Syriac alphabet

Syriac alphabet	
Type	Abjad
Languages	Aramaic (Classical Syriac, Assyrian Neo-Aramaic, Chaldean Neo-Aramaic, Turoyo, Christian Palestinian Aramaic), Arabic (Garshuni)
Time period	~200 BC to the present

Parent systems	Proto-Sinaitic alphabet
	• Phoenician alphabet
	  • Aramaic alphabet
	    • Syriac alphabet

Child systems	Sogdian →Orkhon (Turkic)
	  →Old Hungarian
	  →Old Uyghur
	  →Mongolian
	Nabataean alphabet
	  →Arabic alphabet
	  →N'Ko alphabet
	Georgian (*disputed*)

ISO 15924	`Syrc, 135`

	`Syre (138, ʾEsṯrangēlā variant)`
	`Syrj (137, Western variant)`
	`Syrn (136, Eastern variant)`

Direction	Right-to-left
Unicode alias	Syriac

The **Syriac alphabet** is a writing system primarily used to write the Syriac language from the 1st century AD. It is one of the Semitic abjads directly descending from the Aramaic alphabet and shares similarities with the Phoenician, Hebrew, Arabic, and the traditional Mongolian alphabets.

General remarks

Syriac is written from right to left. It is a cursive script where some, but not all, letters connect within a word. The alphabet consists of 22 letters, all of which are consonants. The vowel sounds are supplied by the reader's memory or by pointing (a system of diacritical marks to indicate the correct reading).

In fact, three letters act as matres lectionis: rather than being a consonant, they indicate a vowel. *ʾĀlap̄* (ܐ), the first letter, represents a glottal stop, but it can also indicate a vowel at the beginning or the end of a word. The letter *Waw* (ܘ) is the consonant *w*, but can also represent the vowels *o* and *u*. Likewise, the letter *Yōḏ (ܝ) represents the consonant* y*, but it also stands for the vowels* i *and* e.

In addition to the sounds of the language, the letters of the Syriac alphabet can be used to represent numbers in a system similar to Hebrew and Greek numerals.

When Arabic began to be the dominant spoken language in the Fertile Crescent, texts were often written in Arabic with the Syriac script. These writings are usually called *Karshuni* or *Garshuni* (ܓܪܫܘܢܝ). Garshuni is often used today by Neo-Aramaic speakers in written communication such as letters and fliers.

Forms of the Syriac alphabet

There are three major variants of the Syriac alphabet.

Classical ʾEṣṭrangēlā

The oldest and classical form of the alphabet is ʾEṣṭrangēlā (ܐܣܛܪܢܓܠܐ; the name is thought to derive from the Greek adjective στρογγύλη (*strongylē*, 'rounded'),[1] though it has also been suggested to derive from ܣܪܛܐ ܐܘܢܓܠܝܐ (*serṭā ʾewangēlāyā*, 'gospel character')[2]). Although ʾEṣṭrangēlā is no longer used as the main script for writing Syriac, it has received some revival since the 10th century. It is often used in scholarly publications (for instance, the Leiden University version of the Peshitta), in titles and inscriptions. In some older manuscripts and inscriptions it is possible for any letter to join to the left, and older Aramaic letter forms (especially of Ḥeth and the lunate Mem) are found. Vowel marks are usually not used with ʾEṣṭrangēlā.

MS 577
Syriac Serṭâ book script. Mt. Sinai, Egypt, ca. 11th c.

11th century book in Syriac Serṭā.

