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CHAPTER TEN

ARAMAEAN HERITAGE

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There is a well-known series of books dedicated to the exploration of the impact various historic cultures had upon what came after, whose titles include *The Legacy of Greece* and *The Legacy of Rome*. Based on the same concept is *The Legacy of Mesopotamia*, edited by Stephanie Dalley, an excellent collection of papers on the impact of Mesopotamian civilization on surrounding cultures.¹ We might think that it would be impossible to devote a book of this kind to the ancient Aramaeans, partly because there is no period of Aramaean empire or cultural dominance to which we could refer back, partly because it is much more difficult to identify the legacy of the ancient, “pagan” Aramaeans, as opposed to that of the Christian Aramaeans. The latter retain an Aramaean identity, which has been reinvigorated in modern times as a result of political circumstances. These modern Aramaeans are culturally Christians, with an identity analogous to that of Jewish and Mandaean Aramaic-speakers.

In fact, the Aramaeans lived in a close symbiotic relationship with other distinct peoples of the Ancient Near East. In Mesopotamia and adjacent areas, the Aramaeans were, throughout most of their history, under the spell of cuneiform culture. Some of the earliest Aramaic texts are bilinguals in Aramaic and the Assyrian dialect of Akkadian.² Aramaean religious centers like Harran became the focus of attention to Mesopotamian deities,³ and Aramaic traditional legal formulae as revealed in practical documents were not entirely separable from the Mesopotamian legal tradition.⁴ In the West, Aramaean states were in close contact with Israel

¹ Dalley 1998a.

² See the Tell Fekherye inscription, Abou-Assaf – Bordreuil – Millard 1982.

³ In the Harran case, the moon-god Sin; Green 1992.

⁴ Muffs 1969; Cussini 1992; Fales 2000; Gropp et al. 2001: 3–32; Lipiński 2000a: 557–597; id. 2010; Healey 2005a; id. 2005b; Lemaire 2010b.

and Phoenicia,⁵ the Phoenician god Ba'alšamem being accepted into Aramaean tradition,⁶ and with northern Arabia.⁷

It is thus not easy to identify distinct elements of the Aramaean heritage in later times. To take two examples, the earliest Syriac legal documents contain legal formulae that could be regarded as Aramaean, but that might alternatively be interpreted as Neo-Assyrian or Neo-Babylonian.⁸ Again, at Palmyra the main temple is dedicated to Bel, a version of Babylonian Marduk⁹: should we regard him as part of the Aramaean heritage or part of the legacy of Mesopotamia?

The Aramaic script and Aramaic language are indisputably Aramaean artifacts. These were the main legacies to later ages. However, this inheritance is not a sure guide to Aramaean cultural influence. Communities with a shared language tradition may be very different from each other historically and culturally. The Aramaic script and language were adopted by peoples like the Jews and the Nabataeans in a process of Aramaicization in the last centuries B.C., though neither had much in common with the Aramaeans of earlier times: the Jews were eager to keep Aramaean religious influence at arm's length,¹⁰ while the Nabataeans owed more culturally to Arabia than to Syria-Palestine.¹¹ Although the evidence is scanty, it appears that even Phoenicia, from which the Aramaeans originally borrowed the alphabet around 1000 B.C., was later colonized by Aramaic,¹² with Aramaic being used, at least for official purposes, from an early date: the Adon papyrus of 604/3 B.C. attests to this.¹³ Traces of Aramaic impact are still to be found in the Anti-Lebanon range at Ma'lula and nearby villages north of Damascus.¹⁴

Arguably the script that the Aramaeans developed is one of their greatest gifts to posterity. While it was probably not the Aramaic form of the alphabet that, through transmission to the Aegean, gave birth to the western alphabetic tradition, the impact of Aramaic writing on

⁵ Millard 1973.

⁶ Niehr 2003: 89–184.

⁷ Notably Tayma; see Abu Duruk 1986, but for an excellent recent summary, see Hausleiter 2010; cf. on Tayma also H. Niehr's chapter on northern Arabia in this volume.

⁸ Healey 2005a.

