

## Why the Aramaic Script Was Called “Assyrian” in Hebrew, Greek, and Demotic

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In the *Cambridge History of Iran*, Greenfield<sup>1</sup> writes:

The Aramaic script was often called “Assyrian”. This attests to the continued awareness that it developed into an independent entity during the Assyrian period. Greek writers use the designation *Assyria* (or *Syria*) *grammata* for the Aramaic script when they refer to inscriptions in Aramaic (Herodotus IV.87; Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* VII.iii.15; 21st letter of Themistocles iv.50; etc.). A similar term is used in the Demotic Chronicle to describe the script (and language) of one of the rolls on which the Egyptian law code ordered by Darius I was copied. At a later date, *kētab ’ašūri* “Assyrian script” is used in Talmudic literature (Bab. Tal. Sanhedrin 21b, etc.) for the “square” Jewish script which replaced the ancient Hebrew script.

A similar explanation is found in the *Cambridge History of Judaism*<sup>2</sup>:

The term ‘Assyrian’ refers to the Aramaic script and may be reminiscent of the fact that it was during the period of Assyrian domination that Aramaic script and language received official status; the use of *Assyria Grammata* by Greek writers has a similar origin<sup>3</sup>.

This explanation stands in marked contrast to the view which prevailed in earlier handbooks<sup>4</sup>, according to which the term “Assyrian script” says more about the history of Aram than about the history of Aramaic. The earlier view can be traced back to Hitzig<sup>5</sup>, who offered a number of proofs that the name *Aššūr* was inherited by the successors of the Assyrian empire, including the Seleucid empire based in Syria<sup>6</sup>:

<sup>1</sup> J. C. Greenfield, “Aramaic in the Achaemenian empire”, in *The Cambridge history of Iran*, vol. 2: *The Median and Achaemenian Periods* (Cambridge 1985) 710.

<sup>2</sup> J. C. Greenfield – J. Naveh, “Hebrew and Aramaic in the Persian period”, in *The Cambridge history of Judaism*, vol. 1: *Introduction; The Persian period* (Cambridge 1984) 127.

<sup>3</sup> See also J. C. Greenfield, “The Aramaic legal texts of the Achaemenian period”, *Transeuphratène* 2 (1990) 88: “Indeed the [Aramean-Assyrian] symbiosis was so great that Aramaic writing was called at a later date *Assyria Grammata*, and the Aramaic form of the alphabet that replaced the ancient Hebrew script was called *kētab ’ašūri*, ‘Assyrian writing’.” (For *kētab* here and in the first passage cited above read *kētab*; for *’ašūri* read *’ašūri* or *’ašshūri*, and for *’ašūri* read *’aššūri*.)

<sup>4</sup> W. Gesenius – E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius’ Hebrew grammar* (Oxford 1910) 24, etc.

<sup>5</sup> F. Hitzig, *Die Psalmen*, Vol. 1 (Heidelberg 1835) 138–39.

<sup>6</sup> Hitzig overlooked the *baraita* cited in the Talmud (Yoma 10a, Ketubbot 10b), which states explicitly that “Ashur is Seleucia (סליקא)”. The Talmudic passages which explain that the square Jewish script is called כתב אשורי because the Jews brought it with them from Ashur (Sanhedrin 22a, PT Megilla I, 71b) also presuppose that the name *Aššūr* was inherited by the successors of the Assyrian empire.

Zunächst ist der Name Συρία selbst erst aus Ἀσσυρία entstanden; und zwar, wie es scheint, erst im Munde der Griechen; denn nach Herod. 7, 63 hiessen die Σύριοι der Griechen bei den Barbaren, d.i. den nichtgriechischen Asiaten, Ἀσσυριοί, Syrien also אשור. Der Vocalansatz im Beginn des Wortes wurde abgestossen, wie in *Natolien* aus Ἀνατολή, ... u.s.w. ... Drittens trägt die hebräische Quadratschrift, deren syrischen Ursprung Hupfeld auf das Gründlichste dargethan hat, auch den Namen כתב אשורי: eine Bezeichnung, welche man am ehesten also solche des Volkes oder Landes, woher diese Schrift gekommen, ansieht, während zugleich alle andern Erklärungen des Wortes vollkommen gescheitert sind.

