac but rather find their ancestors in different dialects of Aramaic. This all points to a diglossic situation for native-Aramaic speakers of this period, in which their spoken varieties of Aramaic increasingly became mutually unintelligible with Post-Classical Syriac. Given that Post-Classical Syriac was not a primary spoken language, most of its attestation, especially as one moves later in time, represents literary compositions. Still many texts in Post-Classical Syriac, such as those by Ishoʿdad of Merv (fl. ca. 850), Mushe bar Kipho (d. 903), or even the aforementioned Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286), are of a very high-quality literary Syriac often very similar to the Classical Syriac of the previous period. Other texts, in contrast, witness some artificiality, as can be illustrated by the poetry of two fifteenth-century authors, Isḥaq Shbadnaya of the Church of the East (Carlson 2011) and Dawid Puniqoyo of the Syriac Orthodox Church (Butts 2009b).

SYRIAC AS A CONTACT LANGUAGE

Throughout its long history, Syriac has been in contact with a variety of different languages. Due to its earlier Aramaic history, Syriac inherited a number of words ultimately from Akkadian (Kaufman 1974). This is, for instance, the case with Syriac *šṭārā* 'deed, document', which derives ultimately from Akkadian *šaṭāru* via an earlier dialect of Aramaic (Kaufman 1974: 101). Akkadian also served as a bridge for Sumerian loanwords in Syriac, such as Sumerian É.GAL 'big house', which is found in Akkadian as *ekallu* 'royal palace' and which eventually made its way into Syriac as *hayklā* 'palace, temple' (Kaufman 1974: 27). Syriac also includes a large number of loanwords from various Iranian languages (Ciancaglini 2008). Some of these Iranian words were inherited in Syriac, like the Akkadian (and Sumerian) words in Syriac, and so they find their ultimate source in earlier Iranian languages, such as Syriac *gazzā* 'treasure', which derives ultimately from Old Persian **ganza-* via an earlier dialect of Aramaic (Ciancaglini 2008: 142). Others, in contrast, were transferred from an Iranian dialect contemporaneous with Syriac, such as Syriac *byspn* 'messenger' from an Iranian dialect such as Pahlavi *bayaspān* (Ciancaglini 2008: 126–7). The Iranian loanwords in Syriac remind us that throughout Late Antiquity a large number of Syriac-speaking Christians were located outside of the (Eastern) Roman Empire in Sasanian Persia. In its later history, Syriac borrowed a number of words from Arabic. Some of these are connected directly to Islamic rule, such as Syriac *ʾamirā* 'prefect, commander' from Arabic *ʾamīr*. Others, however, are not, such as Syriac *baḡlā* 'mule' from Arabic *baḡl*. These Arabic loanwords reinforce the point that Post-Classical Syriac was a minority language among an Arabic-speaking majority.

Out of all of the languages with which Syriac was in contact, one language had by far the greatest impact: Greek.[16] Syriac contains numerous Greek loanwords. There are in fact more than 800 Greek loanwords attested in Classical Syriac texts from before the eighth century that were not translated from Greek. Some of these are already found in the earliest Syriac texts, such as the Old Testament Peshiṭta, which was translated from Hebrew (not Greek), and they increase in number throughout the history of Classical Syriac (Brock 1999–2000; Butts 2016: 205). In addition to the transfer of lexical items (loanwords), there are also cases involving the transfer of semantic-conceptual material from Greek to Syriac.[17] Contact with Greek, for instance, led to the development of the ubiquitous discourse particle *dēn* 'then, but' from the earlier Aramaic temporal adverb **ʾiðayn* 'then, at that time' as well as to the creation of a fully functioning copula from the earlier existential particle *ʾiṯ* 'there is' (Butts 2016: 174–91 and 153–73, respectively). These changes in the Syriac language, which are the result of contact with Greek, provide important evidence for the pervasive impact that the Greco-Roman world had on Syriac Christianity beginning already in the early centuries of the Common Era and extending throughout Late Antiquity.

