

# Assyria, Syria, and Syriac: An Interdisciplinary Reassessment of Their Historical, Linguistic, and Cultural Continuum

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## Abstract

The historical relationship between the designations Assyria, Syria, and Syriac has long occupied a central place in discussions of Near Eastern history, historical linguistics, and communal identity. Although modern scholarship has debated whether *Syria* represented a designation distinct from *Assyria* or a later linguistic development of the same name, recent advances in epigraphy, Assyriology, archaeology, historical linguistics, and Syriac studies have fundamentally reshaped the discussion.

This article presents an interdisciplinary reassessment of the historical relationship between Assyria, Syria, and Syriac, integrating evidence from ancient inscriptions, Classical literature, patristic interpretation, Syriac literary and manuscript traditions, archaeology, and modern scholarship. Particular attention is given to the Çineköy bilingual inscription, whose correspondence between Sura/i in the Luwian text and 'Aššur in the Phoenician version provides the earliest direct epigraphic evidence bearing upon the Assyria–Syria question.

The study also re-examines the principal historiographical challenges to the Assyria → Syria derivation, including nineteenth-century separationist frameworks, methodological critiques, alternative etymological proposals, and interpretations that distinguish the historical application of the Syrian designation from its original formation.

The cumulative evidence indicates that Syria emerged as a historical and linguistic development of Assyria rather than as an unrelated designation. More importantly, the study demonstrates that this conclusion rests not upon a single inscription, textual tradition, or philological argument, but upon the cumulative corroboration of independent categories of evidence—including epigraphic, Classical, patristic, linguistic, Syriac, manuscript, archaeological, and historiographical sources—which collectively preserve a continuous historical relationship between the designations Assyria, Syria, and Syriac across nearly three millennia.

**Keywords:** Assyria; Syria; Syriac; Çineköy Inscription; Assyria–Syria Question; Historical Linguistics; Syriac Studies; Indigenous Assyrian Manuscript Traditions; Ethnonyms; Historical Toponymy; Cultural Continuity; Communal Identity; Near Eastern Historiography.

## **Part I — Method and Historiography**

### **Introduction**

The historical relationship between the designations Assyria, Syria, and Syriac remains one of the most enduring and consequential questions in the study of the ancient Near East. Although frequently approached as a problem of nomenclature, the issue extends far beyond the history of words. It intersects with questions of historical geography, cultural memory, ethnogenesis, linguistic development, manuscript transmission, biblical interpretation, and the interpretation of ancient and medieval sources. Consequently, the Assyria–Syria question occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of Assyriology, Classical studies, historical linguistics, Syriac studies, and Near Eastern historiography.

The debate is far from modern. Classical authors preserved traditions that explicitly or implicitly associated the names Syria and Assyria, while patristic writers, Syriac literary and manuscript traditions, and later historical sources likewise employed terminology reflecting a comparable understanding.

During the nineteenth century, comparative philologists advanced influential explanations for the origin of the Syrian designation, most notably through the work of Theodor Nöldeke and other scholars of Semitic languages. Yet despite these contributions, the absence of direct epigraphic confirmation allowed alternative explanations and separationist interpretations to persist, leaving the question open to continued scholarly debate.

At the same time, the Assyria–Syria question generated an extensive historiography. Modern research has produced a wide range of interpretations concerning the relationship between the two designations. While many scholars have accepted some form of historical connection, others have questioned whether the derivation has been adequately demonstrated or have proposed alternative explanations.

These competing interpretations range from nineteenth-century separationist frameworks to more recent proposals deriving Syria from Sirion or the Hurrians. Any reassessment of the question

must therefore evaluate not only the evidence supporting an Assyria–Syria relationship, but also the principal objections and alternative explanations advanced over the course of the debate. Accordingly, the purpose of the present study is not merely to revisit a familiar philological problem, but to re-evaluate the full body of evidence upon which the Assyria–Syria question has historically been discussed.

Beyond historiographical debate, discussions concerning the relationship between Assyria, Syria, and Syriac have frequently become intertwined with broader questions of ethnicity, language, religion, and continuity.

Important though these broader discussions are, they should not obscure the distinction between two closely related questions. The first concerns whether the designation Syria derives historically from Assyria. The second concerns how the populations associated with these names should be understood across different periods. The latter encompasses a much wider range of historical, cultural, and historiographical issues that continue to invite scholarly discussion. The former, however, can be examined through the available evidence.

A major turning point in that investigation came with the publication and subsequent study of the Çineköy bilingual inscription from Cilicia. By demonstrating the correspondence between Sura/i in the Luwian text and 'Aššur in the Phoenician version, the inscription supplied the first direct epigraphic evidence connecting the two designations within the ancient Near East itself.

The implications of this discovery extended well beyond philology. It prompted historians, Assyriologists, Classicists, patristic scholars, Syriac scholars, and archaeologists to re-examine longstanding assumptions concerning the development of the Assyrian and Syrian designations. More importantly, it became possible to evaluate the epigraphic evidence alongside independent testimony preserved in Classical literature, patristic interpretation, Syriac historiography, indigenous manuscript traditions, archaeology, and historical linguistics. The question could therefore be approached through multiple independent categories of evidence rather than through any single body of sources.

The present study re-examines the relationship between Assyria, Syria, and Syriac in light of this cumulative body of evidence and the principal alternative explanations proposed over the course of modern scholarship. By integrating epigraphic, Classical, patristic, linguistic, Syriac, manuscript, archaeological, and historiographical evidence, it seeks to clarify the development of

these designations and assess their wider significance for discussions of continuity, cultural transmission, and identity in the ancient and medieval Near East.

### **Methodological Framework**

The historical relationship between the designations Assyria, Syria, and Syriac has been examined through a variety of disciplinary approaches, including Assyriology, Classical studies, patristic studies, historical linguistics, archaeology, Syriac studies, manuscript studies, and Near Eastern historiography. Because the question spans multiple chronological periods, linguistic traditions, and cultural contexts, it cannot be resolved through any single category of source material or evidence.

The present study adopts a multidisciplinary methodology that prioritizes primary evidence while evaluating the extent to which independent categories of evidence converge, corroborate, and reinforce one another. Ancient inscriptions, Classical and patristic testimony, Syriac literary and historiographical traditions, indigenous manuscript traditions, and indigenous communal self-designations are considered alongside modern scholarly analyses from different disciplinary perspectives.

The investigation proceeds in four stages. First, it surveys the principal historiographical challenges to the Assyria–Syria derivation and the alternative explanations advanced in modern scholarship. Second, it examines the primary evidence bearing upon the historical relationship between Assyria, Syria, and Syriac, including epigraphic, Classical, patristic, linguistic, Syriac, manuscript, and indigenous sources. Third, it evaluates the principal competing explanations in light of the available evidence. Finally, it considers the broader implications of the findings for questions of historical continuity, communal self-identification, cultural transmission, inherited traditions, and the ways in which ancient peoples understood and interpreted their own past. Throughout this study, particular weight is accorded to instances in which otherwise independent categories of evidence converge upon comparable historical conclusions. Such convergence is considered especially significant when it arises independently across different chronological periods, linguistic traditions, and disciplinary approaches.

### **Historiographical Developments and Challenges to the Assyria–Syria Derivation**

The historical relationship between the designations Assyria and Syria has generated more than a century of scholarly debate. Modern interpretations range from acceptance of an historical and

linguistic relationship between the two names to methodological critiques, alternative etymological proposals, and broader historiographical frameworks that treat Assyria and Syria as historically distinct entities. The following survey examines these competing interpretations and evaluates their significance within the development of modern scholarship on the Assyria–Syria question.

### **William Smith and the Classical Geographical Tradition**

One of the earliest examples of the geographical framework from which later separationist interpretations emerged appears in William Smith's *A New Classical Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography, Mythology and Geography* (1862). Although not devoted specifically to the etymology of the name Syria, the dictionary reflects a classical geographical understanding that treated Syria and Assyria as distinct historical entities.<sup>1</sup>

His entry associates Syria closely with the biblical Aram, stating that the wider Syrian region was populated by the Aramaean branch of the Semitic peoples and that the territory was included in the Old Testament under the name Aram. This interpretation places emphasis upon an Aramaean identity and geographical framework rather than upon any derivation from Assyria. Particularly significant is the author's discussion of the relationship between Syria and Assyria: "Even when the name of Syria is used in its ordinary narrower sense, it is often confounded with Assyria, which only differs from Syria by having the definite article prefixed."<sup>2</sup>

Although this statement is not presented as a formal etymological argument, it reflects a geographical framework in which Syria and Assyria were generally treated as distinct regions while simultaneously acknowledging the longstanding Classical tendency to associate or confuse the two names. Rather than proposing an historical derivation from Assyria, Smith understood Syria primarily through biblical and Classical conceptions of Aram and the Aramaeans. His treatment therefore illustrates an important stage in nineteenth-century scholarship, before the question could be reassessed in light of later philological and epigraphic discoveries.

For this reason, Smith should not be classified as an explicit opponent of the Assyria → Syria derivation. Nevertheless, his dictionary illustrates the nineteenth-century geographical paradigm, grounded largely in Classical and biblical traditions, that treated Syria and Assyria as distinct

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<sup>1</sup> William Smith, ed., *A New Classical Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography, Mythology and Geography* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1862), 846–47.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 846.

historical entities and thereby contributed to the intellectual environment from which later separationist interpretations emerged. Similar assumptions concerning the distinction between Syria and Assyria would continue to characterize much nineteenth-century scholarship, including the influential work of Ernest Renan.<sup>3</sup>

### **Ernest Renan and the Nineteenth-Century Separationist Paradigm**

A more influential expression of this nineteenth-century interpretive paradigm may be found in the work of Ernest Renan. Throughout his *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques*, Renan generally treated Syria, Syriac, Assyria, Chaldea, and Mesopotamia as distinct historical and linguistic categories.<sup>4</sup>

Renan described Syriac as the ecclesiastical Aramaic of Edessa and Nisibis and repeatedly distinguished “Syria proper” from Mesopotamia, arguing that the development of Syriac literature occurred primarily east of the Euphrates rather than in Syria itself.<sup>5</sup> He further regarded Biblical language as representing the dialect of Syria and regarded Aramaic as the dominant spoken language of much of the population of Assyria during the later phases of the first millennium BCE.<sup>6</sup>

In Renan's reconstruction, Syria functioned primarily as an Aramaic linguistic and cultural sphere, while Assyria represented a distinct imperial civilization. His treatment therefore reinforced the conceptual separation of Syria and Assyria that characterized much nineteenth-century scholarship. Yet his position was not entirely rigid. By acknowledging that Greek authors designated the language of Babylonia and Assyria as *syriasti* (“Syrian”), Renan preserved an important element of the Classical tradition later cited by scholars supporting the Assyria–Syria relationship.<sup>7</sup>

He should therefore be understood not as a direct opponent of the Assyria → Syria derivation, but as a representative of a nineteenth-century scholarly tradition that generally regarded Syria and Assyria as separate historical and cultural spheres without directly addressing the etymological relationship between the two names.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 846.

<sup>4</sup> Ernest Renan, *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1878), 259–65, 515–19.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 259–65.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 214–16, 515–17.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## Jaroslaus Tkatsch and the Critique of Nöldeke's Derivation

One of the earliest substantial twentieth-century critiques of the linguistic derivation of Syria from Assyria was advanced by Jaroslaus Tkatsch in *Die arabische Übersetzung der Poetik des Aristoteles und die Grundlage der Kritik des griechischen Textes* (1928). Unlike the nineteenth-century separationist writers who largely assumed the independence of Syria and Assyria, Tkatsch engaged directly with Theodor Nöldeke's influential attempt to derive the Greek name Syria from Assyria.<sup>8</sup>

Examining a wide range of classical evidence from Herodotus, Xenophon, Strabo, Arrian, Diodorus, and other Greek and Roman authors, Tkatsch argued that the textual and manuscript tradition did not support Nöldeke's explanation that Syria represented merely a shortened or popularized form of Assyria. In a particularly significant passage, he argued that Nöldeke's celebrated study failed to provide proof that the Greek and Roman name Syria originated from such a development.<sup>9</sup>

Tkatsch further challenged Nöldeke's treatment of the ethnonyms Σύροι, Σύριοι, and Ἀσσύριοι, arguing that the surviving manuscript evidence reflected distinctions that could not easily be explained as the result of abbreviation or popular usage. He therefore left open the possibility that Syria represented an indigenous geographical designation distinct from Assyria, while acknowledging that neither its origin nor its precise historical relationship to Assyria could be established with certainty.<sup>10</sup> His criticism was grounded not only in linguistic considerations but also in a detailed examination of the manuscript traditions of classical authors, particularly Herodotus, whose usage of the ethnonyms Σύροι, Σύριοι, and Ἀσσύριοι formed an important part of the debate.

Nevertheless, Tkatsch's position was considerably more nuanced than that of later separationists. Although he rejected Nöldeke's derivation, he repeatedly emphasized that ancient Greek and Roman authors frequently applied the name Syria to Mesopotamian territories and populations. He described Mesopotamia as "the true stronghold of Syrianness" (*der wahre Hort des*

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<sup>8</sup> Jaroslaus Tkatsch, *Die arabische Übersetzung der Poetik des Aristoteles und die Grundlage der Kritik des griechischen Textes*, vol. 1 (Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1928), 43–46.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 43–44.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 43–45.

*Syrertums*) and located the heartland of Syriac language, literature, and Christianity in regions such as Edessa, Harran, Adiabene, Arbela, and Assyria itself.<sup>11</sup>

Tkatsch's critique was directed primarily against the linguistic derivation proposed by Nöldeke rather than against the broader historical association between Syria, Syriac civilization, and the Mesopotamian world. His work is important because it shifted the debate from inherited assumptions to questions of textual criticism, manuscript evidence, and linguistic method while simultaneously preserving many of the historical observations later employed by scholars on both sides of the controversy.

### **Franz Rosenthal and the Qualified Objection**

A valuable historiographical perspective on the debate was provided by Franz Rosenthal in his influential survey of Aramaic scholarship, *Die Aramaistische Forschung seit Th. Nöldekes Veröffentlichungen*. Because Rosenthal's work was later cited by scholars who opposed the Assyria → Syria derivation, it is often assumed that he himself rejected Nöldeke's theory. A closer reading, however, reveals a considerably more cautious position.<sup>12</sup> Unlike Tkatsch, who directly challenged Nöldeke's derivation, Rosenthal approached the question primarily as a historian of scholarship and a commentator on the development of the debate itself. Rosenthal discussed both Nöldeke's derivation of Syria from Assyria and the alternative proposal advanced by J. Tkatsch, who suggested that Syria might represent an entirely separate indigenous name unrelated to Assyria. Summarizing Tkatsch's view, Rosenthal observed: "J. Tkatsch, on the other hand, simply supposed that Syria was an indigenous form entirely different from Assyria, concerning whose origin nothing more precise could yet be said. This may perhaps one day indeed prove to be correct."<sup>13</sup>

The importance of this passage lies not in Rosenthal's endorsement of Tkatsch's theory, but rather in his willingness to acknowledge it as a possibility deserving further investigation. Yet he stopped well short of accepting it as an established fact. Even more revealing is Rosenthal's treatment of the phonological difficulties surrounding the Assyria → Syria derivation.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 45-55.

<sup>12</sup> Franz Rosenthal, *Die Aramaistische Forschung seit Th. Nöldekes Veröffentlichungen* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1939; repr., Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

While noting that the vocalism of the Greek forms presented certain problems, Rosenthal did not reject the derivation itself. On the contrary, he explicitly argued that the explanation of the Greek vowel quantity should be sought among the solutions already proposed by Nöldeke.<sup>14</sup>

In doing so, Rosenthal remained fundamentally within the Nöldekean framework while acknowledging unresolved linguistic questions. His position is therefore best understood as one of qualified skepticism rather than outright opposition. Later writers occasionally cited him as a critic of Nöldeke, yet a close reading of his survey shows that his assessment was considerably more restrained than such characterizations imply.