East Syriac Maḏnḥāyā

The East Syriac dialect is usually written in the *Maḏnḥāyā* (ܡܕܢܚܝܐ, 'Eastern') form of the alphabet. Other names for the script include *Swāḏāyā* (ܣܘܕܝܐ, 'conversational', often translated as 'contemporary', reflecting its use in writing modern Neo-Aramaic), 'Assyrian' (not to be confused with the traditional name for the Hebrew alphabet), 'Chaldean', and, inaccurately, 'Nestorian' (a term that was originally used to refer to the Church of the East in the Persian Empire). The Eastern script resembles ʾEṣṭrangēlā more closely than the Western script, being somewhat a midway point between the two. The Eastern script uses a system of dots above or below letters, based on an older system, to indicate vowels:

- A dot above and a dot below a letter represent [a], transliterated as *a* or *ă* (ܦܬ݂ܚܐ, *Ptāḥā*),
- Two diagonally-placed dots above a letter represent [ɑ], transliterated as *ā* or *â* or *å* (ܙܩܦܐ, *Zqāpā*),
- Two horizontally-placed dots below a letter represent [ɛ], transliterated as *e* or *ě* (ܪܒ݂ܨܐ ܐܪܝܟ݂ܐ, *Rḇāṣā ărīḵā* or ܙܠܡܐ ܦܫܝܩܐ, *Zlāmā pšīqā*; often pronounced [ɪ] and transliterated as *i* in the East Syriac dialect),
- Two diagonally-placed dots below a letter represent [e], transliterated as *ē* (ܪܒ݂ܨܐ ܟܪܝܐ, *Rḇāṣā karyā* or ܙܠܡܐ ܩܫܝܐ, *Zlāmā qašyā*),
- A letter *Yōḏ* with a dot beneath it represents [i], transliterated as *ī* or *i* (ܚܒ݂ܨܐ, *Ḥḇāṣā*),
- A letter *Waw* with a dot below it represents [u], transliterated as *ū* or *u* (ܥܨܐ ܐܠܝܨܐ, *ʿṢāṣā ălīṣā* or ܪܒ݂ܨܐ, *Rḇāṣā*),
- A letter *Waw* with a dot above it represents [o], transliterated as *ō* or *o* (ܥܨܐ ܪܘܝܚܐ, *ʿṢāṣā rwīḥā* or ܪܘܚܐ, *Rwāḥā*).

- A combination of *Rḇāṣā karyā* (usually) followed by a letter *Yōḏ* represents [e] (possibly *[ẹ] in Proto-Syriac), transliterated as *ē* or *ê* (ܐ�ֵܣܵܩܵܐ, *ʾĀsāqā*).

It is thought that the Eastern method for representing vowels influenced the development of the *Niqqud* markings used for writing Hebrew.

In addition to the above vowel marks, transliteration of Syriac sometimes includes *ə*, *ě* or superscript [e] (or often nothing at all) to represent an original Aramaic schwa that became lost later on at some point in the development of Syriac. Some transliteration schemes find its inclusion necessary for showing spirantization (see below) or for historical reasons. Whether because its distribution is mostly predictable (usually inside a syllable-initial two-consonant cluster) or because its pronunciation was lost, neither the East nor West variants of the alphabet have a sign to represent the schwa.

West Syriac Serṭā
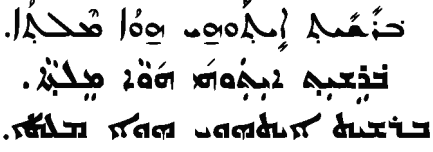
The West Syriac dialect is usually written in the *Serṭā* (ܣܶܪܛܵܐ, 'line') form of the alphabet, also known as the *Pšīṭā* (ܦܫܝܼܛܵܐ, 'simple'), 'Maronite', or the 'Jacobite' script (although the term *Jacobite* is considered derogatory). Most of the letters are clearly derived from ʾEsṭrangēlā, but are simplified, flowing lines. A

Serṭo
Madnḥāyā
Esṭrangelā

Brēšiṯ iṯaw[hy]-[h]wā melṯā.
In the beginning was the Word.

