

Assyrians, Syrians and Syriacs Revisited

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Why should anyone ask from the Assyrians not use that name to refer to themselves but use the term Syriacs considering all the historical, cultural, linguistic and archaeological facts?

Logic tells us that when a person asks from another to use one thing and not the other, then that person must provide justification for that request.

What is questionable is when certain scholars¹ question, for example, that modern Assyrians are linked to ancient Assyrians, because, they claim, this English word *Assyrian* is lacking in historical records post the fall of the Assyrian Empire. One wonders: First, how much research has the scholar performed for his piece or article? Second, why would any scholar attempt to discredit the continuity of the Assyrian people by building a case that relies on a foreign language used by people that the Assyrians have not come in contact with until the 19th Century? Why not do a research first that is based on historical records in the Assyrians' own language?

We can argue rightfully that when people of a particular ethnic group explain who they are they do not refer to themselves by using a foreign language. The Egyptians among themselves, for example, do not say, Nahnu al-Egyptians (Nahnu or Arabic نحن is for the English "we"). They rather say, Nahnu al-Misriyeen (al-Misriyeen المصريين is the Arabic for the English Egyptians). The Syriac or Assyrian speaking Christians do not refer to themselves as "*akhnan Syriacs*", "*akhnan Syrians*" or *akhnan Suryan*, Assyrians say "*akhnan Suraye*", "*akhnan Atouraye*" or "*akhnan Ashuraye*" in their own language.

Now considering other languages. Al-Suryan (السرّيان), is a foreign Arabic version of the Persian word Suriyan (Syrians), which in turn derives from Assuriyan (Assyrians). The title Syriac is from Latin Syriacus, or from Greek Syriakos, which is "Syrian, of or pertaining to Syria".² Vine writes: "These various sections of the old Indian Church are often called 'Syrian', as indicative of their origin. Thus the Uniates are called Romo-Syrians, the Jacobites Orthodox Syrians, the Thomas Christians Reformed Syrians..."³

The Syriac speaking Christians of the entire Near East were called Syrians by the Greeks and the rest of the West, which meant nothing but Assyrians. We read, "It has been a custom to call these people as Syrians by the Greek, who are called Assyrians in other places."⁴

1 See for example Wolfhart Heinrichs, "The Modern Assyrians – Name and Nation. Harvard, 1993"

2 <https://www.etymonline.com/word/syriac>

3 Audrey Vine, "The Nestorian Churches". Independent Press, London. 1937.

4 Herodotus, "The Chronicles", page 466.

This English word Syrian was used in many publications before WWI, which meant the Syriac speaking Christians or Suraye. This word Suraye is Asuraye (with the removal of A that is common in the language) and the latter comes from Ashuraye (Assuraye).

In the past, this term Syrian did not cause any conflict. In fact, it was used to reflect East and West Syrians, because it meant simple Christians.

We read, “... *the ‘East Syrians’ is a term frequently used to describe the Persian Church rather than ‘Nestorian’.*”⁵

We also read when trying to explain the word Syriac, “... *From being a vernacular language it soon developed a literature, though one which was largely translated from the Greek, and it could even give a name to a district. The province of ‘Syria’ known to the Romans did not refer to any country ever occupied by any ‘king of Syria’, but simply to the land, under Roman dominion, occupied by Syriac-speakers.*”⁶

And we read more, “*Whether governed by Romans or Persians, the Syrian Christians were in a minority position (and their language was always overshadowed by the dominant language of their rulers). While the eastern Syrians were a religious minority in an empire largely Zoroastrian, the western Syrians were a minority of a different kind. They shared the faith but not the culture of their rulers, and in the heated christological debates of the fifth century they found even their faith to be at odds with that of their government. The struggle of the western Syrians was thus of a more bitter kind. Christians within the Christian Empire, they were nonetheless set apart.*”⁷

It is very clear here that the term Syrians was generally used with association to the Syriac speaking Christians and has no connection to the term Syrians, relating to the inhabitants of a country called Syria. The term Syrians did not cause any conflict earlier.

However, in 1922, the new country of Syria was created out of the Ottoman Empire and placed under the French Mandate. The people of this country were called Syrians logically. With the independent of this Arab country in 1946 it began to cause a problem and confusion. From one end, we have now “Arab” Syrians, the citizens of this new Arab country of Syria and from the other end we have the Syriac-speaking Christians of the Near East known as Syrians by the West who were ethnically not Arabs. With the weakness of the Pan-Arab movement in the Middle East, certain churches that used the Syrian title in their name began to change it to Syriac Churches instead of Syrian Churches.

How about the title Syria? The name Syria is synonymous to Assyria as proven by many scholars, including Robert Rollinger⁸, Richard Frye⁹ and many others. Syria has always been short for Assyria as used by the Greeks and the Romans during and after the Selucides were driven out of Mesopotamia in the mid of the 2nd Century BC. When the Roman Pompey annexed it, the small kingdoms comprising Syria gave way to the

5 "St. Isaac of Nineveh", a St. Vladimir's Seminary Press publication. New York. 1989.