Rosenthal's significance lies not in the formulation of an alternative explanation, but in his role as a commentator on the controversy itself. His survey preserves the competing arguments of Nöldeke and Tkatsch, records the principal phonological objections that had been raised, and illustrates the extent to which the question remained unsettled in mid-twentieth-century scholarship.

In this respect, Rosenthal serves as an important historiographical witness to the debate rather than as a leading advocate of a rival theory. While Smith, Renan, Tkatsch, and Rosenthal primarily questioned, qualified, or reinterpreted aspects of the traditional derivation, a smaller number of scholars attempted to replace it with entirely new etymological models.

### **John A. Tvedtnes and the Hurrian–Egyptian Theory**

A more systematic challenge to the Assyria → Syria derivation was advanced by John A. Tvedtnes in a study devoted specifically to the question of Syria's etymology.<sup>15</sup> Unlike Tkatsch and Rosenthal, whose discussions focused primarily on perceived weaknesses in Nöldeke's derivation, Tvedtnes sought to provide a complete alternative explanation for the origin of the name Syria.

Reviewing earlier scholarship on the Assyria–Syria question, Tvedtnes noted that Theodor Nöldeke had argued that Syria derived from Assyria through linguistic transference. He also summarized several objections that had been raised against that derivation. Among them, Tkatsch suggested that Syria and Assyria may have had separate indigenous origins, while

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> John A. Tvedtnes, "The Origin of the Name 'Syria,'" *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 40, no. 2 (1981): 139–40.

Rosenthal drew attention to phonological difficulties associated with explaining the Greek form *Suria* from Akkadian *Aššūr* while remaining broadly within the Nöldekean framework.<sup>16</sup>

Tvedtnes examined and rejected several alternative explanations, including derivations from Subartu, the biblical Siryon, and other geographically relevant place-names.<sup>17</sup> He ultimately proposed that the name Syria originated among the Hurrians and entered Greek through Egyptian mediation. According to his reconstruction, the Hurrian ethnonym entered Egyptian as *Hrw* or *Huru*, eventually developing into a pronunciation approximating *Suri*, which was subsequently adopted into Greek as *Suria*.<sup>18</sup>

Tvedtnes' proposal is significant because it represents one of the few attempts to replace the Assyria → Syria derivation with a fully developed alternative etymological model. The theory nevertheless depends upon a sequence of linguistic transitions that are not directly attested in the surviving sources and therefore remains largely reconstructive in character.

While the proposal attracted attention as a systematic alternative to Nöldeke's explanation, it has not achieved broad scholarly acceptance and remains one of several competing attempts to explain the origin of the Greek designation *Syria* independently of Assyria.

### **Daniel Pipes and the Siryon Hypothesis**

A more recent alternative etymology was proposed by Daniel Pipes in *Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition*. Pipes argued that the name Syria derives from the Semitic term *Siryon*, the biblical Sidonian designation for Mount Hermon (Deut. 3:9).<sup>19</sup> According to this interpretation, the origin of Syria should be sought in a local Levantine geographical designation rather than in Assyria.

Pipes's discussion of the subject is brief and largely incidental to his broader study of Syrian political history. Unlike Tvedtnes, whose work was devoted specifically to the etymology of Syria, Pipes does not develop his proposal into a comprehensive linguistic theory. He offers neither a detailed philological explanation of the proposed development from *Siryon* to *Syria* nor an account of the historical process by which a local geographical designation might have expanded into the name of a much larger territorial entity. His discussion likewise predates the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 139.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 139-40.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 140.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 13–14.

renewed attention given to the Çineköy inscription and therefore does not engage extensively with the epigraphic evidence that later became central to the Assyria–Syria debate.

Accordingly, Pipes is best classified as an advocate of an alternative Levantine etymology rather than as a detailed philological or linguistic critic of the Assyria–Syria derivation. Like several other alternative explanations proposed in modern scholarship, the Siryon hypothesis offers a possible geographical point of origin for the designation Syria but leaves unresolved the question of how a local place-name became the designation of a much larger historical and geographical region. As such, Pipes's hypothesis is best understood as a geographical suggestion rather than a fully developed historical-linguistic model.

### **John Joseph and the Septuagintal Interpretation**

A different approach to the Assyria–Syria question was advanced by John Joseph, whose analysis focuses less upon the etymology of the designation Syria than upon the historical processes through which the terms Syria and Syrian became associated with Aramaean-speaking populations and later Syriac-speaking Christian communities.

While Joseph's interpretation addresses important questions of nomenclature, identity, and language, it encounters a fundamental difficulty when applied to the problem of the original formation of the designation Syria. In seeking to explain the designation Syria through the Septuagint's translation of Hebrew *Aram* and Aramaean as Syria and Syrian, Joseph effectively begins his analysis at a stage when the Greek terminology was already fully established. Yet the translators of the Septuagint did not create the designation Syria; they inherited and employed a nomenclature that had long been current in the Greek-speaking world.

Classical authors such as Herodotus and Strabo used the terms Syria and Syrian independently of the Septuagint and centuries before many of the later traditions invoked by Joseph.

Consequently, the Septuagint cannot explain the origin of the designation Syria; at most, it demonstrates how Jewish translators rendered Hebrew geographical terminology into the prevailing Greek vocabulary of their own age.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, the direction of adaptation may reasonably be understood in the opposite manner. Rather than Greek writers applying Syria to a pre-existing biblical *Aram*, the translators of the

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<sup>20</sup> John Joseph, “Nestorians, Chaldeans, Syrians, Arameans, Assyrians,” in *The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East: Encounters with Western Christian Missions, Archaeologists, and Colonial Power* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 9–14; Herodotus, *Histories* 7.63; Strabo, *Geography* 1.2.34.

Septuagint appear to have adapted Hebrew nomenclature to conform to an already established Greek geographical conception of Syria. The Hebrew Bible, whose primary purpose was theological, religious, and literary rather than ethnographic or philological, preserved its own traditional terminology, while the Septuagint reflects the linguistic and geographical conventions of the Hellenistic world.

Significantly, even the Posidonian tradition cited by Joseph presupposes the existence of the Greek designation Syria and seeks only to distinguish it from indigenous self-designations.

Posidonius observes that those whom the Greeks called Syrians were known among themselves as Aramaians, but he offers no explanation for the origin of the Greek term itself.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, Joseph's reconstruction simultaneously presupposes the aramaization of Assyria, the adoption of Aramaic within the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and the development of Syriac literary culture in territories historically associated with Assyria. Consequently, while seeking to explain the later application of the Syrian designation to Aramaean-speaking populations, his model leaves unresolved the earlier question of the historical origin of the designation itself and, in doing so, necessarily presupposes a continuing historical relationship between Assyria and the later Syriac-speaking world.

Even the ecclesiastical declaration cited by Joseph is concerned with the preservation of the Syrian designation as a communal self-identification rather than with its historical origin.

Consequently, it cannot function as evidence for the etymology of the name itself.<sup>22</sup>

### **Historiographical Analysis**

The sources examined thus far illustrate several distinct approaches to the Assyria–Syria question, ranging from inherited geographical assumptions and methodological critiques to fully developed alternative etymological theories.

Broadly speaking, these approaches may be grouped into four categories: separationist frameworks that treated Syria and Assyria as historically distinct designations; methodological

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<sup>21</sup> Strabo, *Geography* 1.2.34 (preserving Posidonius, fragment 280 in J. G. F. Kidd, *Posidonius*, vol. 2, pt. 2 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988], 955–56); Theodor Nöldeke, “Ἀσσύριος Σύριος Σύρος,” *Hermes* 6 (1871): 443–468; Richard N. Frye, “Assyria and Syria: Synonyms,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 51, no. 4 (1992): 281–285; Robert Rollinger, “Assyria and Syria: On the History of Two Related Names,” in *Conceptualizing Past, Present and Future*, ed. H. Genz and D. Bonatz (2015), 47–60.

<sup>22</sup> Ignatius Zakka I Iwas, “Encyclical: The True Name of Our Church,” Apostolic See of Antioch, 29 November 1981.

critiques questioning whether the Assyria → Syria derivation had been adequately demonstrated; alternative etymological theories proposing origins for Syria independent of Assyria; and ethnolinguistic interpretations concerned primarily with the historical application of the Syrian designation to particular populations rather than with its original formation.

William Smith and Ernest Renan represent a broader nineteenth-century separationist framework that habitually treated Syria, Syriac, Assyria, Chaldea, and Mesopotamia as distinct historical and linguistic categories. Neither scholar directly argued that Syria could not derive from Assyria; nevertheless, both contributed to an intellectual tradition that conceptualized Syria and Assyria as separate entities.<sup>23</sup>

A similar perspective appears in late nineteenth-century classical scholarship. The entry on Syria in Harper's *Dictionary of Classical Literature and Antiquities* describes Syria as a broad geographical designation extending from the Mediterranean to Mesopotamia and notes that the name was frequently "confounded with Assyria" in Classical usage. Although the explanation offered for this relationship reflected the limitations of contemporary scholarship and remained dependent upon biblical and geographical assumptions, the entry nevertheless demonstrates that the close association between Syria and Assyria was widely recognized prior to the emergence of modern philological and epigraphic analyses. This recognition is particularly noteworthy because it arose independently of the evidence later supplied by historical linguistics and the Çineköy bilingual inscription.<sup>24</sup>

Jaroslav Tkatsch occupies a particularly important position in the historiography of the debate. Unlike Smith and Renan, he engaged directly with Nöldeke's derivation and argued that the classical textual evidence did not prove that Syria originated as a shortened or popularized form of Assyria. Yet Tkatsch was not a simple separationist. While questioning Nöldeke's linguistic explanation, he simultaneously emphasized the Mesopotamian heartland of Syriac civilization, the broad ancient application of the name Syria to Mesopotamian territories, and the central role

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<sup>23</sup> William Smith, ed., *A New Classical Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography, Mythology and Geography* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1862), 846–47; Ernest Renan, *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1878), 259–65, 515–19.

<sup>24</sup> Harry Thurston Peck, ed., *Harper's Dictionary of Classical Literature and Antiquities* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1896), s.v. "Syria," 1515–1516.

of regions such as Edessa, Harran, Adiabene, Arbela, and Assyria in the development of Syriac language, literature, and Christianity.<sup>25</sup>

Rosenthal's contribution lies less in the formulation of an alternative explanation than in his role as a commentator on the controversy itself. His work preserves the competing arguments of Nöldeke and Tkatsch, records the principal phonological objections that had been raised, and illustrates the extent to which the question remained unsettled in mid-twentieth-century scholarship. In this respect, Rosenthal serves as a valuable historiographical witness to the debate rather than as a leading advocate of a rival theory.<sup>26</sup>

The most explicit alternative etymologies were proposed by John A. Tvedtnes and, in a more limited form, Daniel Pipes. Tvedtnes explicitly rejected the Assyria derivation and proposed a Hurrian–Egyptian pathway from Huru to Greek Suria, while Pipes advanced a Levantine explanation linking Syria to the biblical Siryon, the Sidonian designation of Mount Hermon.<sup>27</sup> Unlike Tvedtnes, however, Pipes did not develop the proposal into a detailed linguistic argument and provided no extensive philological defense of the derivation.

A fourth approach appears in the work of John Joseph, whose analysis shifts attention away from the etymology of the designation Syria and toward questions of nomenclature, ethnicity, language, and historical continuity. Joseph argues that the terms Syria and Syrian became associated with Aramaean-speaking populations through Greek usage and the translation practices of the Septuagint, and that these designations subsequently remained attached to Syriac-speaking Christian communities. Although his reconstruction seeks to explain the historical application of the Syrian designation to Aramaean-speaking populations, it simultaneously presupposes the aramaization of Assyria, the adoption of Aramaic within the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and the emergence of Syriac literary culture in territories historically associated with Assyria. His work therefore represents a significant historiographical tendency that explains the later application of the Syrian designation while nevertheless acknowledging

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<sup>25</sup> Jaroslaus Tkatsch, *Die arabische Übersetzung der Poetik des Aristoteles und die Grundlage der Kritik des griechischen Textes*, vol. 1 (Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1928), 43–55.

<sup>26</sup> Franz Rosenthal, *Die Aramaistische Forschung seit Th. Nöldekes Veröffentlichungen* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1939; repr., Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964), 4.

<sup>27</sup> John A. Tvedtnes, "The Origin of the Name 'Syria,'" *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 40, no. 2 (1981): 139–40; Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 13–14.

the central role of Assyria in the linguistic and cultural developments that made that process possible.<sup>28</sup>

Taken together, these sources demonstrate that opposition to, or hesitation about, the Assyria → Syria derivation was far from uniform. It ranged from inherited geographical separation and methodological criticism to explicit alternative etymologies and ethnolinguistic interpretations concerned primarily with the historical application of the Syrian designation rather than its original formation. This diversity is itself historiographically significant, for it shows that no single competing explanation emerged as a universally accepted alternative to the Assyria derivation. Rather, a variety of objections and hypotheses appeared at different stages of the debate, often reflecting broader assumptions about the historical relationship between Syria, Syriac civilization, Mesopotamia, and Assyria. Notably, even scholars who questioned the Assyria → Syria derivation frequently continued to associate Syriac language, literature, and identity with Mesopotamia and the regions historically connected with Assyria.

## **Part II — The Evidence**

### **The Earliest Epigraphic Evidence: The Çineköy Bilingual and the Assyria–Syria Equation**

The earliest direct epigraphic evidence relevant to the historical relationship between the terms Assyria and Syria is found in the bilingual inscription discovered at Çineköy in Cilicia, southern Anatolia. Published by Recai Tekoğlu and André Lemaire in 2000, the inscription is written in both Phoenician and Hieroglyphic Luwian and dates to the late eighth century BCE during the reign of Urikki (Warikas), king of Que.<sup>29</sup>

The importance of the inscription lies in its bilingual character. In the Phoenician version, reference is made to the king of 'Aššur and the *House of Assyria* ('ŠR; 'ŠRYM), while the corresponding Hieroglyphic Luwian text employs the designation *Sura/i*. The equivalence of

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<sup>28</sup> John Joseph, “Nestorians, Chaldeans, Syrians, Arameans, Assyrians,” in *The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East: Encounters with Western Christian Missions, Archaeologists, and Colonial Power* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 9–14, 21–24, 29–30.

<sup>29</sup> Recai Tekoğlu and André Lemaire, “La bilingue royale louvito-phénicienne de Çineköy,” *Comptes rendus des séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 144, no. 3 (2000): 961–1007.

these terms within a single bilingual document provides direct evidence that the Luwian form *Sura/i* functioned as the counterpart of Phoenician *Assyria*.<sup>30</sup>

J. David Hawkins subsequently re-examined the inscription and confirmed the identification of Luwian *Sura/i* with Assyria, emphasizing the importance of the bilingual correspondence for understanding the historical development of the name.<sup>31</sup> The discovery proved especially significant because it addressed one of the principal objections raised by earlier critics of the Assyria → Syria derivation, namely the absence of direct ancient documentary evidence linking the two forms. Furthermore, it provided epigraphic confirmation for a relationship that had previously been proposed primarily on philological grounds. What nineteenth-century scholars such as Nöldeke had reconstructed linguistically could now be supported by documentary evidence from the ancient Near East itself.