Stade<sup>7</sup> adopted Hitzig's explanation, developing the historical background of the Greek usage somewhat more fully:

Dann aber beweist weiter sowohl der Ausdruck כתב אשורי als der aus Ἀσσυρία verkürzte Name Συρία, dass die orientalische Bezeichnung אשור dereinst auch an den von Aramäern bewohnten Küstenländern des Mittelmeeres gehaftet hat ... Die griechische Bezeichnung ist nur daraus erklärlich, dass jene Gegenden, als die Griechen mit ihnen näher bekannt wurden, einen Theil des assyrischen Weltreiches bildeten, dem sie ja von 734 bis zu seinem Untergange unterworfen waren.

Ironically, this earlier view is corroborated by evidence adduced by Greenfield himself. The passage which he cites from the *Demotic Chronicle* is rendered by Spiegelberg<sup>8</sup> as follows:

[Darius] wrote the words ... of the laws of Egypt and they wrote a copy in a papyrus roll in script of Assyria (*sh 'Isr*) and script of epistles (*sh s't* = demotic).

That the term “script of Assyria” in this passage refers to the Aramaic script was noted already by Spiegelberg<sup>9</sup>. A second attestation of the term, in papyrus Cairo 50153 (line 2) from Edfu, was interpreted by Spiegelberg<sup>10</sup> in the same way. Spiegelberg<sup>11</sup> also provided what is still the standard explanation for this term: *sh 'Isr* is used of Aramaic script because Demotic *'Is(w)r* denotes not only Assyria proper but also Syria=Aram<sup>12</sup>. The latter usage, attested already in the sixth century BCE<sup>13</sup>, is presumably a reflection of the political facts of that region in the previous century, when Aram was part of the Assyrian empire. The Egyptians were far enough away and insular enough not to feel the need to distinguish Aram from

<sup>7</sup> B. Stade, “Deuterozacharja”, *ZAW* 2 (1882) 292-93.

<sup>8</sup> W. Spiegelberg, *Die sogenannte demotische Chronik* (Demotische Studien 7; Leipzig 1914) 30-31.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 31, 142; cf. also E. Meyer, “Ägyptische Dokumente aus der Perserzeit”, *Sitzungsberichte der königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, phil.-hist. Klasse 1915, p. 308; N. J. Reich, “The codification of the Egyptian laws by Darius and the origin of the ‘Demotic Chronicle’”, *Mizraim* 1 (1933) 181; and W. Erichsen, *Demotisches Glossar* (Copenhagen 1954) 45.

<sup>10</sup> W. Spiegelberg, *Catalogue général des antiquités égyptiennes du musée du Caire*, Vol. 3: *Demotische Inschriften und Papyri* (Berlin 1932) 113. — I am indebted to J. Manning for the latter reference.

<sup>11</sup> W. Spiegelberg, *Die sog. demotische Chronik* 142.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. also G. R. Hughes, “A demotic astrological text”, *JNES* 10 (1951) 259-60, and W. Erichsen, *Demotisches Glossar* 45.

<sup>13</sup> W. Erichsen, “Erwähnung eines Zuges nach Nubien unter Amasis in einem demotischen Text”, *Klio: Beiträge zur alten Geschichte* 34 (1941) 57. Some of the *'Is(w)r* mentioned in this papyrus (529 BCE, probably from Elephantine) have names which are definitely West-Semitic; see K.-Th. Zauzich, “Eun Zug nach Nubien unter Amasis”, in *Life in a Multi-Cultural Society: Egypt from Cambyses to Constantine and Beyond*, ed. by J. H. Johnson (Chicago 1992) 364. Zauzich speculates that the others, bearing Egyptian or unidentified names, may be descendants of Assyrian soldiers; *ibid.* 363.

Assyria<sup>14</sup>. It should be noted that this explanation presupposes a seventh century *terminus ante quem* for the use of 'Išr to denote Aram but not for the use of *šh* 'Išr to denote Aramaic script; the latter usage may well have been introduced in the sixth century by Egyptians who had not the foggiest notion when the Aramaic script first received official status in Mesopotamia.

