



ASSYRIANS IN IRAN II. LITERATURE OF THE ASSYRIANS IN IRAN

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The modern Syriac idiom of the East Syrian Christians (termed “Neusyrisch” or modern, vernacular, or colloquial Syriac by scholars) has come to be labeled by the people themselves as “Assyrian.” This misleading term is also applied to the literature, replacing the old designation *siprāyūtā b-liššānā sūryāyā swādāyā* (literature in spoken Syriac); the latter was commonly used until the end of World War I. The term “Assyrian” was also intended to better distinguish literature in the spoken idiom from that in classical Syriac. Classical Syriac is referred to as *liššānā ‘attīqa* (ancient language) or *liššānā siprāyā* (literary language).

A spoken dialect of Mesopotamian Syriac, called Sūret and in local Arabic Fellīhī, had been written by the poets of the “school of Alqoš” in the monastery of Rabban Hormezd as early as the beginning of the seventeenth century. But it remained for the American Presbyterian missionary Rev. Dr. Justin Perkins early in the 1840s to make the Iranian (As)syrian dialect of Urmia the most important literary language of the people who later called themselves



Assyrians. Aided by the priests Aḫrāhām from Gūgtāpāh, Deḥhā and Īšōʿ from Gāvār, as well as the Nestorian bishop Yōḥannān from Gavilān and the deacons Ishāq and Tammū, he worked out the first orthographical and grammatical rules for this spoken idiom and started an effective campaign against illiteracy. At the time of his arrival in Urmia, there were, among 125,000 inhabitants of the city, only about forty men able to read and write and among the women only one, the sister of the patriarch. Through Perkins' admirable efforts, these people, after having been neglected for centuries, were awakened to an intensive cultural life. In the first (As)syrian press Perkins published not only his complete modern Syriac translation of the Bible, but also more voluminous publications than any Assyrian author after him (Macuch, pp. 117-30). Two of his first collaborators, Albert Lewis Holladay and David Tappan Stoddard, are known as the first grammarians of modern Syriac, the former through his neo-Syriac booklet *Huggāyā* (The speller) for the use of the natives, the latter through his English grammatical outline (London, 1855 = *JAOS* 5, 1856, pp. 1-180). The latter enabled Th. Nöldeke to present the first scholarly description of this language in his *Grammatik der neusyrischen Sprache am Urmia-See und in Kurdistan* (Leipzig, 1868, repr. 1974) with more certainty than he could have done using only neo-Syriac publications. The grammatical and lexicographical investigations of the missionaries culminated at the end of the century in two scholarly achievements by the English missionary A. J. Maclean (*Grammar of the Dialects of Vernacular Syriac*, Cambridge, 1895, repr. 1971, and *A Dictionary of the Dialects of Vernacular Syriac*, Oxford, 1901, repr. 1972). It is noteworthy that Maclean chose the name of "Vernacular Syriac," though his Mission was officially called "to Assyrian Christians."

The literary production of the first decades of this literature was almost entirely in the hands of the missionaries. It is only at the end of the last century that we can name some outstanding native authors: Paul Bedjan (1838-1920; [Figure 1](#)) from Ƙosrava, known chiefly as an indefatigable editor of voluminous classical Syriac texts, was also a fine modern Syriac writer, as is proved by his *Ktābā d-ebādatkārūtā. Manuel de piété* (Paris, 1886, 2nd ed. 1893); *Ḥayyē d-qaddīšē. Vie des saints* (Paris and Leipzig, 1912), etc. Another Chaldean scholar Mgr. Tōmā Odō (1853-1918), the most outstanding modern Syriac writer, published *Ktābā d-Kalīlā wa-Dimnā. Fables indiennes, traduites en langue chaldéenne* (Mosul, 1895); *Dictionnaire de la langue chaldéenne* (Mosul, 1897); *Ktābā d-grāmātiqī d-liššānā swādāyā* ("Grammar of vernacular Syriac," Urmia, 1905, 1911); *Ktābā d-qeryānē gubyē* (*Morceaux choisis*, Urmia,



1906); *Ktābā d-mā*” *matlē* (“A Book of hundred tales,” a translation of the Fables of Lafontaine, Urmia, 1907, 2nd ed., Tehran, 1956); along with several theological and nationalist publications. His fine poetic style remains unequalled in modern Syriac literature. Rābī Bābā d-Kōsī, the head of the national movement in Urmia at the beginning of this century, was preparing an extensive *Dictionary of Modern Syriac*, of which only a few fascicles were issued; the work as a whole remained unpublished because of financial difficulties which prevented many Syriac writers from publishing the fruits of their labors.

