ARAMAIC

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In the first millennium BCE Aramaic, like Akkadian and Sumerian before it became the lingua franca of the Near Eastern world. Unlike its predecessors, however, Aramaic's reach extended far beyond its center, and it was used from Egypt in the south to Anatolia in the north to India in the east. Through many permutations, Aramaic has survived over a span of ca. 3,000 years and is attested in ancient inscriptions, seals, coins, manuscripts, and now in the modern spoken dialects of several Middle Eastern communities. To describe Aramaic, scholars have used various systems of classification, but the one followed here divides the language by chronology into Old, Imperial, Middle, Late, and Modern (Kaufman 1997).

Old Aramaic (to the late seventh century BCE) is attested as early as the ninth or possibly tenth century as the language of several Aramean city-states and kingdoms: Arpad, Damascus, Hamath, and Sam'al (modern Zinc¸irli). Between the tenth and eighth centuries, Aramaic was used in political and royal contexts, such as those attested by the Byblos seals (ninth century), the Tel Dan inscription (ninth century), and the Sfire treaty (eighth century), each of which demonstrates a script based on the Phoenician alphabet, but dialectical differences according to geographical provenance.

Imperial (or "Official") Aramaic (to ca. 200 BCE) was the official language of the Achaemenid Empire after Darius I conquered Mesopotamia, and remained the most influential tongue in the Near

East until it was gradually undermined beginning with the conquests of Alexander the Great. Due to the size and spread of the empire, Aramaic was distributed widely – a recently published collection of leather documents from Bactria and Sogdiana demonstrates the use of Aramaic on the northeastern borders (Naveh and Shaked 2005) – and was therefore influenced by Persian, Anatolian, Egyptian, Indic, and still Akkadian loanwords and personal names. One proof of its international status is the correspondence in the Elephantine Papyri between Persians and Egyptians. At this time, Aramaic was somewhat standardized as an administrative language, but already deviations are increasingly evident further away from the center of the empire. Also emerging at this time is the literary dialect scholars have named Standard Literary Aramaic, which homogenized the language and orthography, and presented the ideal for subsequent literary activity. Most of what remains was preserved in Egypt. Imperial Aramaic is well attested in texts such as the Persepolis Fortification Tablets the proverbs of AHIQAR, the Elephantine Papyri, the letters of Arsames, the Hermopolis Papyri, the Wadi Daliyeh papyri, and the Aramaic portions of Ezra (4:8–6:18; 7:12–26).

Middle Aramaic (to ca. 200 CE) was the period during which Greek and Latin were used as the administrative languages of the Near East. Thus, the loss of official status meant that regional dialects became increasingly prominent as the language continued to be used throughout the territories of the old Persian empire.

There was, however, the continuation of Standard Literary Aramaic that gave some measure of uniformity. This literary dialect is found in some epigraphic remains from the Nabataean Arab kingdoms of Petra, Palmyra, and Hatra, but most notably the Aramaic portion of the biblical book of Daniel (2:4–7:28), the Qumran materials, Targums Onkelos and Jonathan, and other rabbinic writings such as Megillat Ta‘anit.

Late Aramaic (to ca. 700 CE) is the final period in which Aramaic was a major spoken language of the Near East, since at the end Arabic will have become dominant. Most of our literary evidence for the language comes from this period; in particular, Jewish and Christian literature flourished. It is possible to divide Late Aramaic into Palestinian (or Western), Babylonian (or Eastern), and Syrian branches. In Palestinian Aramaic, there are three main divisions: a) Jewish – synagogal inscriptions, but more importantly the Palestinian Talmud and Targums; b) Samaritan – the Samaritan Pentateuch, hymns, and other exegetical works; and c) Christian – Bible versions translated from Greek, lectionaries, and some translations of original Greek exegetical works. Babylonian Aramaic has two varieties: a) Jewish – the Babylonian Talmud, literature of the Gaonim, and some incantation bowls; and b) Mandaic – the liturgical language of a non-Christian gnostic sect. Finally, the Syrian Aramaic branch has a Jewish and Christian division: a) Jewish – the literary dialect, which is the continuation of the same from the Middle Aramaic period, thus there are more Targums and other liturgical texts, as well as some translations; and b) Syriac – a Christian liturgical language.

Modern Aramaic (to the present) is the final phase of this language still in use after ca. 3,000 years. These dialects are mostly known by their “Neo-” prefix, though sadly some are facing the threat of extinction. There are Neo- Aramaic dialects spoken in Damascus, south- eastern Turkey (Turoyo), Iraq, Iran, and Azerbaijan, now mostly by Christians. In the east, some speakers of Neo-Mandaic continue, though their numbers also are dwindling.