The significance of the inscription was quickly recognized in subsequent scholarship. Lebrun and De Vos described the bilingual as a document of considerable philological and historical importance and further explored its implications for the political geography of Cilicia and the kingdom of Hiyawa.<sup>32</sup>

The implications of the inscription extend beyond a simple lexical equivalence. Giovanni B. Lanfranchi demonstrated that the Çineköy bilingual, together with the related Karatepe inscription, formed part of a broader ideological framework celebrating the alliance between the kingdom of Hiyawa (Que) and the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Within this context, the Phoenician designation *ʾAššur* and the Luwian form *Sura/i* were employed as parallel expressions of the same political and imperial reality.<sup>33</sup>

Further analysis by Zsolt Simon reinforced these conclusions. He demonstrated that the Luwian designation *Sura* corresponds to Phoenician *ʾŠR/ʾŠRYM* in the Çineköy inscription and argued that related forms appearing elsewhere in Hieroglyphic Luwian texts help explain the terminology later encountered in Classical sources. In particular, he connected the use of *Sura* in

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<sup>30</sup> J. David Hawkins, "The Çineköy Inscription: A New Hieroglyphic Luwian–Phoenician Bilingual from Cilicia," *Anatolian Studies* 53 (2003): 45–47.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> René Lebrun and Julien De Vos, "À propos de l'inscription bilingue de l'ensemble sculptural de Çineköy," *Anatolia Antiqua* 14 (2006): 45–64.

<sup>33</sup> Giovanni B. Lanfranchi, "The Luwian-Phoenician Bilinguals of Çineköy and Karatepe: An Ideological Dialogue," in *Getrennte Wege? Kommunikation, Raum und Wahrnehmung in der alten Welt*, ed. Robert Rollinger et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Antike, 2007), 187–194.

Anatolian contexts with the Greek ethnonyms *Syroi* and *Leukosyroi*, thereby helping to explain the linguistic transition between the Near Eastern and Classical traditions.<sup>34</sup>

The significance of the Çineköy bilingual extends beyond the identification of a single lexical correspondence. Prior to its discovery, discussions concerning the derivation of *Syria* from *Assyria* relied primarily upon linguistic reconstruction, Classical testimony, and later historical traditions. The inscription introduced a new category of evidence: an indigenous Near Eastern document demonstrating the equivalence of *Sura/i* and *Assyria* within the first millennium BCE itself. As Robert Rollinger has argued, it fundamentally altered the terms of the debate by providing direct documentary evidence for a relationship that had long been suspected but rarely demonstrated with such clarity.<sup>35</sup>

The phonological contraction presupposed by the *Assyria* → *Syria* derivation is not linguistically exceptional. Discussing the question, Richard N. Frye observed that the loss of an initial *a-* is a widespread phenomenon in many languages and noted particularly the disappearance of initial *a-* in Phoenician proper names in Anatolia and in Old Iranian. Drawing upon observations by Paul Kretschmer and Ernst Herzfeld, Frye concluded that the coexistence of forms with and without an initial *a-* presents no significant linguistic difficulty. Consequently, the contraction of *Assyria* to *Syria* may be understood as part of a broader pattern of phonological reduction attested elsewhere in the ancient Near East rather than as an isolated or anomalous development.<sup>36</sup>

Subsequent scholarship has increasingly regarded the Çineköy inscription as one of the most significant pieces of evidence in the *Assyria*–*Syria* discussion. The bilingual correspondence between *Sura/i* and *ʾAššur* not only confirms the historical association of the two designations but also establishes that forms corresponding to “*Syria*” were already in use within the Near East centuries before the terminology entered Classical Greek literature. In this respect, the inscription

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<sup>34</sup> Zsolt Simon, “Where Is the Land of Sura of the Hieroglyphic Luwian Inscription KARKAMIS A4b and Why Were Cappadocians Called Syrians by Greeks?” *Altorientalische Forschungen* 39 (2012): 167–180.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Rollinger, “Assyrios, Syrios, Syros und Leukosyros,” *Die Welt des Orients* 36 (2006): 72–82, esp. 74–79; Robert Rollinger, “The Terms ‘Syria’ and ‘Assyria’ Again,” in *Crossroads: Cultural Interactions in the Mediterranean Region*, ed. Sophia Kalopissi-Verti and Henriette Kok (Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation, 2015), 47–60, esp. 52–58.

<sup>36</sup> Richard N. Frye, “Assyria and Syria: Synonyms,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 51, no. 4 (1992): 282; Paul Kretschmer, “Nochmals die Hypachäer und Alaksandus,” *Glotta* 24 (1932): 218–19; Ernst Herzfeld, *The Persian Empire* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1968), 306–7.

serves as the earliest securely attested witness to a historical and linguistic relationship between the designations Assyria and Syria.

While the Çineköy inscription alone does not resolve every aspect of the Assyria–Syria question, it provides an evidentiary foundation against which the testimony of Classical authors, linguistic developments, and later historical traditions may be evaluated. Its importance is further strengthened by the fact that it constitutes an indigenous Near Eastern witness entirely independent of the Classical, Syriac, manuscript, and later historiographical traditions examined elsewhere in this study.

### **Syria and Assyria in Classical Literature**

The historical association between Syria and Assyria was not confined to the epigraphic record of the ancient Near East. Classical Greek and Roman authors likewise preserved traditions that connected the two designations, often employing them within overlapping geographical and ethnographic frameworks. Their testimony is particularly significant because it demonstrates how terminology originating in the Near East was transmitted, adapted, and understood within the wider Mediterranean world.

Among the earliest and most frequently cited witnesses is Herodotus. Writing in the fifth century BCE, he explicitly recorded that “*those whom the Greeks call Syrians are called Assyrians by the barbarians.*”<sup>37</sup>

Several centuries later, Strabo provided a more extensive geographical treatment of the subject. In his *Geography*, he described Assyria as encompassing the regions associated with Aturia (Assyria proper) and Ninus (Nineveh), while also observing that those inhabiting territories further west were “in a special sense” called Syrians.<sup>38</sup> Although Strabo distinguished between regional applications of the terms, he nevertheless situated both within a broader geographical continuum. His account reflects a Classical understanding that situated Syria and Assyria within a broader and interconnected geographical framework.

The association between Assyria and Syria was not confined to historians and geographers but also appears within the wider literary culture of the Greco-Roman world. In Catullus' account of

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<sup>37</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. A. D. Godley, vol. 3, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), 7.63 (367).

<sup>38</sup> Strabo, *Geography* 16.1.1–2, trans. Horace Leonard Jones, Loeb Classical Library 241 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), 192–193.

Ptolemy III's campaign against the Seleucid kingdom, the poet employs the designation Assyrios in a context that commentators have long understood as referring to Syria rather than Assyria in the narrower geographical sense. Similar usage appears in Virgil and Horace, where Assyrian terminology functions as a literary designation for eastern luxury products, perfumes, and dyes. Although such poetic usage lacks the geographical precision sought by modern historians, it nevertheless illustrates the extent to which Assyrian nomenclature remained embedded within the cultural vocabulary of Classical antiquity and could be employed in contexts associated with the wider Syrian and Near Eastern world.<sup>39</sup>

A similar geographical conception appears in the work of Pliny the Elder. Describing Syria as “formerly the greatest of lands” (*quondam terrarum maxuma*), Pliny includes within the Syrian designation a wide range of regions extending from Palestine, Judaea, and Phoenicia to Babylonia, Mesopotamia, Sophene, Commagene, and Adiabene. Particularly noteworthy is his observation that Adiabene had previously been called Assyria (*Adiabene Assyria ante dicta*). Pliny’s account demonstrates that the broad geographical application of Syria in Classical literature could coexist with the continued preservation of Assyria as an historical and geographical designation. His testimony therefore complements that of Herodotus and Strabo by illustrating the persistence of an interconnected Assyrian–Syrian geographical tradition within Roman intellectual culture.<sup>40</sup>

The fluidity of Classical geographical terminology is further illustrated by Aeschylus' description of Xerxes as driving a "Syrian chariot" (*Persians* 84), despite the Persian king's obvious Iranian identity. Such usage demonstrates that Greek authors frequently employed broad regional designations associated with the lands of the Near East rather than narrowly defined ethnic categories. Similar phenomena appear throughout Classical literature, where Syria, Assyria, Syrian, and Assyrian could function within overlapping historical and geographical frameworks. The same tendency is visible in the legendary traditions surrounding Semiramis, who is described as the daughter of a Syrian youth and associated with Ascalon in Syria, yet simultaneously appears as the great queen of the Assyrian Empire, ruler of Nineveh, and founder

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<sup>39</sup> Catullus 66.12; Elmer Truesdell Merrill, ed., *Catullus* (Boston: Ginn, 1893), 167, commenting "Assyrios: for Syrios"; Virgil, *Georgics* 2.465 (*Assyrio veneno*); Horace, *Carmina* 2.11.15–16 (*Assyria nardo*).

<sup>40</sup> Pliny the Elder. *Natural History*. Translated by H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938–1963. [https://www.loebclassics.com/view/pliny\\_elder-natural\\_history/1938/pb\\_LCL352.271.xml?mainRsKey=V7FKrS&print=&readMode=reader](https://www.loebclassics.com/view/pliny_elder-natural_history/1938/pb_LCL352.271.xml?mainRsKey=V7FKrS&print=&readMode=reader)

of many works attributed to Assyria. While these usages cannot be treated as direct evidence for ethnic identity, they nevertheless illustrate the linguistic and historiographical environment within which the Assyria–Syria nomenclatural relationship developed, was transmitted, and was understood in Classical antiquity.<sup>41</sup>

A further illustration of the complexities of Classical ethnographic terminology appears in Aelian's *Varia Historia*. Writing in the second–third century CE, Aelian refers to the Assyrians as a distinct people possessing their own customs and traditions, thereby demonstrating that Assyrian ethnonyms remained intelligible within later Greco-Roman literature. Yet some of the traditions he attributes to the Assyrians appear to derive from earlier accounts associated with Babylonia, illustrating the tendency of Classical authors to employ broad historical and geographical designations that do not always correspond to modern ethnic or political distinctions. Such examples underscore both the value and the limitations of Classical testimony: while preserving important evidence for the continued memory of Assyria, these sources also contributed to the gradual blurring of regional, ethnic, and linguistic categories, a process that later influenced the development and interpretation of designations such as Syrian, Syriac, Aramaean, and related ethnographic terminology.<sup>42</sup>

A further example appears in *De Dea Syria*, traditionally attributed to Lucian of Samosata. Describing Hierapolis in Syria, the author refers to the city's principal deity as the “Assyrian Hera” (*Ἡρῆ Ἀσσυρίη*) and explicitly identifies himself as “an Assyrian” (*γράφω δὲ Ἀσσύριος ἐών*). The work further speaks of Assyrians as participants in the transmission of ancient religious traditions while simultaneously describing sanctuaries in Syria. Whatever the precise question of authorship, the passage demonstrates the continued coexistence of Syrian and Assyrian terminology within the cultural and religious landscape of the Roman Near East. Particularly noteworthy is the author's unproblematic movement between Syria as a geographical

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<sup>41</sup> Aeschylus, *Persians* 84; see also Gaius Valerius Catullus, *Carmina* 66.12, where the manuscripts read *Assyrios* in reference to Syria; Elmer Truesdell Merrill, ed., *Catullus* (Boston: Ginn, 1893), 167; Virgil, *Georgics* 2.465 (*Assyria veneno*); Horace, *Carmina* 2.11.15–16 (*Assyriaque nardo*). For the Semiramis tradition, see Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica* 2.1–20; William Smith, ed., *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, vol. 3 (London: John Murray, 1873), s.v. “Semiramis.”

<sup>42</sup> Aelian, *Varia Historia* 4.1, 7.1. In one passage Aelian attributes to the Assyrians a custom reported by Herodotus among the Babylonians (*Histories* 1.196), illustrating the fluidity of Classical ethnographic nomenclature and the tendency of later authors to employ Assyrian terminology as a broader designation for Mesopotamian traditions.

designation and Assyrian as a cultural and communal designation, suggesting that the connection between the names remained intelligible to educated readers of the period.<sup>43</sup>

An even more explicit statement is preserved by Justin, whose epitome of Pompeius Trogus states that "*the Assyrians, who were afterwards called Syrians*" (*Assyrii, qui postea Syri dicti sunt*) held their empire for thirteen hundred years. Justin's formulation is particularly significant because it explicitly presents the Syrian designation as a later appellation applied to the Assyrians, thereby preserving a historical tradition that directly linked the two names within Roman historiography. Significantly, Justin continues elsewhere in the same book to employ the ethnonym *Assyrii* in describing later historical events, indicating that his statement reflects a deliberate historical understanding of the relationship between the two designations rather than accidental or inconsistent terminology.<sup>44</sup>

The significance of these passages was recognized by George Rawlinson, who drew attention to the close association of the names in both Classical and Near Eastern sources. Rejecting the notion that *Syria* represented an entirely unrelated ethnonym, he regarded it as a derivative form that preserved the legacy of the Assyrian designation in Greek and later usage. His observations anticipated conclusions that would later receive further support from philological and epigraphic research.<sup>45</sup>

The testimony of Herodotus and Strabo is particularly valuable because it predates the modern scholarly debate by more than two millennia. Neither author sought to address questions of historical linguistics in the modern sense; rather, both recorded contemporary understandings of geographical and ethnic terminology. Their observations therefore constitute independent evidence that an association between Syria and Assyria was already recognized in antiquity. Taken together, the Classical sources provide independent testimony that associations between the names Syria and Assyria were already present in antiquity. Rather than representing a modern scholarly construction, these associations were preserved within Greek and Roman literary traditions, thereby complementing the epigraphic testimony of the Çineköy bilingual.

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<sup>43</sup> Lucian (Pseudo-Lucian), *De Dea Syria* 1–5, in *Lucian*, vol. 4, trans. A. M. Harmon, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1925), 340–343.

<sup>44</sup> Justin, *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus* 1.2, *Assyrii, qui postea Syri dicti sunt*; cf. 1.10, where Justin continues to employ the ethnonym *Assyrii* in describing the Babylonian revolt under Darius. See also *Iustini Historiae Philippicae*, ed. Friedrich Dübner (Paris, 1831), 38, 48.

<sup>45</sup> George Rawlinson, *The Five Great Monarchies of the Ancient Eastern World*, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1862), 148–150.

While the inscription provides direct documentary evidence from the Near East, Classical literature illustrates how these related names were understood, transmitted, adapted, and preserved within the broader intellectual world of antiquity.

### **Patristic Tradition**

The historical relationship between the Assyrian and Syrian designations was likewise recognized by early Christian exegetes. Commenting on Isaiah 19:23–25, Eusebius of Caesarea explains that the biblical text refers to "Assyrians who are now called Syrians," adding that those living in Syria and Mesopotamia had formerly been known as Assyrians.<sup>46</sup>

Jerome offers a closely related interpretation of the same passage, stating that the territory extending from the Euphrates to the Tigris belonged to the Assyrians and concluding that those whom his contemporaries called Syrians were the ancient Assyrians.<sup>47</sup>

Although expressed within the framework of biblical exegesis rather than historical philology, these independent Greek and Latin patristic interpretations demonstrate that leading Church Fathers understood the Syrians of their own day in historical continuity with the Assyrians described in Scripture. Their testimony therefore provides an additional and independent line of evidence complementing the Classical literary tradition while illustrating the continued transmission of this historical understanding within early Christian scholarship.

### **The Assyria–Syria Question in Historical Linguistics**

Long before the publication of the Çineköy bilingual inscription, scholars of Semitic and Classical languages sought to explain the origin and development of the designations Assyria, Syria and Syriac through the methods of comparative philology. Their efforts were informed by both the testimony of Classical authors and the striking phonetic similarity of the terms. Although interpretations differed in detail, a substantial body of linguistic scholarship increasingly converged upon the view that Syria and Syriac represented a shortened form of Assyria and Assyrian.

One of the earliest modern discussions of the nomenclature continuity between Assyria and Syria appears in John Selden's *De Diis Syris* (1617), where Selden treats Syria as historically derived

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<sup>46</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Commentary on Isaiah*, trans. Jonathan J. Armstrong, in *Ancient Christian Texts*, ed. Joel C. Elowsky (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), commentary on Isaiah 19:23–25 (Kindle loc. 4019).

<sup>47</sup> Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah, Including St. Jerome's Translation of Origen's Homilies 1–9 on Isaiah*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 231–32.

from Assyria and discusses the nomenclature of Assur, Syria, and the Chaldeans.<sup>48</sup> Although predating modern philology, Selden's observations demonstrate that the Assyria–Syria connection was already recognized in early seventeenth-century scholarship.