The opening words of the Gospel of John written in Serṭā, Maḏnḥāyā and ʾEsṭrangēlā (top to bottom) — brēšiṯ iṯaw[hy]-[h]wā melṯā, 'in the beginning was the word'.

cursive, chancery hand is evidenced in the earliest Syriac manuscripts, but important works were written in ʾEsṭrangēlā. From the 8th century, the simpler Serṭā style came into fashion, perhaps because of its more economical use of parchment. The Nabataean alphabet (which gave rise to the Arabic alphabet) was based on this form of Syriac handwriting. The Western script is usually vowel-pointed with miniature Greek vowel letters above or below the letter which they follow:

- Capital Alpha (A) represents [a], transliterated as *a* or *ă* (ܦܬ̈ܳܚܳܐ, *Pṯāḥā*),
- Lowercase Alpha (α) represents [ɑ], transliterated as *ā* or *â* or *å* (ܙܩ̈ܦܐ, *Zqāp̄ā*; pronounced as [o] and transliterated as *o* in the West Syriac dialect),
- Lowercase Epsilon (ε) represents both [ε], transliterated as *e* or *ĕ*, and [e], transliterated as *ē* (ܪ̈ܒܳܨܳܐ, *Rḇāṣā*),
- Capital Eta (H) represents [i], transliterated as *ī* (ܚ̈ܒܳܨܳܐ, *Ḥḇāṣā*),
- A combined symbol of capital Upsilon (Υ) and lowercase Omicron (o) represents [u], transliterated as *ū* or *u* (ܥ̈ܨ̈ܨܳܐ, *ʿṢāṣā*).
- Lowercase Omega (ω), used only in the vocative interjection *ʾō* (ܐܘ̄, 'O!').

Summary table

The Syriac alphabet consists of the following letters, shown in their isolated (non-connected) forms. When isolated, the letters *Kāp̄*, *Mīm*, and *Nūn* are usually shown with their initial form connected to their final form (see below). The letters *ʾĀlap̄*, *Dālaṯ*, *Hē*, *Waw*, *Zayn*, *Ṣāḏē*, *Rēš*, and *Taw* (and, in early ʾEsṭrangēlā manuscripts, the letter *Semkaṯ*[3]) do not connect to a following letter within a word when written. These are marked with an asterisk (*).

Name	Letter			Sound Value		Numerical Value	Phoenician Equivalent	Hebrew Equivalent	Arabic Equivalent
	ʾEsṭrangēlā	Maḏnḥāyā	Serṭā	Transliteration	IPA				
ʾĀlap̄* (ܐܠܦ)	ܐ	ܐ	ܐ	ʾ or nothing	[ʔ] or silent	1		א	ا
Bēṯ (ܒܝܬ)	ܒ	ܒ	ܒ	hard: b soft: ḇ (also bh, v, β)	hard: [b] soft: [v] or [w]	2		ב	ب
Gāmal (ܓܡܠ)	ܓ	ܓ	ܓ	hard: g soft: ḡ (also g, gh, ġ, γ)	hard: [g] soft: [ɣ]	3		ג	غ ,ج
Dālaṯ* (ܕܠܬ)	ܕ	ܕ	ܕ	hard: d soft: ḏ (also dh, ð, δ)	hard: [d] soft: [ð]	4		ד	ذ ,د
Hē* (ܗܐ)	ܗ	ܗ	ܗ	h	[h]	5		ה	ه
Waw* (ܘܘ)	ܘ	ܘ	ܘ	consonant: w mater lectionis: ū or ō (also u or o)	consonant: [w] mater lectionis: [u] or [o]	6		ו	و
Zayn* (ܙܝܢ)	ܙ	ܙ	ܙ	z	[z]	7		ז	ز
Ḥēṯ (ܚܝܬ)	ܚ	ܚ	ܚ	ḥ	[ħ], [x], or [χ]	8		ח	خ ,ح
Ṭēṯ (ܛܝܬ)	ܛ	ܛ	ܛ	ṭ	[tˤ]	9		ט	ط
Yōḏ (ܝܘܕ)	ܝ	ܝ	ܝ	consonant: y mater lectionis: ī (also i)	consonant: [j] mater lectionis: [i] or [e]	10		י	ي
Kāp̄ (ܟܦ)	ܟ	ܟ	ܟ	hard: k soft: ḵ (also kh, x)	hard: [k] soft: [x]	20		כ ך	خ ,ك
Lāmaḏ (ܠܡܕ)	ܠ	ܠ	ܠ	l	[l]	30		ל	ل
Mīm (ܡܝܡ)	ܡ	ܡ	ܡ	m	[m]	40		מ ם	م
Nūn (ܢܘܢ)	ܢ	ܢ	ܢ	n	[n]	50		נ ן	ن
Semkaṯ (ܣܡܟܬ)	ܣ	ܣ	ܣ	s	[s]	60		ס	س
ʿĒ (ܥܐ)	ܥ	ܥ	ܥ	ʿ	[ʕ]	70		ע	ع
Pē (ܦܐ)	ܦ	ܦ	ܦ	hard: p soft: p̄ (also p, ḟ, ph, f)	hard: [p] soft: [f]	80		פ ף	ف
Ṣāḏē* (ܨܕܐ)	ܨ	ܨ	ܨ	ṣ	[sˤ]	90		צ ץ	ص
Qōp̄ (ܩܘܦ)	ܩ	ܩ	ܩ	q	[q]	100		ק	ق
Rēš* (ܪܝܫ)	ܪ	ܪ	ܪ	r	[r]	200		ר	ر
Šīn (ܫܝܢ)	ܫ	ܫ	ܫ	š (also sh)	[ʃ]	300		ש	ش
Taw* (ܬܘ)	ܬ	ܬ	ܬ	hard: t soft: ṯ (also th, θ)	hard: [t] soft: [θ]	400		ת	ث ,ت