⁹ Teixidor 1979: 1–11 and Kaizer 2002: 67–79.

¹⁰ Millard 1973: 148f; see 2 Kgs 16: 10–13 for Ahaz's introduction of an Aramaean cult to Jerusalem.

¹¹ Healey 1989 and id. 2001: 2–12.

¹² Segert 1965: 216.

¹³ Gibson 1975: 110–116 no. 21 and Lipiński 1992b.

¹⁴ Arnold 2000: 347–357.

the scripts of the Middle East and India is central. Both the standard Hebrew script and the Arabic script owe their direct origins to the earlier Aramaic scripts of the Achaemenid and post-Achaemenid periods.¹⁵

The other cultural traces of the earlier Aramaeans are also widespread and varied. The reasons for this distribution and variety are political. Western Asia was united under the Achaemenid Persians and Aramaic was chosen as the official language of the imperial possessions. This led to the spread of Aramaic beyond the area it already inhabited: in the west to Elephantine and the Bosphorus, in the east to Northern India.¹⁶ At these extremes, Aramaic never became the vernacular, functioning rather as the high language (H) in diglossic situations. From this “high language” role emerged what is called Standard Literary Aramaic,¹⁷ a literary koiné sporadically evidenced in Elephantine (the Aḥiqar framework) and in the original form of the Biblical Aramaic texts (within Daniel and Ezra-Nehemiah), though the latter have undergone later revisions, including vocalization. This Standard Literary Aramaic also had its impact on the Dead Sea Scrolls and even later Targumic Aramaic. The Aḥiqar text is, incidentally, the unique example of a literary work current in earlier Aramaic which left a legacy in the form of impact on later generations: it survives in modified forms in Syriac and many other languages.¹⁸

Under the Seleucids Aramaic lost prestige, slipping into second position as the low language (L) in Greek-Aramaic diglossia. The domination of Greek in the early Seleucid era results in there being precious little evidence of the continued use of Aramaic¹⁹ until it began to re-emerge as the Seleucids lost their grip. Edessa, a Seleucid foundation, is the clearest example: a local dynasty took power shortly after 150 B.C. and by the 1st century A.D. there appear Aramaic inscriptions in the local dialect of Aramaic, known in later (Christian) contexts as Syriac.²⁰ Palmyrene and Hatran history are obscure in the Seleucid and early Roman periods, but Aramaic is visibly flourishing there in the early centuries A.D.²¹

Petra had resisted Seleucid control, but Aramaic was sufficiently strong in its region for its élite to turn to it for public purposes in the last

¹⁵ Naveh 1982.

¹⁶ For a brief though concentrated survey, see Beyer 1984: 23–76 and id. 1986.

¹⁷ Greenfield 1974.

¹⁸ Lindenberger 1983; Contini – Grottanelli 2005; Niehr 2007.

¹⁹ An exception is the Samaria papyri: Gropp et al. 2001 and Dušek 2007.

²⁰ Drijvers – Healey 1999.

²¹ Hillers – Cussini 1996; Beyer 1998; Healey 2009: 43–49 and nos. 28–45 and 64–80.

century B.C. and the 1st century A.D.²² Where evidence survives (Edessa and Petra) it is clear that the Aramaic legal tradition, represented earlier by the Elephantine and Samaria papyri, had continued to flourish.²³

In Edessa and in Palestine (Jerusalem until 70 A.D. and then in Galilee, but also in the eastern Jewish diaspora) Aramaic flourished, developing new uses in religious literature. Thus Aramaic became both a Christian and a Jewish language, despite having its roots in the pagan world of the Ancient Near East.²⁴

In other aspects of culture, each of the later communities that used Aramaic had its own distinctive features. There was no uniform inheritance of cultural and religious values shared by all. Aramaic had become a lingua franca for culture as well as commerce, which means that it was adopted and used by peoples and societies that were very different from each other. Of course some details were inherited from earlier times and to some extent these can also be identified as part of the Aramaean heritage.