The most influential early contribution came from Theodor Nöldeke. In his landmark study “Ἀσσύριος Σύριος Σύρος,” published in 1871, Nöldeke argued that the Greek form *Syrios* arose through the loss of the initial vowel in *Assyrios*.<sup>49</sup> This process, known as aphaeresis, provided a linguistic explanation for the emergence of the shorter form *Syria* from *Assyria*. Nöldeke's analysis became one of the foundational contributions to the modern discussion and remained highly influential in subsequent scholarship.

Comparable conclusions were reached independently by other nineteenth-century scholars of Semitic and Classical languages. William Wright described *Syrian* as “a Greek corruption of *Assyrian*,” emphasizing the role of Greek linguistic adaptation in the transmission of Near Eastern names.<sup>50</sup> Jean-Baptiste David likewise regarded *syriaque* as a contracted derivative of *assyri(en)*, reflecting the same underlying historical development.<sup>51</sup> Although these scholars worked independently and from different disciplinary perspectives, they arrived at broadly similar explanations concerning the evolution of the designation.

Eduard Schwartz subsequently re-examined the Classical evidence and independently arrived at substantially the same conclusion. Analyzing Herodotus, Strabo, Xenophon, and other Greek authors, Schwartz argued that the designations Syria and Assyria originally referred to the same imperial sphere and that the historical equation Syroi = Assyrioi remained discernible in the Classical tradition even after the original political context had faded from memory. His study reinforced Nöldeke's philological conclusions by demonstrating that the identification was supported not only by linguistic analysis but also by the testimony of ancient Greek historical and geographical writers.<sup>52</sup>

Nöldeke's conclusions exercised a profound influence on subsequent scholarship and remained the principal point of reference for much of the twentieth century. In a comprehensive doctoral study devoted to the use of the names *Assyria* and *Syria* in Greek literature, Payton R. Helm

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<sup>48</sup> Selden, John. *De Diis Syris Syntagmata II*. London: William Stansby, 1617, *Prolegomena*, chap. 4.

<sup>49</sup> Theodor Nöldeke, “Ἀσσύριος Σύριος Σύρος,” *Hermes* 6 (1871): 443–468.

<sup>50</sup> William Wright, *A Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages* (London: Trübner, 1890), 12.

<sup>51</sup> Jean-Baptiste David, *Grammaire de la langue Araméenne* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1872), 5.

<sup>52</sup> Eduard Schwartz, “Einiges über Assyrien, Syrien, Koilesyrien,” *Philologus* 86 (1931): 373–399.

observed that most scholars continued to follow Nöldeke's fundamental assumptions regarding the relationship between the two designations. Although Nöldeke's formulation later attracted criticism from scholars such as Tkatsch, it nevertheless remained the dominant framework for subsequent linguistic discussions of the problem.<sup>53</sup>

Modern Assyriological scholarship has further explored the relationship between Assyrian and later Syriac self-designations. Simo Parpola has argued that the indigenous designations Sūrāyā and Sūryōyō ultimately derive from the Neo-Assyrian form Sūrāyu, itself a variant of Aššūrāyu (“Assyrian”).<sup>54</sup> On this interpretation, the terms later rendered as Syriac and Suraya reflect not a separate ethnonym but the historical continuation of Assyrian self-designation within the Assyrian (Or as often called Syriac, and sometimes Aramaic)-speaking communities.

The significance of these philological arguments lies not only in their conclusions but also in their chronology. Most were formulated decades before the publication of the Çineköy inscription and therefore relied upon linguistic analysis, Classical testimony, and historical reasoning rather than direct epigraphic confirmation.

In this respect, the later discovery of the bilingual inscription did not create a new theory but provided documentary support for a conclusion that many linguists had already reached independently.

More recent scholarship, particularly that of Robert Rollinger, has re-evaluated these earlier philological conclusions in light of the epigraphic evidence now available. The convergence between philological reconstruction and subsequent epigraphic discovery represents one of the most important developments in the modern study of Near Eastern historical nomenclature. What had long been inferred through comparative linguistic analysis could now be evaluated against contemporary documentary evidence from the ancient Near East itself.

The result was a growing alignment between historical linguistics, Classical testimony, and epigraphy, each providing independent support for the conclusion that *Assyria*, *Syria*, and *Syriac* represent historically connected designations rather than unrelated names.

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<sup>53</sup> Payton R. Helm, "Greeks" in the Neo-Assyrian Levant and "Assyria" in Early Greek Writers (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1980), 2–15.

<sup>54</sup> Parpola, Simo. “Assyrian Identity in Ancient Times and Today.” *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 18, no. 2 (2004): 5–49.

## Indigenous Assyrian Traditions<sup>55</sup>

Beyond the evidence of inscriptions, Classical literature, and historical linguistics, important evidence concerning the Assyria–Syria–Syriac relationship is preserved within Syriac (i.e. Assyrian, according to evidence thus far) literary tradition and indigenous usage. These sources are particularly significant because they illuminate how communities associated with the Syriac language understood, transmitted, and preserved their own historical terminology.

While such testimony does not replace epigraphic or philological analysis, it provides an additional perspective on the continuity, interpretation, and cultural memory of the designations Assyria, Syria, and Syriac across the centuries.

## Literary Tradition

Evidence for the preservation of Assyrian terminology within the Syriac literary tradition can be traced to Late Antiquity. The *Doctrina Addai*, one of the earliest Syriac Christian texts, repeatedly refers to the missionary activity of Addai in “the country of the Assyrians” and describes local rulers as kings of the Assyrians.<sup>56</sup> Such passages indicate that Assyria and the Assyrians continued to function as meaningful geographical and communal designations within Syriac Christian literature centuries after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, providing further evidence that Assyrian nomenclature remained embedded within the historical consciousness of Syriac-speaking communities.

An early Syriac witness relevant to the nomenclatural history of the region appears in *The Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite*, composed in the early sixth century CE. Although the work does not contain an explicit discussion of the historical association between Assyria and Syria, it preserves the place-name Šūrā , ܫܘܪܐ corresponding to the Greek form Σούρα.

William Wright identified the site with modern Suriyeh on the Euphrates, thereby illustrating the continued use of forms related to *Šūr* within Syriac and neighboring linguistic traditions.<sup>57</sup>

Although this evidence does not constitute a direct etymological statement, it is nevertheless

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<sup>55</sup> The expression "Indigenous Assyrian Traditions" is employed here in accordance with the evidence examined throughout this study, which argues that the indigenous designations Sūryāyē/Sūryōyō represent historical continuations of the Assyrian ethnonym rather than unrelated communal appellations. The heading therefore reflects the historical continuity argued in this article rather than modern denominational or linguistic classifications.

<sup>56</sup> *Doctrina Addai*, in William Cureton, *Ancient Syriac Documents* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864), 16, 122. [http://www.melammu-project.eu/database/gen\\_html/a0000707.html?utm\\_source=](http://www.melammu-project.eu/database/gen_html/a0000707.html?utm_source=)

<sup>57</sup> William Wright, *A Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages* (London: Trübner, 1890), 12.

consistent with the broader pattern of nomenclature attested in earlier Near Eastern inscriptions and later Classical and Syriac sources, where related forms continued to appear across different languages and historical periods.

The identification of Syrians with Assyrians was likewise preserved within medieval Syriac historiography. In his *Chronicle*, Michael the Syrian, when enumerating the peoples descended from Shem, refers to the “Assyrians (Āturāyē), that is the Syrians,” explicitly equating the two designations.<sup>58</sup> This testimony is particularly significant because it originates from one of the most important Syriac historians of the medieval period and provides explicit evidence that the identification of Assyrians with Syrians formed part of the Syriac scholarly and historiographical tradition itself.

### **Manuscript Evidence**

While Classical authors, historical linguists, and modern scholars have long debated the relationship between Assyria and Syria, an additional category of evidence survives within the manuscript traditions of Syriac (i.e. Assyrian)-speaking Christian communities themselves. This evidence is particularly significant because it is neither the product of Greek ethnography nor the result of modern philological reconstruction, but rather derives from indigenous manuscript traditions preserved within the linguistic environment in which the ethnonyms continued to be used.

A Christian Palestinian *Aramaic* lectionary manuscript, tentatively dated to the tenth or eleventh century CE and first acquired in Cairo by Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson in 1895, preserves two remarkable readings. In Micah 5:5 the biblical Assyrians are designated *Āsūrāyā*, while in Isaiah 10:24 they appear as *Sūrāyā*. Both forms refer to the same historical people. The significance of these readings lies not merely in the preservation of the Assyrian ethnonym, but in the coexistence of a fuller form and a contracted form within the same manuscript tradition.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Michael the Syrian, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, ed. J.-B. Chabot, vol. 2 (Paris: Leroux, 1899–1910), 32.

<sup>59</sup> Agnes Smith Lewis, ed., *A Palestinian Syriac Lectionary: Containing Lessons from the Pentateuch, Job, Proverbs, Prophets, Acts, and Epistles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Ramsin Edward, “What Does This Newly Digitized Manuscript Reveal About the Assyrian Identity?”, Assyrian Cultural Institute, 12 July 2023. The manuscript preserves the forms *Āsūrāyā* and *Sūrāyā* in reference to the biblical Assyrians, while related Christian Palestinian Aramaic fragments reportedly attest *Sūrāyā* and *Sūrāyā*.

Additional Christian Palestinian *Aramaic* fragments from the Taylor–Schechter Collection have reportedly yielded further forms, including *Sūrāy* and *Sūryāyā*, likewise employed in reference to the biblical Assyrians. Collectively, these attestations demonstrate that the loss of the initial aleph was not merely a phenomenon observed by Greek writers or reconstructed by modern philologists, but was reflected within indigenous Assyrian-speaking Christian usage itself. The manuscripts therefore preserve an indigenous linguistic witness to the historical relationship between Assyrian and Syrian forms of the ethnonym.<sup>60</sup>

The evidentiary value of these texts is considerable. Unlike Herodotus, Strabo, Pliny, and other Classical authors, the manuscript tradition preserves the terminology employed within the indigenous linguistic environment itself rather than describing it from the perspective of external observers. Nor does this evidence depend upon modern theories of historical linguistics. Instead, it preserves the actual forms used by Assyrian-speaking Christians when referring to the Assyrians. The coexistence of *Āsūrāyā* and *Sūrāyā* within the same manuscript tradition demonstrates that both forms were intelligible and interchangeable designations for the same historical people. Consequently, these manuscripts provide one of the clearest indigenous confirmations of the broader pattern identified throughout this study, showing that the historical relationship between the Assyrian and Syrian forms of the ethnonym was preserved not only in Greek geographical terminology and later scholarly reconstruction, but also within the manuscript traditions of Assyrian-speaking Christian communities themselves.

### **Communal Usage and Self-Identification**

The historical relationship between the names was also explicitly recognized within the Syriac (i.e. Assyrian) scholarly tradition itself. Archbishop Toma Audo, one of the most influential Syriac lexicographers of the nineteenth century, explicitly described *syriaque* as deriving from *assyriaque*.<sup>61</sup> His testimony demonstrates that awareness of the historical connection between the designations was preserved within the Syriac intellectual tradition itself rather than being solely the product of modern European philology.

A similar awareness appears in the monumental work of Joseph (Giuseppe Simone) Assemani. In the *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, Assemani employed the heading *De Syris Nestorianis* while

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Toma Audo, *Dictionnaire de la langue chaldéenne*, vol. 1 (Mossoul: Imprimerie des Pères Dominicains, 1897), 9.

simultaneously preserving Syriac texts containing the designation ܐܬܘܪ (Āthūr), which he glossed as *Athur seu Assyriaca Musulana*.<sup>62</sup> This juxtaposition demonstrates that “Syri,” “Nestorian Syrians,” and “Assyrians” were not treated as mutually exclusive categories but rather as related expressions within a common historical, linguistic, and ecclesiastical framework.

Further evidence is preserved in nineteenth-century observations of indigenous usage. During his travels in Mesopotamia, Horatio Southgate recorded that local Christians employed a range of designations—including *Syriac*, *Syrian*, *Asouri*, *Athouri*, and *Othoroyo*—as interconnected expressions ultimately derived from Assyrian.<sup>63</sup> Southgate's observations are particularly valuable because they preserve vernacular usage before the emergence of many of the modern national and denominational classifications that would later shape discussions of identity in the region.

A comparable explanation was offered by the Assyrian archaeologist and scholar Hormuzd Rassam. Discussing indigenous nomenclature, Rassam observed that *Soorayé* (Sūryāyē) represented a contracted form of *Athurayé* (Āthūrāyē, Assyrians), adding that the omission of the initial *A* was not unusual when cognate languages were compared. He further rejected attempts to explain *Soorayé* independently of Assyrian identity, regarding the designation as an indigenous linguistic development rather than a distinct ethnonym.<sup>64</sup>

Additional testimony concerning indigenous self-identification is provided by Gabriel Oussani, a scholar from the Chaldean Church, in his writings at the beginning of the twentieth century. Discussing the communities commonly designated as “Nestorians,” Oussani observed that they did not ordinarily employ the name Nestorian as a self-designation, but rather called themselves *Sūrāyē* (“Syrians”).<sup>65</sup> He further described these communities as descendants of the ancient Eastern Syrians and emphasized the common Syriac linguistic and literary heritage shared by

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<sup>62</sup> Joseph S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana*, vol. 2 (Rome: Typis Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, 1721), 647.

<sup>63</sup> Horatio Southgate, *Narrative of a Visit to the Syrian [Jacobite] Church of Mesopotamia* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1844), 87.

<sup>64</sup> Hormuzd Rassam, “Biblical Lands, Races, Customs, etc.,” *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* 20 (1898): 53-55.

<sup>65</sup> Gabriel Oussani, “The Modern Chaldeans and Nestorians, and the Study of Syriac among Them,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 22 (1901): 79–82.

both Chaldeans and Nestorians.<sup>66</sup> Oussani's observations are especially significant because they preserve an indigenous perspective predating many of the modern political, denominational, and historiographical debates surrounding Assyrian and Syriac identity, while simultaneously demonstrating the continued use of *Sūrāyē* as a communal self-designation within the Assyrian tradition.

A further indigenous witness is provided by a seventh-century letter of Mār ʾIshōʿyahb III, Catholicos of the Church of the East. In this text, *Sūrāyē*, *Ārāmāyē*, *Ḥūzāyē*, and *Pārsāyē* are enumerated as distinct groups. Regardless of the precise historical or geographical referents intended in the passage, the terminology demonstrates that *Sūrāyē* and *Ārāmāyē* were not employed interchangeably in this indigenous Syriac context. The document therefore provides important evidence that at least some Syriac-speaking ecclesiastical authors maintained a conceptual distinction between the two designations during the seventh century.<sup>67</sup>

Evidence for indigenous self-identification is complemented by modern studies of oral transmission and communal remembrance. Examining the oral transmission of Sayfo memories among Assyrians, Naures Atto observed that communal identity, historical narratives, songs, and lamentations functioned as important vehicles through which collective memory and communal identity were transmitted across generations. Her findings illustrate how traditions associated with Syriac-speaking communities could be preserved and communicated even in the absence of extensive written documentation, thereby complementing the literary and historiographical evidence discussed above.<sup>68</sup> Atto's observations concerning oral transmission provide a modern illustration of the mechanisms through which collective memory could be preserved within Syriac-speaking communities.

Taken collectively, these sources demonstrate that awareness of the relationship between Assyria, Syria, and Syriac was not confined to modern scholarship. References preserved in manuscript traditions, ecclesiastical literature, lexicography, travel accounts, communal self-designations and oral transmission indicate that associations between these designations

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 79-82.