Contextual forms of letters

Letter	ʾEsṭrangēlā (classical)			Maḏnḥāyā (eastern)		
	Normal form	**Final connected**	**Final unconnected**	**Normal form**	**Final connected**	**Final unconnected**
ʾĀlap̄					[1]	
Bēṯ						
Gāmal						
Dālaṯ						
Hē						
Waw						
Zayn						
Ḥēṯ						
Ṭēṯ						
Yōḏ						
Kāp̄						
Lāmaḏ						
Mīm						
Nūn						
Semkaṯ						
ʿĒ						
Pē						
Ṣāḏē						
Qōp̄						
Rēš						
Šīn						
Taw						

[1] In the final position following *Dālaṯ* or *Rēš*, *ʾĀlap̄* takes the normal form rather than the final form.

Ligatures

Name	ʾEsṭrangēlā (classical)			Maḏnḥāyā (eastern)			Unicode character(s)	Description
	Normal form	Final connected	Final unconnected	Normal form	Final connected	Final unconnected		
Lāmaḏ-ʾĀlap̄	ܠܐ			ܠܐ			󠀰󠀰	Lāmaḏ and ʾĀlap̄ combined at the end of a word
Taw-ʾĀlap̄	ܬܐ			ܬܐ	ܬܐ	ܬܐ / ܬܐ	󠀰󠀰	Taw and ʾĀlap̄ combined at the end of a word
Hē-Yōḏ					ܗܝ		󠀰󠀰	Hē and Yōḏ combined at the end of a word
Taw-Yōḏ					ܬܝ		󠀰󠀰	Taw and Yōḏ combined at the end of a word

Letter alterations

In modern usage, some alterations can be made to represent phonemes not represented in classical orthography. A mark similar in appearance to a tilde, called *Majlīyānā* (ܡܓ̰ܠܝܢܐ), is placed either above or below a letter in the *Maḏnḥāyā* variant of the alphabet to change its phonetic value (see also: *Geresh*):