In considering the impact of the earlier Aramaeans on the later Middle East, it is better, rather than treating the evidence purely geographically, to distinguish between (1) regions where Aramaic had always been and remained the main language; (2) areas where Aramaic had been adopted in a diglossic situation instead of the other available language; and (3) areas where another language replaced Aramaic, at least for formal purposes, though Aramaean cultural traditions were maintained. This can be imagined as a continuum with purely Aramaic/Aramaean regions at one end of the continuum and areas where Greek was preferred at the other:²⁵ (1) Aramaic predominant > (2) Aramaic preferred > (3) Greek predominant.

1. EDESSA, HATRA, PALMYRA

So far as we can tell, the Edessa region was Aramaic-speaking from the earliest times. The Seleucid foundation or refoundation of the city itself

²² Healey 1993; id. 2009: 38–40 and nos. 1–11.

²³ Healey 2005a.

²⁴ The respective roles of local languages (especially forms of Aramaic) and Greek in the Roman Near East have been explored in a long series of articles by Fergus Millar and were discussed in detail in his British Academy Schweich Lectures of 2010.

²⁵ Not every case falls neatly into one or other category; see Petra and the Hauran, below.

must have introduced Greek as the language of the élite,²⁶ but the city reverted to the use of the local dialect of Aramaic (conventionally called “Syriac”) in the public sphere when it gained its independence in the mid-2nd century B.C., though the linguistic situation is not simple, since there were several Aramaic dialects in the immediate region.²⁷ The prominence of Syriac continued even when the Romans took full control of the area in the early 3rd century A.D.

It is not easy to trace purely Aramaean elements in Edessan culture in either the pre-Christian or Christian periods. In religion what is most striking about the surviving evidence is the prominence of Mesopotamian deities such as Nabu, Bel-Marduk, Nergal, and Šamaš.²⁸ At nearby Sumatar, which seems to have belonged to the Edessa sphere, the moon-god Sin is to the fore, as he is also in the ancient city of Harran to the west, along with Nikkal.²⁹ In fact the whole region had been heavily influenced by Mesopotamian culture in earlier times, with the last Assyrian king taking up residence at Harran and Nabonidus having family connections with its temple.

There are, however, some local features to be noted. Ba‘alšamayin is of Phoenician origin, but his cult spread widely and he was assimilated by the Aramaic-speakers to their deity Hadad³⁰ to such an extent that from ca. 800 B.C. his cult came to be typical of the Aramaeans.³¹ Hadad had a more local role, while Ba‘alšamayin became a transregional weather god. He and Atargatis (Tar‘atha) figure at Edessa at least in personal names.³² They may have been popular among the lower echelons of society. Ba‘alšamayin may also appear under the title *mrlh*’, “lord of the gods,” a title used of Sin at Sumatar³³ and this popular level of religion may be reflected later in the Syriac translation of the New Testament, where the name of Zeus is rendered as *mārē ’alāhē* (Acts 14: 12–13).

There is also evidence of the Aramaean legal tradition surviving into the late pre-Christian period (240s A.D.), in the form of three legal texts drawn up in Syriac and using traditional legal formularies that are characteristic of Aramaic legal documents from earlier times (such as those from

²⁶ Beyer 1984: 46 and id. 1986: 31.

²⁷ Healey 2008.

²⁸ Drijvers 1980.

²⁹ Green 1992.

³⁰ Greenfield 1999.

³¹ Niehr 2003: 89–184.

³² Niehr 2003: 181 (pagan Edessa), 315–317 (in the Christian era).

³³ Drijvers – Healey 1999: As20, Cm II, discussion p. 80.

the Cave of Letters and the Samaria papyri).³⁴ There is, however, a problem of definition here: much of this Aramaic legal tradition is very similar to and influenced by cuneiform law. No doubt it had been Aramaized, but it is not a purely Aramaean artifact.

The earliest known Syriac literature also displays the influence of Greco-Roman culture. Bardaišan's dialogue on the Laws of Countries, both in its form and in its philosophical terminology, shows that he presided over a Hellenic-style school at the court of Abgar the Great, in which the language was Syriac (probably), but what was going on was in spirit Greek,³⁵ and Greek influence became stronger through Christianization.