<sup>67</sup> Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. sir. 157, fol. 125r, letter of Mār ʾIshōʿyahb III (Catholicos of the Church of the East, ca. 649–659 CE), Digital Vatican Library, accessed 28 June 2026, [https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS\\_Vat.sir.157/0125](https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.sir.157/0125)

<sup>68</sup> Naures Atto, "What Could Not Be Written: A Study of the Oral Transmission of Sayfo Genocide Memory Among Assyrians," *Genocide Studies International* 10, no. 2 (2016): 183–209.

continued to circulate and be transmitted within Syriac-speaking communities across many centuries. While individual testimonies require careful contextual interpretation, the cumulative evidence suggests that such associations formed part of an enduring tradition of historical self-understanding rather than a purely modern philological construction.

### **Part III — Evaluation**

#### **Evaluation of Alternative Explanations for the Origin of Syria**

The debate surveyed above was shaped largely by questions of philology, textual interpretation, and historical reconstruction. The discovery of the Çineköy bilingual inscription introduced a new category of evidence—direct epigraphic testimony from the ancient Near East itself—and thereby transformed the terms of the discussion.

The alternative explanations advanced for the origin of the name *Syria* vary considerably in methodology, chronology, and evidentiary strength. Some are primarily geographical, others linguistic, while still others reflect broader historiographical assumptions inherited from earlier scholarship. A critical evaluation of these proposals reveals several recurring methodological challenges, including the absence of explicit ancient testimony, limited linguistic demonstration, dependence upon hypothetical intermediate stages, and difficulties in accounting for the full geographical, historical, and textual distribution of the designation *Syria*.

The following sections assess these competing explanations in light of the cumulative epigraphic, Classical, patristic, linguistic, Syriac, manuscript, archaeological, and historical evidence examined in this study.

#### **The Sirion Hypothesis**

Among the alternative explanations proposed for the origin of Syria is the suggestion that the name derives from the biblical *Sirion*, the Sidonian designation for Mount Hermon. This view has been advocated in modern scholarship most notably by Daniel Pipes, who argued that the name Syria ultimately derived from the Semitic term *Siryon* rather than from Assyria.<sup>69</sup>

At first glance, the hypothesis benefits from the existence of an authentic ancient toponym bearing a superficial resemblance to the Greek form *Suria*. The biblical evidence confirms that

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<sup>69</sup> Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 13–14.

Sirion was indeed a recognized designation for Mount Hermon: "The Sidonians call Hermon Sirion, and the Amorites call it Shenir" (Deut. 3:9).

The appearance of the same name in Late Bronze Age Ugaritic literature further demonstrates its antiquity. In the Baal Cycle, Sirion appears alongside Lebanon in a passage concerning cedar timber: "They [...] from Lebanon and its trees, from Sirion its precious cedars."<sup>70</sup>

These references clearly establish that Sirion was a genuine Northwest Semitic geographical designation known centuries before the earliest Greek attestations of Syria. Yet the evidence supporting the existence of Sirion should not be confused with evidence demonstrating that Syria derived from Sirion. The principal evidentiary difficulty confronting the hypothesis is that none of the ancient sources make such a connection. The Hebrew Bible, Ugaritic literature, Phoenician tradition, Greek historians, and Roman geographers all preserve the name Sirion, yet none explicitly state that the name Syria originated from it.<sup>71</sup>

Moreover, the biblical evidence itself reveals that Sirion was only one among several names for the same mountain. Deuteronomy 3:9 distinguishes between the Sidonian designation Sirion, the Amorite designation Shenir, and the more familiar Hebrew designation Hermon. The text therefore presents Sirion as a localized ethnolinguistic variant rather than as the dominant or universal designation of the region.<sup>72</sup>

This raises a fundamental geographical problem. Sirion is attested exclusively as the name of a mountain. No extant source identifies a kingdom, ethnic group, province, or territorial unit bearing the name Sirion. Consequently, the transition from a local mountain-name to the designation of a vast region extending from Cilicia to Palestine remains entirely hypothetical. The crucial historical mechanism by which such a transformation allegedly occurred has never been demonstrated.<sup>73</sup>

The lexical evidence is equally inconclusive. Standard Hebrew lexicons consistently identify Sirion as the Sidonian name of Mount Hermon but do not derive Syria from Sirion. Brown, Driver, and Briggs simply describe it as the Sidonian designation of Hermon and note possible

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<sup>70</sup> H. L. Ginsberg, trans., "The Baal Cycle," in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 136–38.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Pipes, *Greater Syria*, 13–14; John A. Tvedtnes, "The Origin of the Name 'Syria,'" *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 40, no. 2 (1981): 139–40.

<sup>72</sup> Deut. 3:9; Ps. 29:6.

<sup>73</sup> Pipes, *Greater Syria*, 13–14.

connections with the Assyrian form *Sirara*, while leaving its ultimate etymology uncertain.<sup>74</sup> If the relationship between Sirion and Syria were as straightforward as the theory presupposes, one would expect the major lexical authorities to acknowledge such a connection explicitly.

An additional difficulty arises from the lack of consensus among scholars who reject the Assyria derivation. John A. Tvedtnes, despite explicitly opposing the derivation of Syria from Assyria, nevertheless examined and rejected the Sirion hypothesis before proposing a different etymology altogether.<sup>75</sup> Thus the Sirion theory has failed to secure acceptance even among proponents of alternative explanations.

Collectively, these considerations suggest that the Sirion hypothesis rests primarily upon geographical proximity and phonetic resemblance rather than upon a demonstrable linguistic and historical chain of transmission. Furthermore, the hypothesis offers no clear explanation for the convergence of epigraphic, Classical, linguistic, and Syriac evidence linking Syria with Assyria, a convergence that any alternative theory must also account for if it is to provide a comprehensive explanation of the historical record.

A contrasting alternative explanation was advanced by Hugo Winckler, who rejected the view that the designation Syria originated simply because Aramaean populations inhabited the region. Instead, he argued that Syria derived from an older Mesopotamian geographical designation, *Suri*, whose classical continuation survived in the form *Syria*. Significantly, Winckler distinguished between the geographical concept of *Suri-Syria* and the Aramaean populations that later occupied much of its territory, emphasizing that Mesopotamia constituted the historical and cultural core of *Suri-Syria* and that the designation of the Syriac literary language as *Syrian* was therefore entirely appropriate and not to be replaced by *Aramaic*.<sup>76</sup>

In this respect, Winckler's interpretation differs fundamentally from later explanations that effectively equate Syria with *Aram* or derive the *Syrian* designation primarily from Aramaean ethnicity. Nevertheless, because the theory was formulated prior to the publication of the Çineköy bilingual inscription and relied upon readings and identifications that remained disputed

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<sup>74</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 972, s.v. "Sirion."

<sup>75</sup> Tvedtnes, "Origin of the Name 'Syria,'" 139–40.

<sup>76</sup> Winckler, Hugo. "Mesopotamien und Assyrien." In *Die Keilinschriften und das Alte Testament*, edited by Eberhard Schrader, 3rd ed., 12–119. Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1903.

<https://archive.org/details/diekeilinschrif00wincgoog/page/26/mode/2up>

even among contemporary Assyriologists, its conclusions must be reassessed in light of subsequent epigraphic discoveries linking Luwian *Sura/i* with Phoenician 'Aššur.

### **The Hurrian–Egyptian Theory**

A more elaborate alternative explanation was proposed by John A. Tvedtnes, who argued that Syria ultimately derived from the Hurrians through Egyptian mediation. According to his reconstruction, the Hurrian ethnonym entered Egyptian as *Hrw* or *Huru*, subsequently developed into a pronunciation approximating *Suri*, and was eventually adopted into Greek as *Suria*.<sup>77</sup>

Tvedtnes's proposal emerged within a broader twentieth-century effort to reassess competing explanations for the origin of Syria. Reviewing earlier scholarship, he examined a number of alternative derivations that had been proposed, including explanations based upon Subartu, Sirion, and other geographically or linguistically related forms. Rejecting these alternatives as inadequate, he ultimately advanced the Hurrian–Egyptian theory as the most plausible non-Assyrian explanation for the historical development of the name Syria.<sup>78</sup>

Unlike the Sirion hypothesis, this theory attempts to provide a complete linguistic pathway connecting an ancient Near Eastern ethnonym with the later Greek geographical designation. Nevertheless, it also encounters significant difficulties. Most notably, the proposed derivation depends upon several intermediate phonological developments that are nowhere explicitly attested in surviving sources. No known Egyptian text preserves the transitional form required by the theory, nor does any ancient author identify Syria as a name derived from the Hurrians. The reconstruction is therefore inferential rather than directly supported by contemporary documentary evidence.

The chronological dimension of the problem is equally significant. By the time the earliest Greek references to Syria appear, the Hurrians had long ceased to exist as a distinct political entity. The theory must therefore explain how the name survived and was transmitted across many centuries after the disappearance of the population from which it allegedly originated.

Furthermore, while the Hurrian presence in northern Syria is beyond dispute, the theory does not adequately explain why a name associated with a particular population should eventually become

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<sup>77</sup> John A. Tvedtnes, "The Origin of the Name Syria," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 40, no. 2 (1981): 139–140.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

the standard Greek designation for an extensive region encompassing numerous peoples, kingdoms, and cultural traditions.

Moreover, the theory offers no clear explanation for the convergence of epigraphic, Classical, patristic, Syriac, manuscript, and indigenous evidence that repeatedly associates Syrian terminology with Assyria and the Assyrian historical sphere. The Hurrian–Egyptian theory is therefore more sophisticated than the Sirion hypothesis but remains dependent upon a series of historical and linguistic assumptions that cannot presently be demonstrated from the surviving evidence.

### **Tkatsch and the Problem of Proof**

The critique advanced by Jaroslaus Tkatsch presents a different type of challenge. Unlike Pipes and Tvedtnes, Tkatsch did not attempt to construct a fully developed alternative etymology. Rather, he argued that Nöldeke had failed to prove the derivation of Syria from Assyria and left open the possibility that Syria represented an indigenous geographical designation.

Yet Tkatsch's broader historical reconstruction introduces a significant complication. While criticizing Nöldeke's derivation, he repeatedly emphasized that ancient authors frequently applied the name Syria to Mesopotamian territories and populations. He described Mesopotamia as "the true stronghold of Syrianness" and located the heartland of Syriac language, literature, and Christianity in regions such as Edessa, Harran, Adiabene, Arbela, and Assyria itself.<sup>79</sup>

Consequently, Tkatsch's work illustrates an important tension within the debate.

His objections were directed primarily against a specific linguistic derivation rather than against the broader historical association of Syria and Syriac civilization with Mesopotamia.

Indeed, many of the historical observations emphasized in his work have subsequently been incorporated into arguments supporting a closer relationship between Syria, Syriac civilization, and the Assyrian-Mesopotamian world. In this respect, Tkatsch's critique differs fundamentally from alternative theories such as those proposed by Pipes and Tvedtnes.

By contrast, Tkatsch's argument does not seek to replace the Assyria–Syria derivation with a different historical origin. Rather, it concerns the adequacy of the linguistic explanation itself.

His work therefore raises important methodological questions regarding proof and reconstruction

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<sup>79</sup> Jaroslaus Tkatsch, *Die arabische Übersetzung der Poetik des Aristoteles und die Grundlage der Kritik des griechischen Textes*, vol. 1 (Vienna and Leipzig: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky A.G., 1928), 43–55.

without necessarily undermining the broader historical association between Syria, Syriac civilization, and the Assyrian-Mesopotamian world.

### **The Nineteenth-Century Separationist Framework**

The positions represented by William Smith and Ernest Renan differ fundamentally from the explicit etymological theories discussed above. Neither scholar attempted to derive Syria from Sirion, Hurrians, or any other source. Instead, both operated within a broader intellectual framework that treated Syria, Syriac, Assyria, Chaldea, and Mesopotamia as separate historical and linguistic entities.<sup>80</sup>

William Smith's *A New Classical Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography, Mythology and Geography* associates Syria closely with the biblical Aram and presents Syria and Assyria as distinct territorial entities.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, Renan habitually treated Syria as an Aramaic linguistic and cultural sphere and Syriac as an ecclesiastical form of Aramaic associated with Edessa and Nisibis, while regarding Assyria as a separate imperial civilization.<sup>82</sup>

The principal weakness of this approach lies in its methodological character. The separation of Syria and Assyria is generally assumed rather than demonstrated. Neither Smith nor Renan provides a detailed linguistic explanation for the striking similarity between the two names. Their works primarily reflect inherited geographical conventions and prevailing scholarly assumptions rather than a sustained investigation into the historical development and etymology of the designation Syria.

Indeed, Renan's own discussion contains evidence that complicates a strict separationist reading. While habitually distinguishing Syria from Assyria, he nevertheless acknowledged that Greek authors referred to the language of Babylonia and Assyria as *syriasti* ("Syrian").<sup>83</sup>

Although such testimony does not by itself establish an Assyria–Syria derivation, it nevertheless demonstrates that the conceptual separation maintained by nineteenth-century scholars was not universally reflected in the ancient sources upon which they relied. Consequently, the works of

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<sup>80</sup> William Smith, ed., *A New Classical Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography, Mythology and Geography* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1862), 846–47; Ernest Renan, *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1878), 259–65, 515–19.

<sup>81</sup> Smith, *Classical Dictionary*, 846–47.

<sup>82</sup> Renan, *Histoire générale*, 259–65, 515–19.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 216.

Smith and Renan are valuable primarily as witnesses to the historiography of the question rather than as direct arguments against the Assyria → Syria derivation.

### **General Methodological Considerations**

A common feature shared by the alternative explanations discussed above is the absence of explicit ancient testimony. None of the theories surveyed has yet been supported by an ancient author who directly states that the name *Syria* derived from *Sirion*, the *Hurrians*, or any of the other proposed sources. Instead, each explanation relies upon modern historical and linguistic reconstruction.

This does not in itself invalidate such theories, since historical linguistics frequently proceeds through reconstruction. Nevertheless, the burden of proof increases substantially when a theory depends upon multiple unattested linguistic transitions and lacks direct corroboration from contemporary documentary evidence.

A second recurring methodological issue concerns geographical scale. Both the *Sirion* and *Hurrian* theories seek to explain the designation of an extensive historical region through reference to either a localized geographical feature or a particular ethnic group. Such explanations require a demonstrable historical mechanism by which a local designation came to encompass a much broader geographical and cultural sphere. In the absence of direct evidence documenting this process, the proposed derivations necessarily remain hypothetical.

A further characteristic of the alternative approaches is their methodological diversity. Rather than converging upon a single explanatory model, they propose a range of competing reconstructions that differ in both method and historical emphasis. Some advance alternative etymologies, whereas others concentrate primarily upon questions of language, ethnicity, or communal identity. This diversity is itself historiographically significant, since it suggests that no single alternative explanation has yet achieved broad scholarly consensus.

### **Concluding Assessment of Alternative Explanations for the Origin of Syria**

The alternative explanations examined in this chapter encounter a number of recurring methodological difficulties. The *Sirion* hypothesis offers no convincing explanation of how a localized Sidonian mountain-name became the designation of an extensive historical region, while the *Hurrian–Egyptian* theory depends upon a sequence of hypothetical phonological developments that are not directly attested in the surviving sources. The critique advanced by

Jaroslaus Tkatsch raises legitimate methodological questions concerning the adequacy of Theodor Nöldeke's original demonstration but does not itself provide a demonstrable alternative derivation. Likewise, the nineteenth-century separationist framework represented by William Smith and Ernest Renan generally presupposed rather than demonstrated the historical independence of *Syria* and *Assyria*.

The diversity of these competing explanations is itself revealing. Some scholars sought alternative etymologies in *Sirion*, the *Hurrians*, *Subartu*, *Suri*, or other Near Eastern designations, while others addressed different historical questions altogether.

Hugo Winckler, for example, rejected the reduction of *Syria* to Aramaean ethnicity and instead proposed a pre-Greek, Mesopotamian geographical designation (*Suri*), whereas John Joseph's interpretation focuses primarily upon the later historical application of the Syrian designation to Aramaean-speaking populations rather than upon the original formation of the name itself.

An additional methodological distinction emerges from the evidence. Several of the sources invoked in support of alternative explanations—including the Septuagint, patristic interpretation, Posidonius, and later ecclesiastical traditions—presuppose the existence of the designation *Syria* rather than explaining its historical origin.