The most important editors of the periodicals appearing in Urmia were as follows: Mīrzā Šmū’ēl Bādāl Ḥāngaldē (1865-1908): *Za(h)rīrē d-ba(h)rā*; Ābā Solomon: *Qālā d-šrārā*; Šlīmōn Īšō’ from Salmās (1884-1951): *Ūrmī ārtādoksētā*; Yōḥannān Mūšē (1874-1918): *Kokḇā*. The following writers are mostly known from the mentioned periodicals: Rev. Aḇrahām Morhāč; Mīrzā Masrūf Ḥān Karam (1862-1943) published later a translation of the *Robā’iyāt* of ‘Omar Kayyām and of the verses of the poet Bābā Ṭāher ‘Oryān (Tabrīz, 1933); Rābī Pōlōs Sarmas (1870-1939); Rev. Mūšē Dūmān (1872-1917); Rābī Pē’rā Amrīḥaš (1872-1945); Rābī Aprēm Uršān (1874-1937); Šmū’ēl ‘Aywāz Bēt Ya’qōb who emigrated to America but contributed from there to *Kokḇā*; and some others, among them several immigrants in America who continued to participate in the literary life in their native country.

Although there were four missionary printing-houses in Urmia before the end of World War I, the Iranian Assyrian writers and poets were producing much more than they were able to publish. Many of their literary products remained in manuscript or were published only posthumously, sometimes long after the death of the author. E.g., *Ktābā d-mūšḥātē* (A book of poems) of Šim’ōn bar Dāwīd from Āda (1859-1914) was published in 1945 in Baghdad by his daughter Maryam; a heroic poem *Ātor rabtā* (Great Assyria) of Dāwīd Gīwargīs Māleḵ from Sopūrḡān (1876-1931) was published in 1932 in Beirut by Māleḵ Qambar; a collection of nationalist poems of Šlīmōn Īšō’ from Salmās (1884-1951), *Sāpār d-dem’è b-uḥḥā d-demmā* (The journey of the tears on the bloody way) was published in Tehran, 1962 by William W. Māleḵ Pē’rā. After World War I neo-Syriac books continued to be published in Tabrīz, but in that time of material distress the Assyrians could hardly afford much more than to reprint some older books which had been published in the press of Urmia. In fact, the most fruitful Assyrian writers in Tehran, Benyāmīn Kaldānī (b. 1879) and Benyāmīn Arsānīs (1882-1957) had to publish their works in lithographed



editions.

Due to the lack of a proper printing-house, the Assyrian book production remained limited until the brothers Adday and Jean Aḷḥāš in Tehran, 1951, founded a new printing-house named “Ḥoneyn” after the Syriac-Arabic translator of Greek science. Adday Aḷḥāš (1897-1959) started in the same year to publish a new literary periodical, *Gilgameš*, which continued to appear for a decade and became a literary tribune for Assyrian writers, not only in Iran but in the whole world. He also achieved the first masterpiece of modern Syriac poetry, a versified translation of the Akkadian epic of *Gilgamesh*, which appeared in installments in his periodical. A complete edition was provided six years after his death by Jean (1908-69) (Tehran, Ḥoneyn Press, 1965). With his collaborators, the philologists Zay‘ā d-Bēt Zay‘ā (1897-1972) and Nemrōd Sīmōnō (b. 1908), he succeeded in purifying the modern Syriac idiom of Turkish and Kurdish words, replacing them by classical expressions and creating an elegant literary language.

Through the efforts of these literary personalities and of the Assyrian Youth Cultural Society founded in Tehran, 1950, the Iranian Assyrians have taken the leading role in modern Syriac literature. The following authors of our time deserve to be mentioned: Prānsā Beblā (b. 1896): *Qānūnē šāt’ēsāyē d-Hamūrābī* (Hammurabi’s fundamental laws; Tehran, 1966); *Laylawātē d-Bāḃēl* (The nights of Babylon; Tehran, 1966); *Ātorāyē d-māhal d-Wān* (The Assyrians of the region of Van; Tehran, 1968). Warda Bēt Haydārē (b. 1896): poetry. Šmū’ēl Yōsip Bēt Kūlyā (1898-1975): *Sāpar d-qašīšā Šlīḃō l’šmayyā* (The journey of the Priest Š. to Heaven, Tehran, 1962); *Ḥāčāqōḡē yan plaḥtā d-helṭūnyūtā b-hamāntā l-dūglē* (The hypocrites of errors of superstitions, poetry; Tehran, 1967); he has left several manuscripts. Gūršūm Dūmān, *Gūḡḡā d-gūḡḡē b-dōrā d-ātōmā* (Atrocity of atrocities in the atom age, Tehran, 1965). Lilē (Lilly) Aḃrāhām Taymūrāzī (b. 1900): children literature, folklore, poetry, translations from English and Russian. Yūšīyā Amrīḡaš (b. 1900): *Tpaqtā b-yemmā* (The meeting with mother, nationalist poetry; Tehran, 1965). Dr. Pē’rā Sarmas (1901-72): *Taš’ītā d-siprāyūtā ātorētā* I-III (History of Assyrian literature; Tehran, 1962-70); a Neo-Syriac translation of Barhebraeus’ *Anecdotes* (Tehran, 1964); a supplementary dictionary of the Assyrian (= neo-Syriac) language (Tehran, 1965); *Aḡnām mānī(y) waḡ?* (Who are we?; Tehran, 1965); and in Persian *Ḥoqūq-e ensānī wa Ašūrīhā-ye Īrān* (Tehran, 1965). Bābā Lāčīn (b. 1902): *Ātorāyē wa-mšīḡayūtā* (Assyrians and Christianity, *Ātor*, 1969); poems in periodicals and calenders. Kākū Ōša’nā (b. 1902): *Urḡā kitwanta*(A