We know even less of Hatra to the east. Again, Ba'alšamayin's cult cohabits with the predominant cult of Mesopotamian Šamaš,³⁶ and a temple was dedicated to him,³⁷ linked with that of Atargatis, as also of Nanaya-Ištar and Nabu.³⁸ There is undoubted Iranian influence in Hatra: it owed more to the Parthians than to the West (though note some elements of Hellenistic architecture probably derived from the Parthians) and Hatran Aramaic draws on Iranian and Akkadian terminology in matters connected with administration of the kingdom and with religious architecture.³⁹ There are elements of this also in early Syriac.⁴⁰

The emerging picture of mixed culture, with Mesopotamian elements and western elements cluttering the landscape to such an extent that the purely Aramaean elements are hard to identify, is confirmed by the consideration of Palmyra. The difference in this case is that Greek had a much more prominent and official role there, since Palmyra was from an indeterminate early date attached to the Roman Province of Syria (already in the 1st century A.D., if not earlier), as we see from Roman involvement in taxation arrangements, evident in the Palmyrene Tax Tariff.⁴¹

As in Edessa, the Mesopotamian gods dominate the scene. Bel appears to have taken over from the local Bol: Bel-Marduk was worshipped with other local deities in the main temple of the city, Nabu (probably) in

³⁴ See conveniently Drijvers – Healey 1999: P1, P2, P3; Healey 2009: 252–265 nos. 62 and 63. There are some other papyri in Greek, with Syriac subscriptions and signatures.

³⁵ Drijvers 1965 and id. 1966.

³⁶ Niehr 2003: 169–179.

³⁷ Niehr 2003: 175–177.

³⁸ Vattioni 1994: 12–16 and Beyer 1998: 144–151.

³⁹ Healey 2009: 49.

⁴⁰ Healey 1995: 81f.

⁴¹ See, conveniently, Healey 2009: 164–205 no. 37.

one of the others.⁴² The Bel temple was dedicated to Bel in the distinctly Mesopotamian guise of Marduk, as is clear from iconography depicting elements of the Mesopotamia creation myth (Enūma elish).⁴³ He was worshipped alongside other deities, Yarḥibol (the local god of the Efqa spring) and ‘Aglibol, thus overshadowing these local deities. And, as in Edessa and Hatra, there was a discernible “Arab” element in the population, worshipping its own deities (such as Allat).

But Palmyra provides us with concrete evidence also of the role of Ba‘alšamayin/Hadad, with the Aramaeans forming the major element of the population of the city.⁴⁴ Ba‘alšamayin appears in inscriptions—associated with Durahlun,⁴⁵ apparently an alternate version of Ba‘alšamayin, perhaps of Ituraean origin in Raḥle⁴⁶ or of tribal importance—but is also represented by an elaborate temple complex.⁴⁷ Although this complex is not central to the official cult of the city in the way that the Bel temple is, as is clear from the latter’s connection to the colonnaded street (though evidently older than it), it does appear to be important.

Palmyra also provides us with an insight into traditional funerary culture. We can be confident that this tradition is local rather than imported (as so much else in Palmyrene architecture is imported from the West), because it is distinctive (using tomb-towers, though also hypogea, which are common in the Roman East), but especially because it is associated with exclusively Aramaic inscriptions: Greek appears commonly in public life (honorary inscriptions, taxation), but in matters directly related to the dead, Palmyrene Aramaic is almost always used.⁴⁸

The importance given to the dead in Palmyra may appear distinctive (compare Nabataea, where there is a similar emphasis), but concern with the dead has ancient roots in Aramaean religious tradition and this may have been a factor. Particularly suggestive is the earlier evidence of a royal funerary cult at Sam’al.⁴⁹

⁴² Teixidor 1979 and Kaizer 2002.

⁴³ Du Mesnil du Buisson 1976, with modifications by Dirven 1997.

⁴⁴ Kaizer 2002: 79–88 and Niehr 2003: 103–163.

⁴⁵ Teixidor 1979: 21; Kaizer 2002: 84; Niehr 2003: 107–113.

⁴⁶ Niehr 2003: 221f, 225f. We may note the possible Aramaean origins of the Ituraeans; see recently Myers 2010: 136–140 and cf. Niehr on Phoenicia in this volume.