They therefore illuminate the use, transmission, and interpretation of the name but do not resolve the earlier question of how the designation itself arose. Consequently, many of the competing theories ultimately address the historical identity of the populations called *Syrians* rather than the origin of the name *Syria*.

These observations do not, by themselves, establish the correctness of the Assyria → Syria derivation. They do, however, expose significant limitations in the principal competing explanations and underscore the necessity of evaluating them against the full body of epigraphic, Classical, patristic, linguistic, Syriac, manuscript, archaeological, and historiographical evidence. Any satisfactory explanation for the origin of the name *Syria* must account not only for phonological plausibility, but also for geographical scope, historical continuity, and the testimony of the ancient sources themselves. In this respect, the principal strength of the Assyria → Syria derivation lies not in the plausibility of a single line of argument, but in the convergence of multiple independent categories of evidence that collectively support a historical relationship between the designations under consideration.

## Part IV — Modern Reassessment of the Evidence

The modern reassessment of the Assyria–Syria question represents one of the most significant developments in the study of Near Eastern historical nomenclature during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Whereas the preceding chapter evaluated the principal alternative explanations for the origin of *Syria* and their methodological limitations, recent scholarship has increasingly reassessed the question through the combined evidence of epigraphy, archaeology, Assyriology, historical linguistics, Syriac studies, and related disciplines. The resulting convergence of evidence has substantially strengthened the case for understanding *Assyria*, *Syria*, and *Syriac* as historically related designations within a common tradition of historical nomenclature.

### Modern Interpretation of Syriac Tradition

Modern scholarship has likewise drawn attention to the ways in which Syriac historiography preserved and transmitted historical consciousness. Examining the works of Jacob of Edessa, Dionysius of Tel Mahre, and Michael the Great, Muriel Debié observed that Syriac authors frequently connected Syriac-speaking communities with the royal traditions of ancient Mesopotamia and Assyria, while maintaining that the designation “Syrian” reflected terminology introduced through Greek usage.<sup>84</sup> She further noted that shared language and historical memory often functioned as important markers of communal identity within Syriac historical writing.<sup>85</sup> A similar observation has been made by Dorothea Weltecke in her study of Michael the Great and Syriac Orthodox identity. Examining Michael's historical writings, she noted that the heritage of the ancient Near East occupied a central place in his understanding of the Suryoye and that references to Assyrians, Arameans, and other ancient Mesopotamian peoples formed part of a broader historical framework through which Syriac-speaking communities understood their own past.<sup>86</sup> Weltecke further argues that Michael's historical narrative integrated these inherited Mesopotamian traditions into a broader conception of Syriac Orthodox communal identity.

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<sup>84</sup> Muriel Debié, “Syriac Historiography and Identity Formation,” *Church History and Religious Culture* 89, nos. 1–3 (2009): 93–114.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, nos. 1–3 (2009): 104–106.

<sup>86</sup> Dorothea Weltecke, “Michael the Syrian and Syriac Orthodox Identity,” *Church History and Religious Culture* 89, nos. 1–3 (2009): 115–125.

A comparable conclusion has been reached by Philip Wood in his study of Dionysius of Tel-Mahre and early Syriac historiography. Examining al-Mas‘ūdī’s account of the ancient kings of Nineveh and Mosul, Wood argues that Dionysius’ conception of the Suryaye as a people possessing an ancient political past had become sufficiently influential to be reflected in later Arabic historical writing. In Wood’s assessment, al-Mas‘ūdī regarded the Suriyāniyyūn as an *umma* analogous to the Romans, Arabs, and Persians, indicating that Syriac historical traditions had come to present the Suryaye as a distinct historical people rather than merely a linguistic or ecclesiastical community.<sup>87</sup>

Bas ter Haar Romeny and his collaborators likewise observed that medieval Syriac Orthodox historiography increasingly employed language, shared tradition, and collective heritage as markers of communal identity.<sup>88</sup> Examining the works of Jacob of Edessa, Dionysius of Tel Mahre, Michael the Great, and later authors including Dionysius bar Salibi, Bar Shakko, and Barhebraeus, they concluded that Syriac historiography consistently integrated the cultural heritage of ancient Mesopotamia—including Assyria and Babylonia—into its understanding of the Syriac past.<sup>89</sup>

### **Historical and Philological Reassessment**

Among the most influential contributions is that of Stephanie Dalley. Drawing upon linguistic, historical, and geographical evidence, Dalley argued that the contraction of Assyria into Syria through the loss of the initial vowel was already established by the seventh century BCE. She further maintained that attempts to distinguish sharply between “Syrian” and “Assyrian” references in many Classical texts are not supported by the evidence and that numerous passages

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<sup>87</sup> Philip Wood, *The Imam of the Christians: The World of Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, c. 750–850* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 230.

<sup>88</sup> Bas ter Haar Romeny, Naures Atto, Jan J. van Ginkel, Mat Immerzeel, and Bas Snelders, “The Formation of a Communal Identity among West Syrian Christians: Results and Conclusions of the Leiden Project,” *Church History and Religious Culture* 89, nos. 1–3 (2009): 1–52.

<sup>89</sup> Bas ter Haar Romeny, Naures Atto, Jan J. van Ginkel, Mat Immerzeel, and Bas Snelders, “The Formation of a Communal Identity among West Syrian Christians: Results and Conclusions of the Leiden Project,” *Church History and Religious Culture* 89, nos. 1–3 (2009): 25–29, 43–50; Herman Teule, “Reflections on Identity: The Suryoye of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries: Bar Salibi, Bar Shakko, and Barhebraeus,” *Church History and Religious Culture* 89, nos. 1–3 (2009): 179–189.

traditionally interpreted as referring to “Syria” should instead be understood within an Assyrian historical context.<sup>90</sup>

Robert Rollinger's work marked a major turning point in the modern discussion. Building upon the evidence of the Çineköy bilingual inscription, Rollinger argued that the Greek ethnonyms *Syrios*, *Syros*, and *Leukosyros* are best understood as regional manifestations of a designation ultimately derived from *Assyrios*.<sup>91</sup> In subsequent studies, he integrated linguistic, epigraphic, historical, and cultural evidence to demonstrate that the distinction often drawn between Syria and Assyria in modern scholarship does not accurately reflect the historical understanding of these designations in antiquity.<sup>92</sup>

Richard N. Frye likewise concluded that Syria and Assyria were historically synonymous designations. In his influential study “Assyria and Syria: Synonyms,” Frye rejected alternative explanations that treated the two names as unrelated and argued that Herodotus' testimony remained fundamentally correct. He further maintained that the distinction often drawn between Syria and Assyria in modern scholarship lacks firm historical support, emphasizing both the continuity of Assyrian traditions among later Syriac-speaking communities and the enduring use of related designations within the Christian communities of the Near East.<sup>93</sup>

### **Assyriological Perspectives on Historical Continuity**

A similar reassessment appears within Assyriology. Examining the survival of Assyrian populations and traditions after the collapse of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, Simo Parpola argued that substantial elements of the ancient Assyrian population survived into later periods and contributed to the communities that would eventually emerge as Syriac-speaking Christians.<sup>94</sup> In this context, Parpola regarded *Syrian* as a linguistic development of *Assyrian* rather than as an unrelated ethnonym.

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<sup>90</sup> Stephanie Dalley, *The Mystery of the Hanging Garden of Babylon: An Elusive World Wonder Traced* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 23, 32–33.

<sup>91</sup> Robert Rollinger, “Assyrios, Syrios, Syros und Leukosyros,” *Die Welt des Orients* 36 (2006): 72–82.

<sup>92</sup> Robert Rollinger, “The Terms ‘Syria’ and ‘Assyria’ Again,” in *Crossroads: Cultural Interactions in the Mediterranean Region*, ed. Sophia Kalopissi-Verti and Henriette Kok (Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation, 2015), 47–60.

<sup>93</sup> Richard N. Frye, “Assyria and Syria: Synonyms,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 51, no. 4 (1992): 281–285.

<sup>94</sup> Simo Parpola, “Assyrians after Assyria,” in *Assyria 1995: Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project*, ed. Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), 181–208.

Nathanael Andrade likewise examined the historical relationship between Assyrian and Syrian identities in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Drawing upon Greek, Syriac, and Near Eastern sources, he argued that Syrians and Assyrians were not mutually exclusive categories but rather overlapping designations that could simultaneously express common heritage and regional distinction. Andrade further observed that many inhabitants of Roman Syria continued to situate themselves within an Assyrian historical tradition, demonstrating that Syrian and Assyrian identifications frequently functioned as complementary rather than contradictory forms of self-understanding.<sup>95</sup>

Yasmeen Hanoosh has likewise observed that discussions concerning the historical relationship between Assyria and Syria remain closely connected to broader questions of continuity and identity. Reviewing modern interpretations of the nomenclature, she notes the longstanding view that *Suraye* (Syrians/Syriacs) represents a contracted form of *Ashuraye* (Assyrians), while also acknowledging that the disappearance of the Assyrian Empire did not entail the disappearance of the populations that inhabited Mesopotamia. Her discussion emphasizes the continued presence of indigenous populations and the survival of linguistic traditions as important indicators of long-term historical continuity.<sup>96</sup>

Recent scholarship has likewise emphasized the significance of indigenous self-identification within the Syrian Orthodox tradition. Sargon Donabed and Shamiran Mako have argued that Assyrian identification among Syrian Orthodox communities is well attested in both lay and clerical sources and that the historical relationship between the Assyrian and Syriac designations has played a central role in modern debates concerning communal identity and continuity. Their study further highlights the persistence of Assyrian self-understanding among segments of the Syrian Orthodox population prior to the emergence of later competing ethnogenetic narratives.<sup>97</sup>

Recent archaeological and historical research has likewise challenged older assumptions that Assyria disappeared as a meaningful entity after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Reviewing the evidence from the Neo-Babylonian, Achaemenid, Hellenistic, and Arsacid periods, Stefan R.

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<sup>95</sup> Nathanael Andrade, "Assyrians, Syrians and the Greek Language in the Late Hellenistic and Roman Imperial Periods," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 73, no. 2 (2014): 299–317.

<sup>96</sup> Yasmeen Hanoosh, "Minority Identities Before and After Iraq: The Making of the Modern Assyrian and Chaldean Appellations," *Arab Studies Journal* 24, no. 2 (2016): 8–40.

<sup>97</sup> Sargon George Donabed and Shamiran Mako, "Ethno-Cultural and Religious Identity of Syrian Orthodox Christians," *Chronos* 19 (2009): 69–111.

Hauser argues that Assyria continued to be perceived as a distinct geographical, administrative, and cultural entity long after the collapse of imperial rule. He further notes the persistence of the designation Athuria in imperial administration and the continued worship of traditional Assyrian deities at Ashur into the early centuries of the Common Era.<sup>98</sup>

Collectively, the works of Parpola, Andrade, Hanoosh, Donabed and Mako, and Hauser demonstrate that modern discussions of the Assyria–Syria question increasingly intersect with broader questions concerning historical continuity, cultural survival, and the persistence of Assyrian traditions beyond the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

### **Modern Identity, Language, and Cultural Continuity**

Robert Isaf has similarly highlighted the importance of the Syriac literary revival in the formation of modern Assyrian identity. Examining the writings of Naum Faiq and other early twentieth-century intellectuals, he observed that Classical Syriac functioned not merely as a liturgical language but also as a vehicle for the articulation of a shared Assyrian historical consciousness. Isaf further noted that the literary movement associated with the Assyrian Awakening drew upon a perceived connection to the ancient Assyrian past and regarded the preservation of Syriac language and literature as central to the cultural and national revival of the community.<sup>99</sup>

Early twentieth-century scholars and observers increasingly abandoned the designation “Nestorian” in favor of “Assyrian.” William Ainger Wigram, whose writings on the Church of the East were among the most influential English-language studies of the period, regarded “Assyrian” as the most appropriate designation for the community and considered alternative labels such as “Nestorian” historically and theologically misleading. As Heleen Murre-van den Berg has observed, Wigram's work contributed significantly to the presentation of the Assyrians

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<sup>98</sup> Stefan R. Hauser, “Post-Imperial Assyria,” in *A Companion to Assyria*, ed. Eckart Frahm (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 229–246.

<sup>99</sup> Robert Isaf, “Awakening, or Watchfulness: Naum Faiq and Syriac Language Poetry at the Fall of the Ottoman Empire,” in *Arabic and its Alternatives: Religious Minorities and their Languages in the Emerging Nation States of the Middle East (1920–1950)*, ed. Heleen Murre-van den Berg, Karène Sanchez Summerer, and Tijmen C. Baarda (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 171–200.

as a continuing historical community connected both to the Syriac Christian tradition and to the wider heritage of ancient Assyria.<sup>100</sup>

Modern studies of Syriac communities have likewise emphasized the importance of language, historical consciousness, and communal self-understanding in the preservation of identity across time. Examining Syriac Christian intellectual life in twentieth-century Iraq, Tijmen C. Baarda observed that many Syriac authors understood themselves as belonging to a wider Syriac nation (*al-umma al-suryāniyya*) connected through shared language, literary heritage, and historical tradition. Although these communities participated in the political and social structures of the modern states in which they lived, they simultaneously maintained a distinct historical consciousness rooted in their Syriac cultural inheritance.<sup>101</sup>

The role of language in the preservation of communal identity has likewise been emphasized by modern Syriac scholars. Discussing the historical development of Modern Syriac, Edward Y. Odisho noted that the designations Assyrian, Syriac, and Aramaic have frequently been employed in overlapping ways within the linguistic tradition itself.<sup>102</sup> He further observed that efforts to preserve and revitalize Syriac have long been understood by its speakers as integral to the preservation of their historical and cultural identity.<sup>103</sup> Such observations illustrate the continuing relationship between language, collective memory, and communal continuity among Syriac-speaking populations.

Recent linguistic research has likewise emphasized the depth and antiquity of the spoken Assyrian dialect tradition. Geoffrey Khan has argued that the contemporary Assyrian dialects are unlikely to be direct descendants of literary Syriac alone, but rather represent vernacular linguistic traditions that existed alongside the literary language for centuries. Examining their historical development, Khan notes that certain morphological features preserved in modern Assyrian dialects are typologically more archaic than their Syriac counterparts and that some

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<sup>100</sup> Heleen Murre-van den Berg, “‘A Strange Survival’: The Rev. W.A. Wigram on the Assyrians before and after World War I,” in *Christian Missions and Humanitarianism in the Middle East, 1850–1950: Ideologies, Rhetoric, and Practices*, ed. Inger Marie Okkenhaug and Karène Sanchez Summerer (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 121–126.

<sup>101</sup> Tijmen C. Baarda, “Arabic and the Syriac Christians in Iraq: Three Levels of Loyalty to the Arabist Project (1920–1950),” in *Arabic and its Alternatives: Religious Minorities and their Languages in the Emerging Nation States of the Middle East (1920–1950)*, ed. Heleen Murre-van den Berg, Karène Sanchez Summerer, and Tijmen C. Baarda (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 144–169.

<sup>102</sup> Edward Y. Odisho, “The Second Koiné of Modern Syriac (Aramaic),” *Mediterranean Language Review* 15 (2003/04): 48–62.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, pages 48–49, 56–60.

lexical items are not attested in classical Syriac but can be traced to roots in the Akkadian language.<sup>104</sup> Such observations provide an additional perspective on the longevity of the spoken Assyrian linguistic tradition and the preservation of historical and cultural continuity within communities associated with the Syriac heritage.