A NICETY OF SYRIAC: FOCUS-MARKING

It is impossible to discuss in this contribution the many wonderful features of the Syriac language. It would, however, be remiss to skip over this topic entirely. So, I briefly want to look at one particular nicety from the realm of syntax: focus-marking. Syriac has the ability to mark any element of a sentence as focalised. This is perhaps

best illustrated through a series of examples. I begin with an example in which a substantive, in this case the logical subject of a sentence, is marked as focalised:

Acts of Thomas (Wright 1871a: 2.187.7)

birtā	banyā	(h)y	wṭaṭlilā	(h)w	ḥassir	lāh
palace	she.is.built	she	and+roof	he	he.is.lacking	to+her

'the palace is built, and it is (only) the roof that is missing'

To understand the focus-marking here, we first need some context. In the previous narrative, the king has asked Thomas for an update on the status of the palace that Thomas is building for him. The text continues with the sentences directly above. The structure of the first sentence is unmarked: the subject is *birtā* 'palace', and the predicate is the passive participle *banyā* 'built', which is followed by an optional enclitic pronoun agreeing in gender (feminine) and number (singular) with the subject. The next sentence has a similar structure: the logical subject is *taṭlilā* 'roof', and the logical predicate is the adjective *ḥassir* 'lacking' (but this time without the optional enclitic pronoun), which is followed by a prepositional phrase referring back to the previously mentioned 'palace'. There is, however, one additional element in this second sentence: the third-person singular enclitic personal pronoun *(h)w* 'he' (the non-enclitic form is *hu*). The pronoun in this sentence forms what can be called an imperfectly transformed cleft-sentence, following Goldenberg (1977=1998: 116–22; 1990=1998: 569–78). This imperfectly transformed cleft-sentence focalises the logical subject *taṭlilā* 'roof'. That is, according to the predication structure of the sentence, it is a given that something is missing, but the question is what is missing. This can be contrasted with the unmarked sentence, *wṭaṭlilā ḥassir lāh* 'and the roof is missing', which would answer a question such as, 'What can one say about the roof?' The semantic import of the imperfectly transformed cleft-sentence is difficult to capture in idiomatic English translation, as can be seen in my translation above with the English cleft-sentence ('It is X that Y'), which is more pronounced – and clumsy – than the Syriac construction.[18] Hopefully, however, the focus of the sentence is not entirely lost in the English translation: there is something that is not yet built for the palace, and that is the roof!

Another example, this time involving a different part of speech, will help to clarify further the Syriac imperfectly transformed cleft-sentence:

Acts of Thomas (Wright 1871a: 2.186.10–11)

hākannā	(h)w	meškḥā	birtā	dṯeṯbnē
thus	he	she.is.able	palace	that+she.can.be.built

'it is in this way that a palace can be built'

Judas is here explaining to the king the manner in which a palace can be built, namely, in the winter and not in the summer, as is usual for other buildings. In this sentence, the adverb *hākannā* 'thus, in this way' is marked as focalised. Thus, the discourse semantics of this sentence is not simply that a palace can be built in answer to the question, 'What can one say about a palace?' This would be simply *hākannā*

meškḥā birtā dṯeṯbnē 'Thus (or: in this way), a palace can be built', without *(h)w*. Rather, the sentence above with the imperfectly transformed cleft-sentence focalises the manner in which the palace can be built, in answer to the question, 'How can a palace be built?' This focus is again marked in Syriac by the enclitic third-person singular personal pronoun 'he', which is realised as *(h)w* here.

The imperfectly transformed cleft-sentence is quite a powerful structure in Syriac. It allows any element in a sentence apart from the verb – to which we turn shortly – to be focalised.[19] The imperfectly transformed cleft-sentence is also quite common in Syriac. The two examples cited above, for instance, occur in the span of just three pages in Wright's edition of the Syriac text of the *Acts of Thomas*, and there are at least a couple of others over these same pages as well (see 185.13 and 186.9–10). Imperfectly transformed cleft- sentences are found in other languages, whether Semitic or not (Goldenberg 1977: 129 = 1998: 118), but Syriac seems to have developed this construction to a much higher degree than most other languages, especially other Semitic languages. An interesting comparison can be made on the semantic level with the so-called second-tenses in Coptic (the classic study of these is Polotsky 1944=1971: 102–207), a language that shares a number of socio-linguistic features with Syriac. The Coptic second-tenses, however, differ in several key ways from the Syriac imperfectly transformed cleft-sentence, including that the former is synthetic and not analytic like the latter (i.e. the Coptic second-tenses are encoded in verbal morphology and not syntax) and that the former indicates generally that there is focalisation but does not mark the exact element that is focalised.[20] The frequency, versatility, and specificity of its focus-marking with imperfectly transformed cleft-sentences sets Syriac apart from many other languages, Semitic and non-Semitic.

