

February 3, 1993

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Dear Rick:

I want to thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the development of the "Syriac" standard. Enclosed please find a paper that I wrote for the Journal of the Assyrian Academic Society (JAAS). I thought it appropriate to send it to you, since it presents a solution to the very problem you are dealing with, namely, creating a standard code for Assyrian characters and symbols. This paper has been submitted for publication in the next issue of JAAS. Please do not distribute or publish this advance copy I have sent you.

Appendix A of the paper contains SACII, the *Standard Assyrian Code for Information Interchange* (I was tempted to call it ASCII. . .). With SACII, 99% of all Assyrian documents and manuscripts can be reproduced -- whether they are from 500 A.D. or from 1993 A.D.. Appendix A specifies each character, symbol, or diacritical mark, its shape, and its name. Since SACII is a comprehensive encapsulation of the writing elements of the Assyrian language, it should become the working proposal.

The preferred spelling of *Estrangelo* is with an o at the end, not an a. The names "Jacobite" and "Nestorian" refer to religious denominations within the Assyrian nation, and are unsuitable as font names. "Nestorian" is unacceptable to those Assyrians who are of the Assyrian Church of the East because 1) The Assyrian Church of the East predates Nestoris by 400 years, and is not a follower of Nestoris, as the name implies, and 2) there is a heresy stigma attached to Nestoris's name (Nestoris was condemned as a heretic for stating that Mary is the mother of Jesus and not the mother of God. At the time the Church supported him because the church held (and still holds) this doctrinal position, hence the Church was accused of "Nestorianism"). Furthermore, the ~~Roman~~ Catholic Assyrians ("Chaldeans") also use the eastern font, and they are certainly not "Nestorians". "Jacobite" refers to those Assyrians who followed Bishop Jacob after he split from the Assyrian Church of the East in 450 A.D.; The proper name for this church is the Syrian Orthodox Church. **Eastern Assyrian Font** should be used in place of "Nestorian", and **Western Assyrian Font** should be used in place of "Jacobite" or "Serto" (Serto means tied together, or connected, and is misleading, because *all* Assyrian fonts are connected). Eastern and Western can be used in short; they accurately reflect who uses these fonts because, in general, the western Assyrians (in Syria and Lebanon) use all three fonts, while the eastern Assyrians (in Iraq, Iran, and Turkey) use *Estrangelo* and Eastern only.

by the Byzantines  
He established  
the Monophysite  
Church.

Nestorians

BAR  
ADDAI

Two issues were raised in the exploratory proposal: the order of the letters and Mandaic. The order of the letters is correct as you have it -- *Wow* is in its correct place. *Wow* should *not* be placed at the end because *Wow* is, by virtue of its position in the Assyrian alphabet (the sixth letter) also the number 6. Assyrian letters are also used as numbers and have ordinal values (if you need more information on this, please let me know). As for Mandaic, when we designed SACII we had Mandaic in the back of our mind. Hence, we left code 87 reserved for the extra letter in Mandaic. It then becomes a simple matter of treating Mandaic as a font, on par with Eastern, Western, or *Estrangelo*.

I now turn to an issue of great significance to the Assyrian people; namely, the use of the word "Syriac" instead of Assyrian. Let me give you a little background. The Assyrian people constitute, in all probability, the oldest surviving nation in the world. The earliest recorded Assyrian is king Sargon I, circa 2400 B.C., and he lists 173 kings before him. Up to about 700 B.C., during the Neo-Assyrian empire (the third, last, and greatest of the Assyrian empires), Assyrians spoke Akkadian, a semitic language, and wrote in cuneiform. But by about 700 B.C. Aramaic had replaced Akkadian (a process that began around 1100 B.C.). The Empire fell in 612 B.C., but Assyrians continued living in their homeland (present day North Iraq), and continued speaking Aramaic, which by 50 A.D. had evolved into "Syriac". Aramaic, as you know, was the *lingua franca* of the Middle East, and was supplanted by Arabic only in the sixth and seventh centuries A.D.. Assyrians, though, preserved their language (which has a distinct Akkadian influence, by the way), and to this day continue to speak, read, and write it. "Syriac" is the oldest continuously spoken language in the world, and only Assyrians are its guardians.

Which brings me to my point. Assyrians do not call their language "Syriac" -- they call it Assyrian, after their national identity. There are two to three million Assyrians in the world; only they use "Syriac". All modern literature in "Syriac" is produced by Assyrians. Given that the users of "Syriac" are Assyrians, and they produce all the literature in "Syriac", then by the *right of national self determination* Assyrians wish their language and their national identity to have the same name -- Assyrian.

When Ben-Yehuda reconstructed the Hebrew language in 1871 in Germany, he borrowed heavily from Aramaic and Syriac (70% of modern Hebrew is derived from Aramaic/Syriac). Yet the language is called Hebrew, after the people who speak it, and rightly so. Assyrians are asking for the same -- no more or no less.

I know that there will be opposition to this from non-Assyrian Syriac scholars. With all due respect, it is none of their business. This is a matter of national self determination. Their scholarship will in no way be affected by the name of the language.

The proper names to use are: **Modern Assyrian** (for the language used by today's Assyrians), **Classical Assyrian** (for the language used in the Church liturgy, which is the same language as



it was in 400 A.D.), and **Ancient Assyrian** (Akkadian). Since we are dealing primarily with today's language, **Modern Assyrian** should be used.

My question, therefore, is this: how can I insure that **Modern Assyrian** is used in the Unicode standard, and not "Syriac"? Your help in this will be greatly appreciated. I ask this because I love my people and my language, and I wish to see them both thrive and prosper, especially in the face of racist Arabization policies imposed on Assyrians by Arab governments (remember, Assyrians are not Arabs and are Christians -- a double whammy in the Middle East).

In the meantime, please look over Appendix A and get back to me with your thoughts. I offer my fullest services to the Unicode committee for developing the Assyrian standard.

Yours sincerely

Peter Jasim, President