The continued correspondence between the English ethnonym "Assyrian" and the indigenous Syriac designation *Sūryāyē* ܣܘܪܝܝܐ is likewise reflected in early twentieth-century public commemorative practice. The memorial erected in 1919 at the Baquba Refugee Camp in Iraq in honour of the Christian refugees who perished during the First World War employed the English designation "Christian Assyrians," while the accompanying Syriac inscription identified the community as *Sūryāyē*. Established within the refugee camp documented contemporaneously by Brigadier-General H. H. Austin, the monument provides an official indigenous bilingual witness to communal self-identification and illustrates the continued public correspondence between these designations in the modern period.<sup>105</sup>

Taken together, the works of Isaf, Wigram, Baarda, Odisho, and Khan demonstrate the extent to which language, literary culture, communal self-understanding, and cultural continuity remain closely intertwined within modern interpretations of Syriac and Assyrian identity. Collectively, these studies illustrate how the preservation of linguistic and cultural traditions has functioned as an important vehicle for the transmission of communal heritage across successive generations.

### **Modern Perspectives from Syriac Studies**

The reassessment has likewise extended into Syriac studies, where scholars have examined the historical development of Syriac language, literature, and identity within the broader context of Near Eastern history. Jean Starcky treated *Syrian* as a contraction of *Assyrian* in his overview of Eastern Christian origins.<sup>106</sup> Sebastian Brock discussed the historical relationship between the designations within the development of Syriac Christianity while emphasizing the emergence of

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<sup>104</sup> Geoffrey Khan, "Remarks on the Historical Background of the Modern Assyrian Language," 1–7.

<sup>105</sup> Brigadier-General H. H. Austin, *The Baqubah Refugee Camp: An Account of Work on Behalf of the Persecuted Assyrian Christians* (London, 1920), especially pp. 18–30, 112–13, documenting the establishment of the Baquba Refugee Camp and its Assyrian refugee population; historical photographs and transcription of the Baquba memorial, [Atour Assyrian History Archive](#); see also [AINA, Assyrian Genocide Monuments](#)

<sup>106</sup> Jean Starcky, "Les origines," in *Les Chrétientés orientales*, vol. 3 of *Histoire des Religions*, ed. Jean Daniélou and André Duval (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), 284–305.

a distinct Syriac literary and ecclesiastical tradition.<sup>107</sup> Heleen Murre-van den Berg similarly highlighted the development of Syriac language and identity within the cultural landscape of northern Mesopotamia and acknowledged the enduring significance of the region's Assyrian heritage.<sup>108</sup> The Turkish historian İbrahim Özcoşar reached comparable conclusions, noting that the designation *Süryani* historically emerged as a contracted form of *Aššūrāyu* rather than as an independent ethnonym.<sup>109</sup>

This continuity was not limited to questions of communal identity alone. Modern scholarship has likewise emphasized that Syriac Christianity constituted a distinct intellectual and cultural tradition. Examining the writings of Isaac of Nineveh within their wider ecclesiastical and historical context, Valentin Vesa characterizes the Syriac tradition as a coherent theological and intellectual heritage shaped through the interaction of indigenous Syriac, Antiochene, Alexandrian, and Byzantine currents.<sup>110</sup> Such observations further illustrate the continuity of Syriac intellectual culture across centuries and underscore the role of language, literature, and religious tradition in the preservation and transmission of inherited traditions within communities associated with the Syriac designation.

Henri Bedros Kifa likewise supported the derivation of *Syrian* and *Syriac* from *Assyrian/Ashur*. Writing in the context of Syriac history, Kifa regarded the Assyrian origin of the designation as the most convincing explanation and drew particular attention to the Armenian preservation of the form *Asori* as evidence of the historical continuity of the name beyond the Syriac-speaking world.<sup>111</sup>

Michael Sommer likewise treats the derivation of Syria from Assyria as part of the historical development of Near Eastern nomenclature. Discussing the historical geography of Syria, he notes that Herodotus derived the Greek name *Syria* from *Assyria* and emphasizes that, although Syria became the standard Greek designation for the Levant, its historical development remained

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<sup>107</sup> Sebastian P. Brock, "The Development of Syriac Identity in the Context of Greek Learning," in *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, ed. Nina Garsoian, Thomas F. Mathews, and Robert W. Thomson (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 1–11.

<sup>108</sup> Heleen Murre-van den Berg, "Syriac Identity and the Syriac Language," in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King (London: Routledge, 2019), 87–106.

<sup>109</sup> İbrahim Özcoşar, *Ancient Community of Diyarbakır: Assyrians* (Diyarbakır: Dicle University, 2010), 22–24.

<sup>110</sup> Valentin Vesa, *Knowledge and Experience in the Writings of St. Isaac of Nineveh* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2021), 309–314.

<sup>111</sup> Henri Bedros Kifa, *The Disaster of the Edessian Syrians* (Master's thesis, Lebanese University, Department of History, Fanar, 1982).

closely connected to the wider Assyrian sphere extending across Mesopotamia and the western Fertile Crescent.<sup>112</sup>

Collectively, the works of Starcky, Brock, Murre-van den Berg, Özcoşar, Vesa, Kifa, and Sommer demonstrate that the Assyria–Syria question is no longer confined to a narrowly philological debate. Modern historians, Assyriologists, linguists, Syriac scholars, archaeologists, and specialists in the ancient Near East increasingly situate the development of Syriac language, literature, and identity within the wider historical context of Mesopotamia and the Assyrian heritage. Although differences remain concerning broader questions of ethnicity, communal identity, and historical continuity, a substantial body of modern scholarship now recognizes a historical and linguistic relationship between the designations Assyria, Syria, and Syriac. This interdisciplinary convergence illustrates the extent to which the Assyria–Syria question has developed into a broader inquiry into language, identity, continuity, and historical memory within the ancient and medieval Near East.

## **Part V — Synthesis**

### **Discussion**

Viewed individually, each category of source examined in this study illuminates only one aspect of the problem. The significance of the Assyria–Syria question emerges most clearly when these otherwise independent bodies of evidence are considered together. Epigraphic records, Classical literature, patristic interpretation, comparative linguistics, Syriac literary tradition, indigenous manuscript evidence, communal usage, archaeology, and modern scholarship approach the question from different perspectives and within different intellectual frameworks. Yet despite their differences in chronology, language, methodology, and purpose, they repeatedly point toward the same broad conclusion: that the designations Assyria and Syria are historically connected and cannot adequately be understood as entirely separate names.

The historiographical survey presented in the preceding chapters further demonstrates that the principal objections to the Assyria → Syria derivation have generally fallen into four broad categories: separationist frameworks that treated Syria and Assyria as historically independent entities; methodological critiques questioning whether the derivation had been sufficiently

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<sup>112</sup> Michael Sommer, *Syria: Geschichte einer zerstörten Welt* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2016), 8.

demonstrated; alternative etymological proposals deriving Syria from Sirion, the Hurrians, Suri, or other suggested sources; and identity-based interpretations concerned primarily with the later historical application of the Syrian designation to Aramaean-speaking populations. While each of these approaches raises important methodological questions, none has yet produced a cumulative explanatory framework comparable to that provided by the combined evidence examined throughout this study.

Among the most important developments in modern scholarship has been the publication and subsequent interpretation of the Çineköy bilingual inscription. As demonstrated earlier, the correspondence between *Sura/i* in the Luwian text and *Aššur* in the Phoenician version provided direct documentary support for conclusions that had previously rested principally upon comparative philology and Classical testimony. The significance of the inscription therefore lies not merely in its linguistic implications, but in its independent confirmation of a relationship already indicated by several other categories of evidence.

The Classical sources reinforce rather than contradict this conclusion. Herodotus' well-known observation that those whom the Greeks called Syrians were known among the "barbarians" as Assyrians, together with Strabo's geographical treatment of Syria and Assyria, indicates that ancient authors themselves perceived a relationship between the two designations. Although neither writer approached the subject from the perspective of historical linguistics, both preserved traditions that closely correspond to conclusions reached centuries later through philological analysis and subsequently corroborated by epigraphic discovery.

Modern assessments of Strabo likewise emphasize that, although Assyria and Syria were not invariably employed as strictly interchangeable geographical terms, he nevertheless situated both within the broader historical framework of the Assyrian world and frequently employed Assyria to describe the former extent of the Neo-Assyrian imperial sphere.<sup>113</sup>

Recent scholarship has further observed that Classical authors commonly employed the names Syria and Assyria within a shared historical framework. Discussing the geographical traditions preserved by Herodotus, Strabo, and later writers, Hamish Cameron, following Robert Rollinger,

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<sup>113</sup> Roller DW. Assyria, Syria, Phoenicia, and Arabia. In: *A Historical and Topographical Guide to the Geography of Strabo*. Cambridge University Press; 2018:888-89.

argues that Greek authors most likely encountered these names as related—or even synonymous—designations already current in eighth-century BCE Anatolia.<sup>114</sup>

The persistence of this understanding is reflected not only in the ancient sources themselves but also in later Classical scholarship. Nineteenth-century reference works—notably William Smith's *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Geography*—observed that *Syria* was frequently "confounded with Assyria," differing only by the prefixed element, while also noting that Classical authors commonly employed *Syria* in a geographical sense extending far beyond the boundaries of the modern nation-state. Such observations demonstrate that the close association between the two designations remained apparent to scholars working within the Classical tradition even before the emergence of modern philological and epigraphic discoveries.

The same broad geographical conception is evident in later Roman literature. Pliny the Elder describes *Syria* as "formerly the greatest of lands" and includes within the Syrian designation territories extending from Palestine and Phoenicia to Mesopotamia, Babylonia, and Adiabene, the latter explicitly identified as having previously been called *Assyria*. Similarly, the author of *De Dea Syria*, traditionally attributed to Lucian of Samosata, locates Hierapolis in Syria, describes its principal deity as the "Assyrian Hera," and identifies himself as "an Assyrian."

Although composed for different purposes and audiences, both works illustrate the continued coexistence of Syrian and Assyrian terminology within the intellectual world of the Roman Near East and demonstrate that the relationship between the two designations remained readily intelligible throughout the Imperial period.

A comparable phenomenon appears within the biblical tradition and further illustrates the coexistence of Semitic and Greek systems of nomenclature. The Hebrew Bible consistently preserves its indigenous terminology: Deuteronomy 26:5 describes the patriarch as an Aramean; Isaiah 36:11 records officials of Hezekiah requesting that the envoy of Sennacherib, king of Assyria, speak in Aramaic; Daniel 2:4 identifies the language of the Babylonian court as Aramaic; and Ezra 4:2, 7 preserves both the designation Assyria and the use of Aramaic as the language of imperial administration. These texts therefore situate Aramaic linguistic traditions firmly within the historical environment of the Assyrian Empire.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Hamish Cameron, *Making Mesopotamia: Geography and Empire in a Romano-Iranian Borderland* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 102–104.

<sup>115</sup> Deuteronomy 26:5 (*ʿarammî*); Isaiah 36:11 (*ʿārāmî*); Daniel 2:4 (*ʿārāmî*); Ezra 4:2, 4:7. These passages illustrate the consistent use of Aram-, Aramean-, and Aramaic-based terminology within the Hebrew tradition, while

Greek and later Christian sources, however, frequently described many of these same geographical, linguistic, and cultural realities through the terminology of Syria, Syrian, and Syriac. Considered alongside the Classical evidence, the biblical material suggests that Greek authors often applied Syrian nomenclature to peoples, languages, territories, and traditions designated in the Hebrew Bible through Aramaean terminology. Although this observation remains secondary to the principal argument of the present study, it nevertheless illustrates that different linguistic communities employed different systems of nomenclature to describe overlapping realities within the ancient Near East.<sup>[66]</sup>

The Septuagint, the earliest extensive Greek witness to much of the Hebrew Bible, reinforces this conclusion. Whereas the Hebrew text consistently employs terminology derived from Aram, Arameans, and Aramaic, the Greek translators frequently rendered corresponding geographical and cultural realities through the language of Syria and the Syrians. This evidence does not, by itself, establish an etymological relationship between *Aram* and *Syria*. Rather, it suggests that the translators were adapting Hebrew nomenclature to an already established Greek geographical vocabulary in which the Syrian designation had long been associated with Assyria and the wider Mesopotamian world.

The importance of this observation is therefore historiographical rather than philological. It indicates that the translators of the Septuagint inherited an existing Greek geographical convention rather than creating it themselves. Consequently, later interpretations of the ancient Near East that relied primarily upon Hebrew nomenclature did not always reflect the broader body of evidence preserved in the Classical, Syriac, and Mesopotamian traditions.

The patristic tradition provides a further independent perspective on the question. Commenting on Isaiah, both Eusebius of Caesarea and Jerome identify the biblical Assyrians with the peoples known in their own day as Syrians. Although these interpretations belong to the sphere of biblical exegesis rather than historical philology, they nevertheless demonstrate that leading Greek and Latin Church Fathers understood the Syrian designation within a historical framework connected to Assyria. Their testimony thus extends the continuity already observed in the Classical tradition into early Christian scholarship.

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simultaneously preserving explicit references to Assyria, including Sennacherib and Esarhaddon as kings of Assyria. Particularly noteworthy is Isaiah 36:11, where officials of Hezekiah request that the envoy of Sennacherib speak in 'ārāmīt ("Aramaic") rather than in yəhūdīt ("the Jews' language"), demonstrating the use of Aramaic within the Assyrian imperial sphere.

A similar pattern emerges from historical linguistics. The explanations advanced by Nöldeke, Wright, David, and later scholars were formulated decades before the discovery of the Çineköy bilingual inscription and rested upon comparative linguistic analysis rather than archaeological evidence. The subsequent appearance of direct epigraphic testimony broadly consistent with many of their conclusions therefore represents an important point of contact between philological reconstruction and documentary evidence.

The Syriac literary and historiographical tradition contributes a complementary perspective. The writings of Audo, Assemani, and other Syriac scholars, together with modern studies of Syriac historiography, demonstrate that awareness of the relationship between the designations was not confined to external observers. Rather, it formed part of Syriac literary, ecclesiastical, and scholarly tradition itself. Likewise, Southgate's nineteenth-century observations of indigenous usage and Oussani's early twentieth-century record of Sūrāyē as a communal self-designation suggest that related forms continued to coexist within communal memory long after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

The indigenous manuscript evidence examined in this study provides one of the clearest internal witnesses to this continuity. Christian Palestinian Aramaic manuscripts preserve the forms Āsūrāyā, Sūrāyā, Sūrāy, and Sūrāyā in reference to the biblical Assyrians, demonstrating the coexistence of fuller and contracted forms of the ethnonym within an Aramaic-speaking Christian tradition itself. Unlike the testimony of Greek and Roman authors, these forms survive within the linguistic environment in which the ethnonym continued to be employed and transmitted. Their significance lies not merely in preserving both forms, but in demonstrating that the historical relationship between the Assyrian and Syrian designations was embedded within indigenous manuscript tradition itself, rather than existing solely in external descriptions or later scholarly reconstruction.

The persistence of this tradition is equally apparent in the modern Syriac literary revival. Naum Faiq and other intellectuals of the Assyrian Awakening regarded the preservation of Syriac language and literature as inseparable from the cultural and national revival of their community. Their writings illustrate that the historical associations preserved in earlier literary, manuscript, and ecclesiastical traditions continued to shape communal historical consciousness well into the twentieth century.

Modern studies of collective memory likewise demonstrate that continuity is preserved not solely through written texts or formal institutions, but also through oral tradition and intergenerational transmission. Examining Assyrian memories of the Sayfo, Naures Atto has shown how historical narratives, lamentations, songs, and oral testimony functioned as important vehicles through which communal identity and historical consciousness endured despite displacement, persecution, and the absence of extensive written documentation. Her work therefore complements the literary and historiographical evidence by illustrating the mechanisms through which historical memory itself was preserved within Syriac-speaking communities.

Among scholars who have explored continuity beyond the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, Simo Parpola has drawn attention to documentary, onomastic, religious, and administrative evidence demonstrating the survival of Assyrian populations and traditions into later periods. He further observes that under the Achaemenid Empire the designation Athura, derived from Athur (Assyria), remained in official administrative use, while regions west of the Euphrates continued to be associated with Assyria in imperial terminology.<sup>116</sup> These observations place the linguistic evidence examined throughout this study within a broader historical context of institutional and cultural continuity.