thorny way; Tehran, 1965). Raĵinā Īšhāq (1902-66): *Penqītā d-mūšhātē* (A booklet of poems, published after her death, Tehran, 1966). Mārōsā ʿĪsā-Ĥān (b. 1903: Patriotic poems in *Gilgameš*). Īšā'yā Šammāšā Dāwīd (b. 1906): *Taš'itā d-Betnahrayn Āšūr-Bāḥèl* (see Bibliography); numerous articles and poems in periodicals. M^onašše S. Amīrā (b. 1906): *Taš'itā d-Ātor...* (see Bibliography above); a collection of poems. Miḵā'èl Š. Amriĵā'š (b. 1909): *Taš'itā d-plāšā teblāyā trayānā* (A history of the Second World War, poems; Tehran, n.d.). Amēḥḥā'n A. Bèt-Ĥūdā (b. 1909): *Walwalyātē d-yātōmē* (The lamentations of the orphans; Tehran, 1967). William Sarmas (b. 1910), brother of Dr. Pē'rā (see above), is the most prominent and prolific Assyrian author, poet, dramaturgist, lexicographer and journalist (d. 1985). He lived in Cannes, where since 1970 he edited the periodical *Maṭe'bānā bulletin d'information de l'association des assyriens (et des amis des assyriens) en France* (see detailed review by Macuch, pp. 310-22). Mišā'èl Bèt Paṭros (1910-70): numerous poems and articles in *Gilgameš* and *Ātor*. Šūpyā (Sofia) Bāsīliyōs (b. 1911) wrote poems and songs for the Assyrian club Ninīve which were set to music by the famous Assyrian composer Nēbū ʿĪsā-bī and published under the little of *ʿEsri syāmē d-myūzīg* (Twenty musical compositions, Tehran, 1970). Erāmyā Yūḥannān Slībā (b. 1911) has published the following collections of poems: *Za(h)rīrā qa(d)māyā* (The first ray; Tehran, 1955); *Za(h)rīrā trāyānā* (The second ray) and *Tpaqtā d-lā spārā b-Nānū Šīrīn* (An unexpected meeting with N. Š.; Tehran, 1965). William S. Dānī'èl, poet and composer: *A(h)rīrē d-umtā nūtā* (Rays of nationalism, popular Assyrian songs with melodies, 1944); *Qāṭnā ga(n)bārā: Mūšhātē ga(n)bārē b-liššānā ātorāya I-III* (The Hero Q., a heroic epic in the Assyrian language, Tehran, 1961-65); *Rāmīnā pātantā* (The charming R.; Tehran, 1967). He is now living in the USA where he directs the Assyrian radio and television program in Chicago and edits the periodical *Mhadiana*. Bābāĵān I. Āšōrē (b. 1912): poems, *Šeblē* (The gleaning, Tehran, 1965) and *Beblē* (The blossoms; Tehran, 1970). Dr. Wilson Bèt-Manšūr (b. 1927), editor of the periodical *Ātor-Āšūrīn* Neo-Syriac, Persian, and English, published in Tehran. Ṭūḥiyā Abrāhām Gīwargīs (b. 1932), poet and translator, an official collaborator of the periodical *Ātor*, has published a translation of W. E. Wigram, *Our Smallest Ally* (Tehran, 1967) and a collection of aphorisms *Mārganyātē d-ḥekmyātē* (The pearls of wisdom, Tehran, 1970).

The manifold subjects of the Iranian-Assyrian literature in our day prove that it liberated itself from the narrow religious frame in which it was predominantly kept in the past.



Search terms:

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