As already noted, the imperfectly transformed cleft-sentence cannot by itself mark the focalisation of the verb. The verb is after all the default new information (Arabic *ḫabar*) of any sentence (Goldenberg 1971: 51 = 1998: 181). The verb, however, can be focalised with a different construction in Syriac, as illustrated in the following example:

Acts of Thomas (Wright 1871a: 2.173.15)

mzabbānū	zabbnāḵ	li
to.sell	he.sold+you	to+me
'He sold you to me'		

This sentence comes from the most well-known story in the *Acts of Thomas*: Thomas refuses to go to India, and so Jesus sells him to a merchant headed there. The merchant then goes to Thomas and asks him if Jesus is his master. Thomas responds in the affirmative, to which the merchant retorts with the sentence above. The force of this sentence is more than simply 'he sold you to me', which would be *zabbnāk li* in Syriac, without the infinitive *mzabbānū* 'to sell'. Rather, the sentence above with the infinitive has a different focus: sell you to me, that's what your master did! This construction, which is best called a tautological infinitive, following Goldenberg (1971 = 1998: 66–115) or, less accurately, an infinitive absolute, focalises the action of the

verb. Unlike the imperfectly transformed cleft-sentence, the tautological infinitive is found in a number of the Semitic languages.

Far from exhausting the topic, the few examples given here illustrate just some of the complexity of focus-marking in Syriac. It is important to note that the basic outline of these focus-marking structures has only become clear in the last several decades, primarily thanks to the work of G. Goldenberg, whose article 'On Some Niceties of Syriac Syntax' (1990 = 1998: 569–78) inspired the title of this section. There is no doubt that our understanding of focus-marking in Syriac will be further refined by additional grammatical studies of Syriac, a topic to which we now turn.

THE STUDY OF SYRIAC GRAMMAR AND LEXICON

The grammar of the Syriac language has long been an object of study.[21] Already in the sixth century, the Greek *Art of Grammar* (*technē grammatikē*) attributed to Dionysius Thrax was translated into Syriac and supplemented with a comparative analysis of Greek and Syriac grammar (Contini 1998). This Syriac adaptation seems to have been the work of Joseph Huzaya (ca. 500), who wrote other works on Syriac grammar as well (see Van Rompay 2011c with further references). The first known systematic grammar of the Syriac language was written by Jacob of Edessa (d. 708) (for Jacob as a grammarian, see Talmon 2008). Unfortunately, however, it survives only in fragments (ed. Wright 1871b). In addition, two grammatical works by Jacob were incorporated into the so-called West Syriac Masora (*mašlmānutā*): his *Letter on Syriac Orthography* (ed. Martin 1869; Phillips 1869) and *Treatise on Persons and Tenses*, which is often entitled simply *On Points* (ed. Phillips 1869). The West Syriac Masora also contains vocalised texts of the Old Testament, New Testament, and patristic authors, which serve as a rich source of philological and grammatical material (see Juckel 2006; Loopstra 2009). The East Syriac Masora similarly contains vocalised and annotated texts of the Bible, both Old and New Testament, but without many of the additional patristic writings and the grammatical treatises (Weiss 1933; a facsimile edition is available in Loopstra 2014–2015). A number of grammarians of Syriac are known starting in the eleventh century, including Elias of Ṣoba (d. 1049), Elias of Ṭirhan (d. 1049), Joseph bar Malkon (thirteenth century), John bar Zoʿbi (thirteenth century), and Severus/Jacob bar Šakko (d. 1241). Many of their grammatical works, such as the influential one by Elias of Ṭirhan (ed. Baethgen 1880), are indebted to contemporary Arabic models of grammar. As is the case with so many of the sciences, the grammatical tradition of Syriac was codified by Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286), who wrote both a shorter metrical grammar (ed. Martin 1872) and a much larger opus entitled *The Book of Splendors* (*ktāḇā dṣemḥē*) (ed. Moberg 1922 with a German translation in Moberg 1907–1913).[22]

