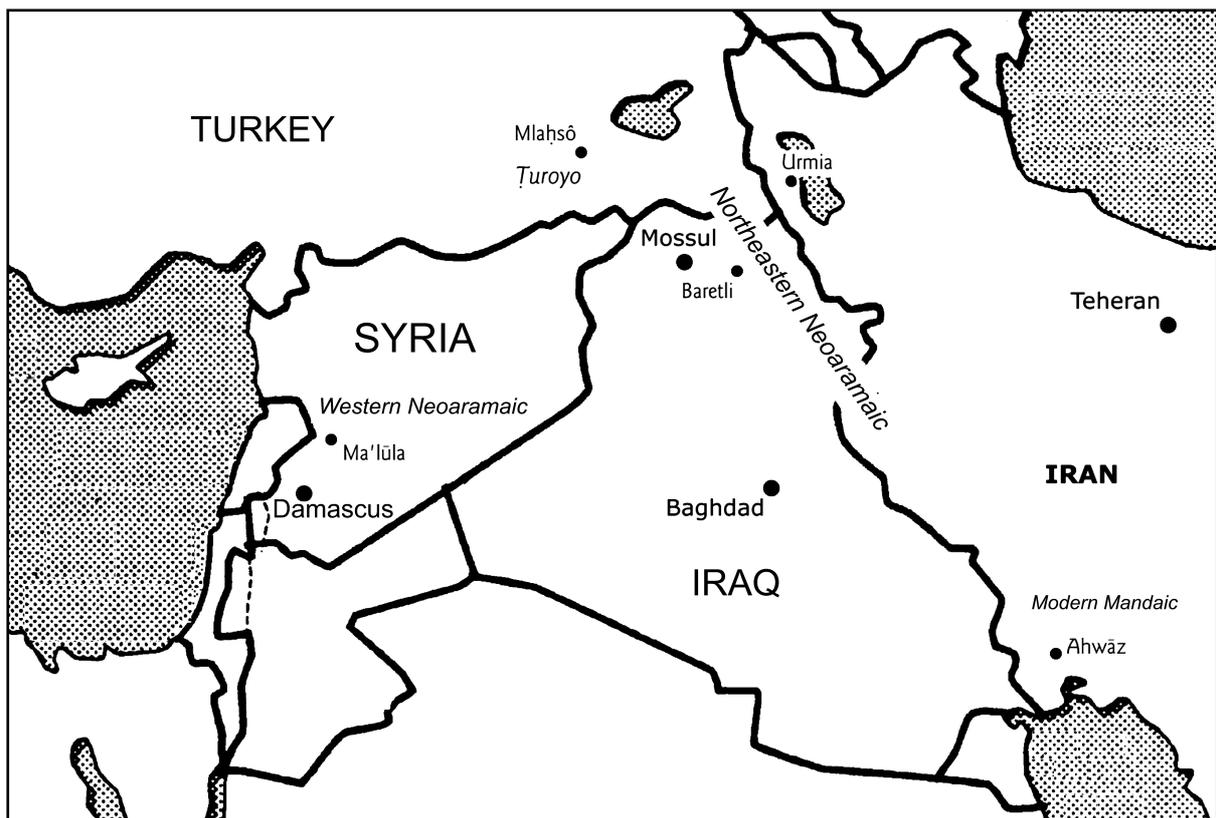


The Neo-Aramaic Languages

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Modern Aramaic languages are spoken today in Syria, south-eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, north-western Iran and in the Iranian city of Ahwāz in the Šaṭṭ il-ʿArab. Western Neo-Aramaic is spoken today only in Syria in the three villages Maʿlūla, Baxʿa and Jubbʿadīn near the Libanese border. All other Aramaic dialects, including Ṭuroyo/Mlaḥso



and Modern Mandaic in Ahwāz belong to the Eastern Neo-Aramaic dialects.

Apart from the Mandaean speakers of Eastern Neo-Aramaic are Christians and Jews, while Western Neo-Aramaic is spoken mainly by Muslims and only the village of Maʿlūla had a Christian majority. Since

the village has been conquered by rebels during the Syrian civil war all inhabitants fled to other settlements in Syria and the Lebanon.