⁴⁷ For the inscriptions, see Dunant 1971.

⁴⁸ See examples in Healey 2009: 214–222 nos. 43–45; see Taylor 2002: 319, noting that this might not apply to legal texts related to tombs.

⁴⁹ Greenfield 1973a; Niehr 1994b; id. 2001; id. 2006: 112–119; Lipiński 2000a: 638f.

2. MESOPOTAMIA, JUDAEA, NABATAEA

To the east, in Mesopotamia proper, we have a situation in which Aramaization had been an ongoing process for centuries in a region where Akkadian had originally dominated.⁵⁰ By the last centuries B.C., the use of Akkadian was dying and dialects of Aramaic were coming to the fore, though Mesopotamian culture continued to flourish. The great temples at Babylon and Ashur remained important centers, but from Ashur we have evidence of the widespread use of Aramaic,⁵¹ and this was probably the situation also in Babylonia and even further south. The Arabian Gulf itself was being Aramaized linguistically, while retaining local and Mesopotamian religious traits: the Šamaš inscription in Aramaic from ed-Dūr (UAE) provides a good example.⁵² It is difficult to estimate how widespread Aramaic was in the Gulf when the Christian missionaries from the Church of the East in Seleukia-Ctesiphon set up their dioceses there, with Syriac as the official church language, but appeals to monks and priests in the area from the patriarch Īshō'yahb III, written in Syriac in the 7th century A.D., suggest it was widely understood.⁵³

The Mandaean religious texts probably originate in the first centuries A.D. in southern Mesopotamia. Again, although they show influences from ancient Mesopotamian culture,⁵⁴ they are written in Aramaic, and Mesopotamian Jews, too, were using Aramaic as their literary language. Madaeans, Jews, pagans, and Christians wrote their magical texts (typically the magic bowls) in Aramaic, again incorporating ancient Mesopotamian magic and demons.⁵⁵

Turning to the west, Jerusalem and its region were also Aramaized, though not obviously in the religious sphere. For the Jews, as for the Mesopotamians, Aramaization was exclusively a linguistic phenomenon, the gradual replacement of Hebrew as a vernacular by Aramaic—the change to the Aramaic script, replacing the Palaeo-Hebrew script, had taken place much earlier, in the time of Ezra (5th century B.C.[?]).⁵⁶ Perhaps symbolic of this linguistic shift is the fact that there have been

⁵⁰ Especially Tadmor 1982.

⁵¹ Aggoula 1985a.

⁵² Healey – Bin Seray 1999–2000: II and Haerinck et al. 1992: 36f.

⁵³ Healey 2000.

⁵⁴ Müller-Kessler – Müller 1999. Note especially “The Book of the Zodiac”; Drower 1949.

⁵⁵ There is an extensive literature, but note the major recent work of Segal 2000.

⁵⁶ Naveh 1982: 112–124; Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 21b.

preserved for us some of the letters of Simon bar Kosibah, the charismatic leader of the 2nd Jewish Revolt of 132–35 A.D. There is clear evidence at this time of an attempt to use Hebrew as a nationalist gesture, but many of Simon's letters are written in Aramaic.⁵⁷ Of course the Bible continued to be copied, recited, and read in Hebrew, but even this tradition had to be adapted through the production of Aramaic translations (the *targumim*). And Jewish legal documents, contracts, etc., are drawn up in the traditional forms already established in Aramaic: the Jewish *ketubbah* is still written traditionally in Aramaic.⁵⁸

Nabataea provides an illuminating example. Many aspects of Nabataean society are unique to it. The main deity of the Nabataeans was Dušara, an Arabian (or at least southern Jordanian) deity not worshipped outside northwest Arabia.⁵⁹ There is no trace of Dušara in Palestine or Palmyra or Edessa. But the probable Arabian origins of the Nabataean élite (whatever about the populations of Nabataean territories further north) were no barrier to the adoption of the Aramaic language,⁶⁰ legal practices, and some aspects of traditional religion: Ba'alšamayin gets incorporated into the Nabataean religion.⁶¹ Atargatis, the goddess of Hierapolis/Manbiğ, appears also to have been worshipped by some Nabataean devotees.⁶² In the more northerly Nabataean regions we seem to have an assimilation of well-established Transjordanian and Syrian deities to the predominant role taken by Dušara. Thus at Khirbet at-Tannur Edomite Qos and in the Hauran Bosra A'ra and again Ba'alšamayin.⁶³