The study of the Syriac language in the West began in the sixteenth century.[23] The first Syriac grammar outside of the Syriac-speaking world was written by Andreas Masius (1514–1573), who learned Syriac from Mushe of Mardin (Contini 1994).[24] The study of the Syriac language culminated at the turn of the twentieth century with the publication of a grammar by Th. Nöldeke (1880, 1898 [2nd ed.]; English translation in 1904). Nöldeke's grammar, with an occasional clarification from the works of Duval (1881), Brockelmann (1951), and Muraoka (2005), remains the state of the art for the description of the phonology and morphology of Classical Syriac. In contrast

and as already noted, the past several decades have witnessed a number of studies on Syriac syntax that have not so much refined Nöldeke's description as entirely replaced it.[25] It is not, however, only the syntax portion of Nöldeke's grammar that needs updating. Lest we forget, Nöldeke himself entitled his grammar 'compendious, concise' (*kurzgefasste*), insisting that it was not 'in any respect a *complete* Syriac Grammar' (1904: vii; emphasis in the original). An updated grammar of the Syriac language will need to include a thorough presentation of diachronic changes in Syriac as well as dialectical differences, including East versus West Syriac. A comparative approach to Syriac, which locates Syriac within its broader Aramaic (and Semitic) context, will also undoubtedly clarify a number of features (see similarly Goshen-Gottstein 1989: 239).

The study of the Syriac lexicon also begins with the Syriac communities themselves. Though there are earlier antecedents, the earliest works that can be called lexica stem from the ʿAbbasid translation movement. The well-known translator Ḥunayn b. Isḥāq (d. 873) wrote several treatises on Syriac lexicography, including a *Compendious Lexicon* (*lhksyqwn bp̄āsiqāṭā*), which unfortunately does not survive. Ḥunayn's lexicographic work was incorporated into a number of later lexica. This includes the *Lexicon* of his student Ishoʿ bar ʿAli, who lived in the second half of the ninth century (ed. Hoffmann 1874; Gottheil 1910–1928).[26] In the introduction to his *Lexicon*, Bar ʿAli states that he employed the *Lexicon* of Ḥunayn as well as that of another ninth-century lexicographer, Ishoʿ of Merv, when compiling his own *Lexicon*. In the mid-tenth century, another lexicographer Ḥasan bar Bahlul composed a large *Lexicon* (ed. Duval 1888–1901), which relied on Ḥunayn as well as a number of other sources, including especially Ḥenanishoʿ bar Seroshway (ninth century). The lexica of Bar ʿAli and especially of Bar Bahlul represent extensive treatments of Syriac lexicography within the Syriac tradition itself.

The lexica of Bar ʿAli and Bar Bahlul were incorporated into the two large Syriac lexica that were published at the end of the nineteenth century: the *Thesaurus Syriacus* by R. Payne Smith (1879–1901), which appeared in an English abridgment as *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* by his daughter Jessie Payne Smith (1903), and, to a lesser extent, the *Lexicon Syriacum* by C. Brockelmann (1895, 1928 [2nd ed.]), which was recently translated into English, with substantial updates and corrections, as *A Syriac Lexicon* by M. Sokoloff (2009). These two Latin lexica, along with their English versions, represent the state of the art of Syriac lexicography. There is, however, much room for improvement. One of the many *desiderata* is fuller coverage, especially in terms of attestation, of each individual lexeme. To take just one example, not a single attestation is provided for the Syriac word *man* 'indeed' (< Greek *men*) in Brockelmann's *Lexicon Syriacum* (1928: 393) or in its English update (Sokoloff 2009: 778). Payne Smith (1879–1901: 2151) provides a number of citations, but primarily from Greek translations and later authors, especially Bar Hebraeus. These incomplete treatments inevitably invite problems. Thus, even Brock (1996: 259; see also 1975: 89 fn. 55a) has incorrectly stated that this Greek loanword is not attested in Syriac before the fifth century, even though it is found already in the *Prose Refutations* by Ephrem (d. 373) as well as arguably in the even earlier *Odes of Solomon* (Butts 2013). The lack of adequate lexica not only leads to problems in our understanding of individual passages, as may well be the case with the passage from the *Odes of Solomon* (18.7), but it limits us in broader ways as well: in this particular instance, the appearance of Greek particles in the earliest layer of Syriac suggests

significant contact between Greek and Syriac already in the early centuries of the Common Era (Butts 2016: 120). A twenty-first-century lexicon of Syriac will need to be based on a much larger corpus of Syriac texts with a copious – perhaps even exhaustive – listing of attestations. This daunting task can be aided by the development of digital tools, which will hopefully one day enable a Syriac equivalent to the monumental *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (TLG).[27]

NOTES

* I would like to thank Lucas Van Rompay for reading a draft of this paper as well as for discussing, over the years, a number of topics presented here.

1 For Afroasiatic, see Frajzyngier and Shay (2012). For Semitic, see Hetzron (1997); Weninger (2011); as well as the relevant chapters in Woodard (2004) on the ancient Semitic languages.