Most of the Aramaic villages are situated in regions where different dialects of Kurdish, Persian, or Turkish dominant. Only the Aramaeans in the Mosul plain, the Mandaeans in Khuzistan and the speakers of Western Neo-Aramaic live in regions, where Arabic is the dominant language.

Western Aramaic differs from Eastern Aramaic since pre-Christian times. The main difference is the inflectional prefix of the 3rd person which is *y-* in the West and *n-* in the east:

	Western	Eastern
Middle-Aramaic	<i>yīqṭul</i>	<i>neqṭol</i>
Modern-Aramaic	<i>yīḳṭul</i>	–

In Western Neo-Aramaic this form is still preserved (*yīḳṭul* he kills) while all eastern dialects have lost their old verbal system and have developed a new system based on the old participles.

The two old sounds *ḥ* and *x* are preserved only in Western Neo-Aramaic and in the Ṭuroyo/Mlahso group of the Eastern Neo-Aramaic languages. (*mōḥ* he beats, *bōx* he cries). In the north-eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA) group the two sounds merged either to *ḥ* in the Hertevin group, a small area east of the Tigris river, or to *x* in the majority of the NENA dialects. In Neo-Mandaic the difference is preserved, but old *ḥ* shifted to *h*: In this respect we can distinguish four different groups of Eastern Neo-Aramaic:

Western Neo-Aramaic	Eastern Neo-Aramaic			
	Ṭuroyo Mlaḥsō	North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA)		Modern Mandaic
Maʿlūla	Ṭur ʿAbdīn Mlaḥsō	Hertevin-Group	all other NENA-Dialects	Ahwāz
<i>mōḥ(i)</i>	<i>mōḥe</i>	<i>māḥe</i>	<i>māxe</i>	<i>māhi</i>
<i>bōx(i)</i>	<i>bōxe</i>	<i>bāḥe</i>	<i>bāxe</i>	<i>bāxi</i>

Ṭuroyo is spoken in eastern Turkey west of the Tigris river in a mountainous area called Ṭūr ʿAbdīn. Mlaḥso was the most north-western dialect of Eastern Neo-Aramaic. It was one of several villages in eastern Turkey north of the Tigris river that was razed to the ground during the Armenian genocide in 2015. These two languages are spoken exclusively by Christians.

Ṭurōyo and Mlaḥsō are closely related. Beside the preservation of old *ḥ* and *x* the two dialects have in common the shift of old *ā* > *ō*. In this respect they differ from the other Eastern Neo-Aramaic languages where old *ā* is preserved but not from Western Neo-Aramaic where the same sound shift occurred. Interesting in the Ṭuroyo/Mlaḥso group is also the development of a proclitic definite article:

		Ṭuroyo	Mlaḥsō	
common:	* <i>ā</i> > <i>o</i>	<i>nofəq/nofaq</i>	<i>nofeq</i>	he comes out
	article	<i>u = malko</i>	<i>ə = malko</i>	the king
different:	* <i>t</i> + <i>d</i>	<i>tloṭo</i>	<i>tloso</i>	three
		<i>iḍo</i>	<i>izo</i>	hand
	* <i>b</i> + <i>w</i>	<i>ktawu!</i>	<i>ksavun!</i>	write! (pl)
		<i>štawu!</i>	<i>štawun!</i>	drink! (pl)
	accent	<i>kármó</i>	<i>karmó</i>	vinyard