3. AREAS UNDER STRONG GRECO-ROMAN INFLUENCE (ANTIOCH TO DURA EUROPOS)

The Hauran region of southern Syria was intermittently ruled by the Nabataeans, and like Palmyra does not fit easily into any simple categorization, but north and west of the Hauran, we enter a region in which

⁵⁷ See Healey 2009: 122–129 nos. 19 and 20.

⁵⁸ Note on the Aramaization of Palestine Schwartz 1999 and see the contribution of Berlejung in this volume.

⁵⁹ Healey 2001: 85–107.

⁶⁰ Earlier Aramaization of the Jordan Valley is represented by the long Aramaic inscription from Tell Deir 'Alla dated around 800 B.C.; see Hofstijzer – van der Kooij 1976 and Hackett 1980.

⁶¹ Niehr 2003: 265–279, on the Petra region 268–273 and Healey 2001: 124–126.

⁶² Healey 2001: 140f.

⁶³ Healey 2001: 97–100, 124–126; Niehr 2003: 268 (Bosra), 265–268 (Hauran).

Greek came to be almost totally dominant, at least in the sphere of public life and religion.

Antioch is the parade-ground example, but the same situation seems to apply in Phoenicia (to which Aramaic had spread at a late stage),⁶⁴ Emesa and in the region extending eastward from Antioch through Cyrrhus and Aleppo (Beroea) to Hierapolis and the Euphrates as far as Dura Europos. In this whole region there is very limited evidence of the use of Aramaic in the Roman period, though there was a re-emergence of Aramaic/Syriac in the Christian era,⁶⁵ which suggests that Aramaic did not by any means disappear under the intensive Roman rule of the region.

Hierapolis is an interesting case. There is 4th-century-B.C. numismatic evidence in Aramaic of the worship of Hadad.⁶⁶ Later evidence, both epigraphic and literary (Lucian), is in Greek and Lucian in 'On the Syrian Goddess' provides an *interpretatio graeca* of the mythology and ritual associated with the temple there. But even in Lucian it is evident that there are some unusual iconographic features (unusual from a Greco-Roman point of view) that must be local. In the best-known instance, Apollo is bearded and is thought in reality to be a version of Nabu.⁶⁷

Dura Europos was a Seleucid foundation where Greek predominated, but there are some signs of the use of Aramaic, even apart from the Palmyrene Aramaic used by soldiers.⁶⁸ Culturally, there are clear evidences of the local Aramaean religious traditions, represented, e.g., by the worship of Azzanathkona, identified with Artemis and originally from 'Anah;⁶⁹ Ba'alšamayin/Zeus Kyrios;⁷⁰ and Atargatis.⁷¹

The Aramaeans constitute a counterintuitive example of cultural contact. The Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans successively invade and dominate the Aramaean homelands. Small-scale political structures, which had existed there previously, are replaced by imperial-colonial administrations. The stage is set for Assyrianization, Babylonianization, Iranization, Hellenization, and Romanization, as predicted by the colonization model. There are indeed clear signs of these

⁶⁴ Cf. also H. Niehr on Phoenicia in this volume.

⁶⁵ See inscriptions in Littmann 1934.

⁶⁶ Greenfield 1987: 69 and Lightfoot 2003: 4f.

⁶⁷ Lightfoot 2003: 456–466 in relation to § 35.

⁶⁸ Bertolino 2004.

⁶⁹ Downey 1988: 99–101 and Edwell 2008: 107.

⁷⁰ Du Mesnil du Buisson 1939: no 23; Downey 1988: 101–102; Niehr 2003: 163–169; Bertolino 2004: 42f.