2 The main divisions of this classification, especially the branch of Central Semitic, were first proposed in a series of articles by Hetzron from the 1970s (see especially Hetzron 1976) and subsequently developed by others (see especially Huehnergard 1995, 2005, 2006, 2017; Huehnergard and Rubin 2011; Porkhomovsky 1997; Rubin 2008; Voigt 1987).

3 For brief overviews of Aramaic, see Brock (1989b); Kaufman (1992, 1997); Van Rompay (2011a). For a more wide-ranging discussion, see Gzella (2015). The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon (CAL) is also an invaluable resource (see http://cal1.cn.huc.edu/).

4 This was traditionally thought to be the case with Neo-Mandaic and Classical Mandaic, but see now Morgenstern (2010).

5 An idiosyncratic alterative was proposed in Beyer (1986), who adopts what might be called a political classification.

6 Fitzmyer (1979) ended the period at ca. 700 BCE. I, however, follow Folmer (1995: 1–5) here in pushing the end to 538 when the Babylonian Empire fell to the Achaemenid king Cyrus. This is, however, to be understood as a fuzzy boundary with the texts from the seventh and sixth centuries marking a transition from Old Aramaic to Achaemenid Aramaic.

7 Fitzmyer (1979) ended the period in ca. 200. I, however, again follow Folmer (1995) in giving dates that coincide with those of the Achaemenid Empire.

8 For the dialectology of Middle Aramaic, see Cook (1992, 1994).

9 Fitzmyer (1979: 62) ended this period at ca. 700 based on the Arab conquests. He, however, noted that Late Aramaic did not die out at this time but continued to live on for centuries, as is shown, for instance, by Jewish literature from the Gaonic period (589–1038 CE) and Syriac literature from even later. Given the continued use of Late Aramaic well beyond the Arab conquests, I adopt an endpoint of ca. 1200, though this is not itself without problems for Syriac: after all, one of the most prolific Syriac authors, Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286), lived entirely after this time (see 'Post-Classical Syriac' below).

10 Most are edited in Drijvers and Healey (1999).

11 These are currently being re-edited by J. F. Healey and the present author.

12 Interestingly, manuscripts that preserve early linguistic features also often attest variant readings some of which seem to reflect the earliest stage of the Peshiṭta pre-dating that found, for instance, in the base text of the Leiden Peshiṭta edition (7a1); for 5b1, see van der Kooij (1988); Haar Romeny (1995); for 9a1, see Weitzman (1988); van der Kooij (2006).

13 There is another, more practical reason that linguistic studies often end the Classical Syriac period with Jacob of Edessa: a majority of the Syriac texts from this period have been edited, whereas many from the eighth century and afterwards have not (see Brock 2010: 124; Butts 2016: 3 fn. 9).

14 See, however, Brock (2003), as a representative of one of several exceptions.

15 For Syriac authors from Beth Qaṭrāyē, see Kozah, Abdulrahim Abu-Husayn, Saif Shaheen Al-Murikhi, and Haya Al Thani (2014, 2015).

16 For a broad overview, see Butts (2014) and, with more detail, Butts (2016).

17 These are termed *grammatical replication* in Butts (2016), following the work of Heine and Kuteva (see e.g. Heine and Kuteva 2005).

18 The translation with a cleft-sentence is more idiomatic in French: *C'est un toit qui manque.*

19 The imperfectly transformed cleft-sentence can, however, be combined with other constructions to focalise the verb (see Goldenberg 1971: 50–8 = 1998: 80–8).

20 This at least seems to be the case for Coptic (Layton 2004: §444–60, especially §445), though perhaps not for earlier phases of Egyptian.

21 In general, see still Merx (1889), with editions of many of the relevant texts.

22 For more details, see Takahashi (2005: 355–84).

23 For the beginning of Syriac studies more broadly, see chapter 37 in this volume, and Strothmann (1971).

24 For more information on Masius, see Van Rompay (2011b) with further references.

25 It is for this reason that the present author is currently preparing a new syntax of Classical Syriac to be published with Ugarit-Verlag in the series Lehrbücher orientalischer Sprachen (LOS).

26 There has been a good deal of confusion in the secondary literature concerning the biography and identity of the lexicographer Bar ʿAli; for which, now see Butts (2009a).

27 In this regard, mention should be made of the Digital Syriac Corpus Project, which aims to prepare a large corpus of annotated Syriac texts linked to one or more dynamic lexica (see https://syriaccorpus.org).

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