On the other hand there are some remarkable differences between Ṭuroyo and Mlaḥsō. The interdentalals are preserved in Ṭuroyo but shifted to the corresponding sibilants in Mlaḥsō. On the other hand Mlaḥsō has preserved old *v*, which coincided with *w* in Ṭurōyo. Mlaḥsō is the only Christian Neo-Aramaic dialect in which the accent is word-final. This phenomenon is otherwise characteristic of the Jewish Neo-Aramaic languages. Ibrahim Ḥanna was the last speaker of the Mlaḥso language, as the village was destroyed in 1915 during the Armenian genocide. He died in 1999 in Qāmišli in Syria, but recordings of his language are preserved in the Semitic Audio-Archive of the University of Heidelberg and are accessible to the public via internet. Otto Jastrow recorded the texts:

http://www.semarch.uni-hd.de/dokumentgruppen.php43?ST_ID=5&DT_ID=32&lang=de

It is interesting to listen also to recordings of the Ṭuroyo language for comparison:

http://www.semarch.uni-hd.de/dokumentgruppen.php43?ST_ID=5&DT_ID=106&lang=de

The largest group is North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA) with many different dialects spoken by Christians and Jews. NENA can be divided in two subgroups. In the smaller Hertevin group *ḥ* and *x* merged to *ḥ*. This coincidence took place only in Turkey in some villages of the Bohtan area where the borders of Syria, Iraq and Turkey converge. All speakers of these dialects are Christians. Today all Aramaic speaking Christians of these villages live in Europe. The dialect of the village of Hertevin is the only one in this group that is known in detail thanks to a monograph of Otto Jastrow. Recordings can be found here:

http://www.semarch.uni-hd.de/index.php43?LD_ID=4&RG_ID=20&ORT_ID=27&lang=de

In all other NENA dialects in contrast, old *ḥ* shifted to *x*: This type of Aramaic was spoken in several hundred villages in Turkey, Iraq and Iran by Christians and Jews. Today one can find only a few Christian dialects in northern Iraq and western Iran. None of the Jewish communities exist anymore and one can find only some aged speakers in Israel. Therefore the Jewish Aramaic dialects will disappear forever in the not too distant future.

There are many differences between the Jewish and the Christian dialects. A general difference concerns the word stress which in all Jewish dialects falls on ultimate syllable but in Christian dialects on the penultimate one. The only exception is the dialect of Mlaḥsō which does not belong to the NENA group.

The NENA dialects are spoken from Hertevin in the north-west to Kerend in the south-east. The dialects of this type of Aramaic are more progressive than the other Aramaic languages. The Jewish dialects are in general more progressive than the Christian dialects. This may be shown by the words for "house" and "hand":

Sara	Sarspido	Zaxo	Zaxo	Urmia	Kerend
Christians	Christians	Christians	Jews	Jews	Jews
<i>béta</i>	<i>bé<u>ta</u></i>	<i>báy<u>sa</u></i>	<i>besá</i>	<i>belá</i>	<i>belá</i>
<i>ída</i>	<i>í<u>da</u></i>	<i>í<u>za</u></i>	<i>izá</i>	<i>idá</i>	<i>ilá</i>

In the Christian dialect of Sarspido for example, the old interdentalals are preserved. In other Christian dialects they shifted to the corresponding plosives or even to the sibilants. The latter happened also in the Jewish dialect of Zakho. But in the Jewish dialects of Iran we find *l* in the place of the old interdentalals, in Urmia only for the old voiceless interdental, in Kerend for both, the voiced and the voiceless interdental. A non-Jewish speaker of Aramaic would never understand the words *belá* "house" and *ilá* "hand".

Recordings of this type of Aramaic dialects can be found here:

Christian north-eastern Neo-Aramaic:

http://www.semarch.uni-hd.de/dokumentgruppen.php43?ST_ID=5&DT_ID=42&lang=de

Jewish north-eastern Neo-Aramaic:

http://www.semarch.uni-hd.de/dokumentgruppen.php43?ST_ID=5&DT_ID=124&lang=de

Beside the Jews and the Christians, the Mandaeans of Iran also speak a Neo-Aramaic language. The majority of the Mandeans live in Iraq and switched to Arabic during the past century. During the war between Iraq and Iran in the 1980's all the villages in which the Mandaeans of Iran used to live were destroyed with the exception of the city of Ahwāz. This is the only place in Iran in which Mandaeans live until today.