In other words, Hitzig was basically right, except that he was unaware that it was the Egyptians who first applied the name of Assyria to Aram and the term "Assyrian script" to the Aramaic script. The corresponding terms in Greek and Hebrew are derived from the Demotic, directly in the case of Greek<sup>15</sup>, indirectly in the case of Hebrew<sup>16</sup>. None of these terms has anything to do with the history of the Aramaic script.

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<sup>14</sup> Egyptian is not the only language which uses a reflex of *Aššūr* with reference to Aram. *Draxt Asūrīg*, the title of a 6th-7th century Middle Iranian work, means "the Syrian tree" (personal communication from S. Shaked). And the Greek name Συρία is probably derived (by apheresis) from Ἀσσυρία, as noted by Hitzig and Stade (cf. also Th. Nöldeke, "ΑΣΣΥΡΙΟΣ ΣΥΡΙΟΣ ΣΥΡΟΣ", *Zeitschrift für klassische Philologie* 5 [1871] 443-68 pace J. Tkatsch, *Die arabische Übersetzung der Poetik des Aristoteles*, Vol. 1 [Vienna 1928] 43-45). Note also the Rabbinic identification of שַׁר with Seleucia, cited in fn. 6, above. Did the name reach Greek via Egyptian rather than directly from Semitic? Is that why Ἀσσυρία does not reflect the long *ū* of the Semitic original (cf. F. Rosenthal, *Die aramaistische Forschung* [Leiden 1939] 4n and J. A. Tvedtnes, "The origin of the name 'Syria'", *JNES* 40 [1981] 139)? The trilingual decree of Canopus equates 'Išr with Συρία (W. Spiegelberg, *Aegyptische und griechische Eigennamen aus Mumienetiketten der römischen Kaiserzeit* [Leipzig 1901] 68\*, cf. also E. Meyer, SPAW 1915, p. 309), but in the Persian period 'Išr may well have been equated with Ἀσσυρία, even when referring to Aram. It is ironic that Spiegelberg ("Der Name Κοίλη Συρία, Coelesyria", *OLZ* 9 [1906] 106-8) attempted to derive the first component of the term Κοίλη Συρία from *Hšrw*, an older Egyptian word for "Syria", without noticing the possible Egyptian origin of the second component. And Tvedtnes (*JNES* 40, 140), apparently unaware of Spiegelberg's study, brought *Hšrw* into the picture again, this time as the etymon of Συρία rather than Κοίλη!

<sup>15</sup> Greek ἀσσυρία γράμματα "Assyrian characters" appears to be a loan translation from Demotic *šh* 'Išr "script of Assyria", presumably dating back to the Persian period. K.-Th. Zauzich writes: "Gegen einen Einfluss des Demotischen auf das Griechische bereits zu Herodots Zeit habe ich keine Bedenken" (personal communication). Clement of Alexandria's γράμματα ἐπιστολογραφικά "epistolary characters" (< *šh š't* "script of epistles"; N. J. Reich, *Mizraim* 1, 181n) shows that γράμματα is the expected Greek rendering of Demotic *šh*. Why the Greek loan-translators did not mimic the genitive construction of *šh* 'Išr and *šh š't* is a question best left to classicists.

<sup>16</sup> A direct borrowing from Demotic to Hebrew is unlikely not only on historical grounds but also on linguistic grounds, for the expected Hebrew translation of *šh* 'Išr is כְּתַב אַשּׁוּר "script of Assyria". A Semite translating the Egyptian phrase would have had no reason to change its second constituent from a genitive noun to an adjective. The Egyptian genitive construction is perfectly natural in Semitic; cf., for example, Is 19:18 שֵׁפֶת כְּנָעַן "language of Canaan" and Dan 1:4 לִשָּׁן כַּשְׂדִּי "language of Chaldea(ns)". The actually attested Hebrew term, כְּתַב אַשּׁוּר "Assyrian script", looks like a translation of Greek ἀσσυρία γράμματα "Assyrian characters".