- Added to *Gāmal*: [g] to [d͡ʒ] (voiced postalveolar affricate)
- Added to *Kāp̄*: [k] to [t͡ʃ] (voiceless postalveolar affricate)
- Added to *Zayn*: [z] to [ʒ] (voiced postalveolar fricative)
- Added to *Šīn*: [ʃ] to [ʒ]

In addition to foreign sounds, a marking system is used to distinguish *qūššāyā* (ܩܘܫܝܐ, 'hard' letters) from *rūkkāḵā* (ܪܘܟܟܐ, 'soft' letters). The letters *Bēt*, *Gāmal*, *Dālaṯ*, *Kāp̄*, *Pē*, and *Taw*, all plosives ('hard'), are able to be spirantized into fricatives ('soft'). The system involves placing a single dot underneath the letter to give its 'soft' variant and a dot above the letter to give its 'hard' variant (though, in modern usage, no mark at all is usually used to indicate the 'hard' value):

Name	Plosive	Translit.	IPA	Name	Spirant	Translit.	IPA	Notes
Bēt (qšīṯā)	ܒ̇	b	[b]	*Bēt rakkīḵtā*	ܒ̣	ḇ	[v] or [w]	[v] has become [w] in most modern dialects.
Gāmal (qšīṯā)	ܓ̇	g	[g]	*Gāmal rakkīḵtā*	ܓ̣	ḡ	[ɣ]	
Dālaṯ (qšīṯā)	ܕ̇	d	[d]	*Dālaṯ rakkīḵtā*	ܕ̣	ḏ	[ð]	[d] is left unspirantized in some modern Eastern dialects.
Kāp̄ (qšīṯā)	ܟ̇ܟ̇	k	[k]	*Kāp̄ rakkīḵtā*	ܟܟ	ḵ	[x]	
Pē (qšīṯā)	ܦ̇	p	[p]	*Pē rakkīḵtā*	ܦ̮ or ܧ	p̄	[f] or [w]	[f] is not found in most modern Eastern dialects. Instead, it either is left unspirantized or sometimes appears as [w]. *Pē* is the only letter in the Eastern variant of the alphabet that is spirantized by the addition of a semicircle instead of a single dot.
Taw (qšīṯā)	ܬ̇	t	[t]	*Taw rakkīḵtā*	ܬ̣	ṯ	[θ]	[t] is left unspirantized in some modern Eastern dialects.

The mnemonic *bḡaḏkp̄āṯ* (ܒܓܕܟܦܬ) is often used to remember the six letters that are able to be spirantized (see also: *Begadkefat*).

In the East Syriac variant of the alphabet, spirantization marks are usually omitted when they interfere with vowel marks. The degree to which letters can be spirantized varies from dialect to dialect as some dialects have lost the ability for certain letters to be spirantized. For native words, spirantization depends on the letter's position within a word or syllable, location relative to other consonants and vowels, gemination, etymology, and other factors. Foreign words are not always subject to the rules for spirantization.

Unicode

The Syriac alphabet was added to the Unicode Standard in September, 1999 with the release of version 3.0.

Block

The Unicode block for Syriac is U+0700 ... U+074F:

Syriac[1] Unicode.org chart [4] (PDF)																
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	A	B	C	D	E	F
U+070x	∴	.	.	⁚	̤	̈	̣	̇	̇	̣	÷	⎺	﹨	✳		
U+071x	ܐ	ܑ	ܒ	ܓ	ܔ	ܕ	ܖ	ܗ	ܘ	ܙ	ܚ	ܛ	ܜ	ܝ	ܞ	ܟ
U+072x	ܠ	ܡ	ܢ	ܣ	ܤ	ܥ	ܦ	ܧ	ܨ	ܩ	ܪ	ܫ	ܬ			
U+073x	ܱ	ܲ	ܳ	ܴ	ܵ	ܶ	ܷ	ܸ	ܹ	ܺ	ܻ	ܼ	ܽ	ܾ	ܿ	݀
U+074x	݁	݂	݃	݄	݅	݆	݇	݈	݉	݊						

Notes	
1.^ As of Unicode version 6.3	

The Syriac Abbreviation (a type of overline) can be represented with a special control character called the Syriac Abbreviation Mark (U+070F).