⁷¹ Downey 1988: 102–105.

processes: Marduk's mythology spreads westward, Iranian and Greek loan words enter Aramaic, and Hellenistic-Roman architecture comes to dominate the landscape. But these are not the predominant features on the linguistic level. Rather, the predominant feature, perhaps outside the region under the direct influence of Antioch and the Roman Empire, is the Aramaization of the colonizers. Assyria is Aramaicized; Greeks intermarry and lose their *graecitas* and any connection with the Aegean; Romans are ultimately conquered by a Jewish-Aramaic religious movement, Christianity; and this leaves in the Middle East a Byzantine-Aramaean legacy in which Syriac, in particular, flourishes. In other words, it is arguable that the main outcome is the extension of the significance of Aramaic and Aramaean culture: Jews translate their Bible into Aramaic, Nabataeans write their inscriptions in Aramaic and worship Aramaean gods. In the context of colonial and postcolonial situations, there seem to be few examples like that of the politically dominated, linguistically dominating, and culturally mixed Aramaeans.

There is some discussion of how the process described above applies to the last of the great invasions, that of the Arabs in the 7th century A.D. The conventional view is that the Arabs arrive and there begins a long period in which the pre-existing populations of the Fertile Crescent, along with those of Egypt, Iran, and ultimately Turkey, are gradually Arabized: they come to speak or write in Arabic; most are converted to Islam, the religion revealed through the Arabian Prophet; most adopt new social customs that have their cultural origins in the Arabian peninsula; and many of the Christians eventually use Arabic in their liturgy and sing hymns in Arabian-oriental style.

But there is an alternative view of the expansion of Islam—that the Arabs too should be seen as having been conquered by the conquered, i.e., that they were Aramaized.⁷²

First of all, the Arabs had begun to infiltrate the Fertile Crescent long before Islam: their presence is either evident or probable in Nabataea, Palmyra, Edessa, and Hatra. Christianity was established among the northern Arabs in pre-Islamic times: the Ghassānids/Jafnids of Syria and

⁷² The Aramaization of the Arabs in early Islam is implied, of course, in works like Crone – Cook 1977 and associated publications, but I can only find explicit discussion of it in Dr. Muhammad Sh. Megalommatis's article at www.americanchronicle.com/articles/view/166730, dated June 30th, 2010, referring back to his earlier internet publications (though not to any conventional academic outputs). I thank my colleague Dr. Andrew Marsham for his confirmation that so far as he is aware the topic is not tackled directly otherwise in the scholarly literature on early Islam.

the Lakhmids/Nasrids of Iraq.⁷³ These Christian Arabs, apart from adopting a non-Arabian faith, had also come into close contact with the Syriac-speaking churches of Syria and Seleukia-Ctesiphon. They were already partly Aramaized. Symbolic of this is the first inscription of any length that can be described without dispute as being in Arabic, the *Namārah* inscription of the king Imru'lqays ("King of the Arabs"), dated 328 A.D: it is written in the (Nabataean) Aramaic script.⁷⁴

Did the arrival of Islam reverse this process of Aramaization or advance it? The conventional view would say that this Aramaization of the Arabs was halted, that the Arabs turned from cringing minor players in the Byzantine-Sasanian wars into the dominant power, imposing their faith and way of life. But there are many aspects of the development of Islam that point in the opposite direction: the Quran comes in part from a Judaeo-Christian matrix, as is evident from its constant allusions to the Bible, its concept of Allah entirely consistent with Judaeo-Christian monotheism. The newly arrived Muslims imitate the cultural norms of the conquered peoples, soon adopting kingship and courtly life (thinly veneered with a pretence that the *khalīfah* is not a king). They adapt their Arabian culture to the existing cultures further north, using traditional Aramaic legal formulae,⁷⁵ adopting coinage, taxation systems, and the like. Undoubtedly, much of this can be accounted for by the fact that many "Aramaean" Christians were converted to Islam, but in any case the process is one of Aramaization.

⁷³ Trimmingham 1979 and the many works of Irfan Shahīd.

⁷⁴ Louvre (AO 4083); cf. Calvet – Robin 1997: 265–269 no. 205.

⁷⁵ Khan 1994.