The Mandeans have a gnostic religion. They believe that they have the knowledge (*manda*) of the world of light (*alma d-nhura*) from where they came and to where they will return after they have left this world, which for them is the world of darkness. Their god is called Hayye, which means "live" and Hayye sends from time to time a messenger, called *manda d-hayye* to the Mandaeans in the world of darkness to instruct them. Their most important holy book is the *ginza rabba* (great treasure), which gives all the information on how to behave in the world of darkness in order to return safely to the world of light. They possess also many other books, among them the book of John (*draše d-yahya*), who is considered a messenger of the world of live, and the astrological book of the Zodiac, *asfar malwaše*. Their main rituals are the daily baptism in running water (*mašbūta*) and a mass for the ascension of the soul (*masiqta*). They have a clergy consisting of priests (*tarmide*) and bishops called *ganzibre*. At the top of the hierarchy is the *reš amma*, the head of the people.

Neo-Mandaic is the only Eastern Neo-Aramaic language that has preserved the old perfect form of the verb (*nšaq* "he kissed", *našaqat* "she

kissed" etc.). Otherwise this only holds in Western Neo-Aramaic. In all other Eastern Neo-Aramaic languages the old perfect was replaced by a new verbal form that developed out of the old passive participle *nšiq*:

Western Neo-Aramaic	Eastern Neo-Aramaic	
<p><i>*nšaq</i> > <i>inšak</i> <i>*našqat</i> > <i>naškat</i></p>	<p>Ṭurōyo, NENA <i>*nšiq</i> + <i>le</i> > <i>nšiqle</i> <i>*nšiq</i> + <i>la</i> > <i>nšiqla</i></p>	<p>Modern Mandaic <i>*nšaq</i> > <i>nəšaq</i> <i>*nešqat</i> > <i>nəšqat</i></p>

The large language group of Eastern Neo-Aramaic contrasts with the small group of Western Neo-Aramaic spoken in Syria north of Damascus in only three villages. The most famous village is Maṣlūla:



Western Neo-Aramaic shares some features with Ṭuroyo. In both languages the old long vowel *ā* has shifted to *ō*. Both have preserved old *ḥ* and *x*, and the old phoneme *p* is replaced by *f*.

In other respects Western Neo-Aramaic differs from Ṭuroyo and from all other Eastern Neo-Aramaic languages. The old voiced plosive *Begadkephat* consonants *b*, *g* and *d* are replaced by the corresponding voiceless consonants. The fricative pronunciation of the *Begadkephat* consonants *g*, *d*, *k*, *p* und *t* was extended to word initial position. Gemination of consonants is always preserved in Western-Neo-Aramaic. The plural ending- is *-ō* in Western Neo-Aramaic against *-e* in the Eastern Neo-Aramaic dialects. Finally, the old verbal categories perfect and imperfect are preserved:

	Ṭuroyo	Western Neo-Aramaic
common:	*ā > ō *ḥ + x *p > f	<i>nōfəq/nofaq</i> <i>bōxe</i> <i>mōḥe</i> <i>falgo, faḥo</i>
		<i>nōfek</i> <i>bōx(i)</i> <i>mōḥ(i)</i> <i>felka, faḥa</i>
different:	*b/g/d Spirans -CC- Plural Verb	<i>kalbo, talgo, ḥuldo</i> <i>karmo, dewo</i> <i>lebo, emo</i> <i>yawme, ʿeze</i> <i>nšəqle</i> <i>d-nošəq/d-nošaḡ</i>
		<i>xalpa, telka, ḥōlta</i> <i>xarma, dēba</i> <i>leppa, emma</i> <i>yumō, ʿizzō</i> <i>inšak</i> <i>yinšuk</i>

Another remarkable, non-linguistic difference is the fact that by far the majority of Western Neo-Aramaic speakers are Muslims. While Eastern Neo-Aramaic has no Muslim native speakers, all inhabitants of Baxʿa and Jubbadin and a minority in Maʿlūla are Muslims and speak Aramaic.

Following the Jews, now the Aramaic speaking Christians and Mandaeans are also leaving their original settlement areas and are on the run from their hostile environment. (recently also the people from

Ma^ʿlūla, see: www.maaloula.de). In the coming few decades the Aramaic languages of these minorities will surely become extinct. Therefore it is very important to salvage, document and record as much as we can while there is still time.