HTML code table

Note: HTML numeric character references can be in decimal format (*&#DDDD*;) or hexadecimal format (*&#xHHHH*;). For example, ܕ and ܕ (1813 in hexadecimal) both represent U+0715 SYRIAC LETTER DALATH.

ʾĀlap̄ Bēṯ

ܕ	ܓ	ܒ	ܐ
ܕ	ܓ	ܒ	ܐ
ܚ	ܙ	ܘ	ܗ
ܚ	ܙ	ܘ	ܗ
ܠ	ܟ	ܝ	ܛ
ܠ	ܟ	ܝ	ܛ
ܝ	ܣ	ܢ	ܡ
ܥ	ܤ	ܢ	ܡ
ܪ	ܩ	ܨ	ܦ
ܪ	ܩ	ܨ	ܦ

		ܠ	ܡ
		ܬ	ܫ

Vowels and unique characters

ܺ	ܽ
ܲ	ܵ
ܸ	ܹ
ܸ	ܹ
ܼ	ܿ
ܼ	ܿ
̈	̰
̈	̰
݁	݂
݁	݂
ܘ	ܖ
܀	܂
ܘ	ݗ
܄	݇

References

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- Robinson, Theodore Henry (1915). *Paradigms and exercises in Syriac grammar*. Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-19-926129-6.
- Rudder, Joshua. *Learn to Write Aramaic: A Step-by-Step Approach to the Historical & Modern Scripts*. n.p.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011. 220 pp. ISBN 978-1461021421 Includes the Estrangela (pp. 59-113), Madnhaya (pp. 191-206), and the Western Serto (pp. 173-190) scripts.
- Thackston, Wheeler M. (1999). *Introduction to Syriac*. Bethesda, MD: Ibex Publishers, Inc. ISBN 0-936347-98-8.

Footnotes

[1] Hatch, William (1946). *An album of dated Syriac manuscripts*. Boston: The American Academy of Arts and Sciences, reprinted in 2002 by Gorgias Press. p. 24. ISBN 1-931956-53-7.

[2] Nestle, Eberhard (1888). *Syrische Grammatik mit Litteratur, Chrestomathie und Glossar*. Berlin: H. Reuther's Verlagsbuchhandlung. [translated to English as *Syriac grammar with bibliography, chrestomathy and glossary*, by R. S. Kennedy. London: Williams & Norgate 1889. p. 5].

[3] Coakley, J. F. (2002). *Robinson's paradigms and exercises in Syriac grammar* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press. p. 141. ISBN 978-0-19-926129-1.

[4] http://www.unicode.org/charts/PDF/U0700.pdf

External links

- The Syriac alphabet (http://www.omniglot.com/writing/syriac.htm) at Omniglot.com (http://www.omniglot.com/)
- The Syriac alphabet (http://ancientscripts.com/syriac.html) at Ancientscripts.com (http://ancientscripts.com/index.html)
- Unicode Entity Codes for the Syriac Script (http://tlt.psu.edu/suggestions/international/bylanguage/syriacchart.html)
- Download Syriac fonts (http://www.wazu.jp/gallery/Fonts_Syriac.html)
- How to write Aramaic - learn the Syriac cursive scripts (http://www.nativlang.com/aramaic-language/aramaic-writing-cursive.php)
- Aramaic and Syriac handwriting (http://www.syriac.talktalk.net/syriac_writing.html) ʾEsṭrangēlā (classical)
- Learn Assyrian (Syriac-Aramaic) OnLine (http://www.learnassyrian.com/aramaic/) Maḏnḥāyā (eastern)
- GNU FreeFont (http://www.gnu.org/software/freefont/) Unicode font family with Syriac range in its serif face.

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