Taken together, the cumulative effect of modern scholarship has been to integrate what were once largely independent lines of inquiry into a coherent historical framework. The contributions of Rollinger, Dalley, Parpola, Frye, and many others have brought epigraphic, philological, historical, archaeological, and Syriac evidence into increasingly close dialogue, revealing a remarkable degree of consistency across disciplines. Although legitimate scholarly differences remain concerning broader questions of ethnicity, communal identity, and historical continuity, there is growing recognition that the historical development of the designations Assyria, Syria, and Syriac rests upon a substantial and mutually reinforcing body of evidence.

By contrast, the principal alternative explanations remain dependent upon comparatively limited categories of evidence. The Sirion hypothesis relies primarily upon geographical proximity and phonetic resemblance; the Hurrian–Egyptian theory upon a sequence of hypothetical linguistic developments; the nineteenth-century separationist framework upon inherited geographical

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<sup>116</sup> Parpola, Simo. “Assyrians after Assyria.” *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 13, no. 2 (1999): 1–16.

assumptions; and Tkatsch's critique, although methodologically important, questions the adequacy of an existing explanation without providing a demonstrable alternative.

The principal strength of the Assyria → Syria explanation therefore lies not in any single inscription, literary passage, or philological argument, but in the cumulative weight of multiple independent traditions of evidence. Epigraphy, Classical literature, patristic interpretation, comparative linguistics, Syriac literary and manuscript traditions, archaeology, and modern interdisciplinary scholarship each illuminate the question from different perspectives, yet arrive at broadly compatible historical conclusions. Particularly significant is the indigenous manuscript evidence, which independently preserves the relationship between the Assyrian and Syrian forms of the ethnonym within the communities that continued to use them. Considered together, these otherwise independent categories of evidence form a coherent explanatory framework and provide the cumulative foundation upon which the conclusions of the present study rest.

## **Conclusion**

The evidence examined throughout this study demonstrates that the relationship between the designations Assyria, Syria, and Syriac cannot be adequately explained through isolated linguistic coincidence, inherited geographical convention, or later ecclesiastical usage. Rather, the cumulative record preserved in ancient inscriptions, Classical literature, patristic interpretation, historical linguistics, Syriac literary tradition, indigenous manuscript evidence, archaeology, and modern interdisciplinary scholarship consistently situates these names within a common historical tradition whose continuity can be traced across nearly three millennia.

The significance of this conclusion lies not in any single inscription, ancient author, or philological argument, but in the remarkable degree to which otherwise independent bodies of evidence corroborate one another.

Considered individually, each category illuminates only one aspect of the problem; considered collectively, they produce a coherent historical pattern that is difficult to explain by alternative hypotheses.

The Çineköy bilingual inscription occupies a pivotal position within this evidentiary framework, not because it created the Assyria–Syria hypothesis, but because it supplied direct indigenous documentary confirmation for a relationship that had previously been inferred from Classical testimony and comparative philology.

The historiographical survey undertaken in this study likewise demonstrates that the principal alternatives to the Assyria–Syria derivation have not converged upon a single explanatory model. Instead, they comprise a diverse group of geographical, linguistic, and ethnogenetic proposals that frequently address different historical questions.

While these interpretations have contributed important observations concerning language, identity, and regional history, they continue to encounter recurring methodological difficulties, including the absence of explicit ancient testimony, reliance upon hypothetical linguistic transitions, limited geographical explanatory scope, and the lack of cumulative corroboration across independent categories of evidence.

Equally significant is the consistency with which indigenous traditions preserve the same historical association. Syriac literary and historiographical sources, ecclesiastical writings, local communal usage, and Christian Palestinian Aramaic manuscripts demonstrate that the relationship between Assyrian and Syrian forms was not solely the product of Greek geographical terminology or modern philological reconstruction. Rather, it formed part of the historical consciousness of the communities within which these designations continued to be transmitted and understood.

The cumulative evidence therefore indicates that the designations Syria, Syrian, and Syriac are best understood not as independent ethnonyms of separate historical origin, but as successive linguistic and historical developments of the earlier designation Assyria. Their evolution reflects processes of phonological change, linguistic transmission, and historical adaptation that unfolded across changing political and cultural environments without severing their connection to the Assyrian tradition from which they emerged.

The broader implications of this conclusion extend well beyond questions of nomenclature. They bear directly upon the interpretation of Classical geography, biblical and patristic literature, Syriac historiography, the transmission of collective memory, and the historical continuity of the indigenous civilizations of Mesopotamia.

The Assyria–Syria question therefore represents not merely a problem of historical linguistics, but a case study in the preservation, transformation, and transmission of historical identity across the ancient and medieval Near East.

Although questions concerning ethnicity, communal identity, and historical continuity will undoubtedly continue to invite scholarly discussion, the cumulative evidence assembled in this

study supports a clear historical conclusion: the designations Syria, Syrian, and Syriac did not emerge independently of Assyria, but constitute successive historical and linguistic expressions of the Assyrian name and tradition.

Their continuity is documented not by a single line of argument, but by the convergence of epigraphic, Classical, patristic, linguistic, Syriac, manuscript, archaeological, and historiographical evidence that, taken together, provides the most comprehensive explanation currently available for the origin and historical development of these designations.

## **Appendices**

The following chronology summarizes the principal sources examined in this study and illustrates the continuity of testimony concerning the relationship between the designations Assyria, Syria, and Syriac across nearly three millennia.

### **Appendix A: Chronological Development of Primary Evidence**

#### **Eighth Century BCE**

- Çineköy Bilingual Inscription

The Phoenician designation *ʾAššur* corresponds directly to the Luwian form *Sura/i*, providing the earliest direct epigraphic evidence linking the Assyrian and Syrian designations.

- Karatepe Bilingual Inscription

Related Syro-Anatolian evidence preserving the same political and linguistic milieu reflected in the Çineköy inscription.

#### **Fifth Century BCE**

- Herodotus

Records that those called Syrians by the Greeks were known as Assyrians among the indigenous populations.

- Aeschylus, *Persians* 84 (472 BCE)

Xerxes is described as driving a "Syrian chariot" (*Σύριον θ' ἄρμα διώκων*), illustrating the broad geographical usage of Syrian terminology in Classical Greek literature.

- Ctesias of Cnidus (late 5th–early 4th century BCE)

Describes Semiramis as both Syrian and queen of the Assyrian Empire, illustrating the overlap of Syrian and Assyrian traditions in Classical literature.

### **First Century BCE – First Century CE**

- Strabo

Describes Syria and Assyria within a connected geographical framework while preserving distinctions between their regional applications.

- Catullus, Virgil, and Horace

Employ Assyrian terminology in broader Syrian and eastern contexts, illustrating the continued literary association of Assyria and Syria.

- Posidonius (preserved by Strabo)

Distinguishes Greek *Syrians* from indigenous *Aramaicans*, illustrating the relationship between Greek exonyms and local self-designations.

### **First Century CE**

- Pliny the Elder

Describes Syria as “formerly the greatest of lands,” encompassing numerous regions including Mesopotamia, Babylonia, and Adiabene, the latter noted as having previously been called Assyria.

### **Second Century CE**

- Lucian (Pseudo-Lucian), *De Dea Syria*

Describes Hierapolis in Syria, identifies himself as an Assyrian, and preserves the coexistence of Syrian and Assyrian terminology.

### **Second–Third Century CE**

- Justin (Pompeius Trogus)

States that “the Assyrians, who were afterwards called Syrians,” held their empire for thirteen hundred years, preserving an explicit historical association between the two names.

- Aelian (*Varia Historia*)

Preserves Assyrian ethnographic terminology while illustrating the broad historical and geographical usage of Assyrian designations in later Classical literature.

### **Fourth Century CE**

- Eusebius of Caesarea, Commentary on Isaiah

Explains that the biblical Assyrians are those "now called Syrians," stating that the inhabitants of Syria and Mesopotamia had formerly been known as Assyrians.

#### **Fourth–Fifth Century CE**

- Jerome, Commentary on Isaiah

Interprets the Syrians of his own day as the ancient Assyrians, preserving the Assyria–Syria relationship within early Christian exegesis.

#### **Sixth Century CE**

- Joshua the Stylite

Preserves the designation Šūrā (ܫܘܪܐ corresponding to the Greek form Σούρα, within the Syriac literary tradition.

#### **Seventh Century CE**

- Mār Īshō‘yahb III (Vat. sir. 157)

Distinguishes *Šūrāyē* from *Ārāmāyē*, demonstrating their separate usage within seventh-century East Syriac ecclesiastical tradition.

#### **Twelfth Century CE**

- Michael the Syrian

Explicitly identifies the Assyrians (*Āturāyē*) with the Syrians within his historical narrative.

#### **Nineteenth Century CE**

- Toma Audo

Affirms within the Syriac scholarly tradition that Syriac derives from Assyrian.

- Horatio Southgate

Records the continued coexistence of Syriac, Syrian, Asouri, Athouri, and related forms in indigenous usage.

#### **Early Twentieth Century**

- Gabriel Oussani

Records *Šūrāyē* (“Syrians”) as an indigenous communal self-designation among East Syriac Christians.

## Summary

The primary evidence demonstrates that associations between Assyria, Syria, and Syriac recur across epigraphic, Classical, biblical, literary, ecclesiastical, manuscript, and indigenous traditions spanning nearly three millennia of recorded history.

Considered collectively, these sources illustrate the persistence, transmission, and reinterpretation of related nomenclature across multiple languages, regions, and historical periods.

## Appendix B: Biblical, Septuagintal and Indigenous Manuscript Traditions

### Deuteronomy 26:5

Preserves the indigenous Hebrew ethnonym 'arammî ("Aramean"), illustrating the biblical use of Aramaean nomenclature.

### Daniel 2:4 and Ezra 4:7

Use 'ārāmîṭ ("Aramaic") for the language of imperial administration, later associated with Syrian and Syriac traditions.

### Ezra 4:2

Refers explicitly to Esarhaddon as king of Assyria, preserving Assyrian historical terminology within the post-exilic biblical tradition.

### Isaiah 36:11

Records officials of Hezekiah requesting that the envoy of Sennacherib king of Assyria speak in 'ārāmîṭ ("Aramaic"), illustrating the association of Aramaic with the Assyrian imperial sphere.

### Septuagint Tradition

Reflects Greek geographical and ethnographic nomenclature, frequently rendering biblical traditions through the designations Syria and Syrians.

### Nineteenth Century (Rediscovery of Manuscripts)

- Christian Palestinian Aramaic Manuscripts (10th–11th centuries CE)  
Preserves *Āsūrāyā*, *Sūrāyā*, *Sūrāy*, and *Sūryāyā* for the biblical Assyrians, demonstrating indigenous transmission of fuller and contracted ethnonyms.

## **Appendix C: Chronological Development of Scholarly Interpretations**

### **Seventeenth Century**

- John Selden (1617)

Treats Syria as historically derived from Assyria and discusses the interconnected nomenclature of Assyrians, Syrians, and Chaldeans.

### **Eighteenth Century**

- Joseph S. Assemani (1721–1728)

Employs the designation De Syris Nestorianis while preserving Syriac references to Āthūr (Assyria), reflecting the coexistence of Syrian and Assyrian forms within ecclesiastical scholarship.

### **Nineteenth Century**

- William Smith (1857)

Observed that Syria was frequently “confounded with Assyria” and noted the broad geographical usage of the designation in Classical literature.

- George Rawlinson (1862)

Interpreted Syria as a derivative form of Assyria within his historical treatment of the ancient Near East.

- Theodor Nöldeke (1871)

Advanced the influential philological explanation that Syria arose through the loss of the initial vowel in Assyria.

- Jean-Baptiste David (1872)

Treated syriaque as a contracted form of assyri(en).

- William Wright (1890)

Described Syrian as a Greek corruption of Assyrian.

- Harry Thurston Peck (1896)

Notes the frequent Classical association of Syria and Assyria while reflecting the transitional scholarship preceding modern epigraphic discoveries.

- Hugo Winckler (1903)

Proposed that Syria derived from an older Mesopotamian geographical designation, Suri, and distinguished Suri-Syria from the later Aramaean populations that inhabited it.

## **Twentieth Century**

- Eduard Schwartz (1931)

Re-examined the Classical evidence and concluded that the historical equation Syria = Assyria was already recognized by ancient Greek authors.

- Franz Rosenthal (1939; rev. ed. 1964)

Reviewed the Assyria–Syria debate, preserving both Nöldeke's derivation and Tkatsch's critique while leaving the question unresolved.

- Payton R. Helm (1980)

Produced the first comprehensive modern study of Assyria and Syria in Greek literature.

- John A. Tvedtnes (1981)

Reviewed competing theories concerning the origin of Syria and proposed a Hurrian–Egyptian derivation.

- Henri Bedros Kifa (1982)

Supported the derivation of Syrian and Syriac from Assyrian and highlighted the Armenian preservation of Asori.

- Sebastian Brock (1982)

Discussed the historical development of Syriac Christianity and the connection between the Syrian, Syriac, and Assyrian designations.

- Richard N. Frye (1992)

Argued that Syria and Assyria were historically synonymous designations and reaffirmed the essential correctness of the Classical tradition.

- Simo Parpola (1997–2004)

Linked modern Sūrāyā/Sūryōyō to Neo-Assyrian Sūrāyu/Aššūrāyu and argued for the survival of Assyrian identity after the empire.

- John Joseph (2000)

Examined the historical development of the Syrian designation among Aramaean-speaking and Syriac Christian communities, emphasizing language, nomenclature, and identity.

## **Twenty-First Century**

- Tekoğlu and Lemaire (2000)

Published the Çineköy bilingual inscription.

- J. David Hawkins (2003)  
Confirmed the identification of Luwian *Sura/i* with Assyria.
- Robert Rollinger (2006; 2015)  
Developed a comprehensive reassessment of the Assyria–Syria relationship using epigraphic, philological, and historical evidence.
- Geoffrey Khan (2008–2010s)  
Argued that modern Assyrian dialects preserve ancient vernacular traditions and retain linguistic features traceable to earlier Mesopotamian speech.
- Donabed and Mako (2009)  
Examined the historical development of identity among Syrian Orthodox Christians and emphasized the importance of indigenous tradition and historical memory.
- İbrahim Özcoşar (2010)  
Treated Süryani as a contracted historical form derived from Aššūrāyu.
- Zsolt Simon (2012)  
Clarified the significance of Sura in Syro-Anatolian inscriptions and its relationship to later Greek terminology.
- Stephanie Dalley (2013)  
Argued that the contraction of Assyria into Syria was already established in antiquity.
- Nathanael Andrade (2014)  
Demonstrated that Syrian and Assyrian identities frequently overlapped in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East.
- Yasmeeen Hanoosh (2016)  
Discussed the historical relationship between Suraye and Ashuraye and the continuity of indigenous Mesopotamian populations.
- Robert Isaf (2017)  
Examined the Assyrian Awakening and highlighted the role of Classical Syriac language and literature in modern Assyrian historical consciousness.
- Stefan R. Hauser (2017)  
Demonstrated the continued existence of Assyria as a geographical, administrative, and cultural entity after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.
- Duane W. Roller (2018)

Interpreted Strabo's geography as preserving a broader historical relationship between Syria and Assyria despite their differing geographical applications.

- Hamish Cameron (2019)

Highlighted the persistence of Assyrian geographical concepts and the historical association of Syria and Assyria in Classical geographical traditions.

- Heleen Murre-van den Berg (2019)

Emphasized the enduring significance of Assyrian heritage in the development of Syriac language and identity.

- Tijmen C. Baarda (2020)

Highlighted the persistence of Syriac historical consciousness and the continuing importance of language, literary heritage, and communal memory.

### **Summary**

The history of modern scholarship demonstrates that the Assyria–Syria question has been approached through philology, Classical studies, Assyriology, archaeology, Syriac studies, historical geography, and historiography. Despite differences in method and interpretation, the relationship between the designations has remained a recurring subject of scholarly inquiry for more than four centuries.

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