6 W.A. Wigram, "The Assyrians and Their Neighbors". G. Bell & Sons, London. 1929.

7 Sebastian Brock and Susan Harvey, "Holy Women of the Syrian Orient", a publication of University of California Press. 1998.

8 The Terms “Assyria” and “Syria” Again <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/511103>

9 Assyria and Syria: Synonyms <https://www.jstor.org/stable/545826>

'province of Syria' in 64 BC, however, the use of the word Syrians until a hundred years ago meant nothing but the Syriac speaking Christians. The Çineköy inscription has a special significance for determining the origin or etymology of the term *Syria*, a question that was debated among scholars since 1871, when Theodor Nöldeke proposed a linguistic explanation based on derivation of *Syria* from *Assyria*. That explanation received majority support among scholars. The discovery of the Çineköy inscription in 1997 near the village of Cine, south of Adana, capital city of the Adana Province (ancient Cilicia) in southern Türkiye, provided additional evidence for direct connection between terms *Syria* and *Assyria*. Phoenician section of the inscription mentions 'ŠR (Ashur), and also 'ŠRYM (Assyrians), while Luwian section narrates the same content by using *SU-RA/i* (Syria). Analyzing the inscription, the Luwian section provides conclusive evidence for the original use of the term *Syria* as synonym for *Assyria*, thus settling the question once and for all.¹⁰

The Armenians of today, the descendants of those Armenians of antiquity, had called the Assyrians 'Asori' for the longest of time, and they still do even today. They never associated the Assyrians with the word Syrians in any of their publications baring in mind that they have shared a long history with the Assyrians. In fact, the Armenians do not have a word for Syrian because to them anyone from Mesopotamia and the Lavant that spoke Syriac/Aramaic was an Assyrian. Herodotus' use of the terms Syrian and Assyrian were strictly to reflect a western and eastern usage and not of two different people.

Why shouldn't the Assyrians call themselves by their historic name الاشوريون (al-Ashuriyoon, Arabic for Assyrians), but use السريان (al-Suryan) for example? When did the Arabic اللغة السريانية or Syriac language appear?

The Syriac language, also known as Syriac Aramaic, is an Aramaic dialect that emerged during the first century AD from a local Aramaic dialect that was spoken in the ancient region of Osroene, centered in the city of Edessa. We read, "... *Edessa (Urhai) became the focus of the spread of Christianity in the Semitic-speaking world. As a result, by about AD 200 the Bible was translated into the local Aramaic dialect, which became known as Syriac ...*"¹¹ Dr. Al-Jeloo states, during the period that the new dialect السريانية (Syriac) began developing in Edessa, the Assyrians were influenced by two cultures: Persians in the East and the Greeks in the West. The Persians called the region of Assyria as Asuristan (اسورستان) and later Suristan (سورستان). They called the Assyrians also Asuriyan (اسوريان) and Suriyan (سوريان). On the other side, the Greek called the Assyrians as Syrians, their language Syriac and the country Syria.¹²

The Arabic term السريان (al-Suryan) was not possible to have existed at the time the Edessa Syriac language was developing. Yes, Arabic was a spoken language in and around Arabia, but the Arabic alphabet probably originated at some time in the 4th Century of the Christian Era, but the earliest extant Arabic writing is a trilingual

10 https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%87inek%C3%B6y_inscription

11 John Healey, "The Early Alphabet". British Museum's "Reading the Past" series. 1990.

12 Personal communication with Dr. Nicholas Al-Jeloo (independent scholar). (Nov 23, 2023)

inscription—Greek-Syriac-Arabic—of AD 512. In fact, the Arabic script developed from the Aramaic, via the Nabataean.¹³

Sectarian people argue that the name Assyrian reflects pagan people. They claim that after the Assyrians adapted Christianity, few of them opted to distant themselves from the Assyrian name since the Assyrians of antiquity were pagans; however, this particular point could be challenged since the Assyrians repented, hence, they believed in God and accordingly their city, Nineveh, was spared;

*"And God saw their works that they turned from their evil way and God repented of the evil that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did not."*¹⁴ Furthermore, there

are ample examples from Arabic, Syriac and English documents reflecting the name Assyrians, Ashur, Athor being used continuously and non-stop since antiquity.¹⁵

Therefore, the argument is not valid.

Few decades ago, an Aramean political movement was initiated. They were able to apply pressure on certain Orthodox church leaders to adopt the name Aramean as the accurate translation for the Syriac-speaking Christians (Syrians). In 1983, Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I Iwas of the Syrian Orthodox Church wrote in *The Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch At A Glance*: *"The Syriac language is the Aramaic language itself, and the Arameans are the Syrians themselves. He who has made a distinction between them has erred."*¹⁶ But this is strange since the Arameans were pagan as well.

Meanwhile, clergy within the Syriac Orthodox Church had argued that the English word Syriacs is best translation for the word السريان (al-Suryan), even when they admitted that it continued to face problems in the West explaining the differences between the Arab citizens of Syria and the Christian Syriacs. Dr. George Kiraz was a force behind this new movement of using the word Syriacs as people which started in the background of the US Census 2000. Kiraz has been a deacon in the Syriac Orthodox Church and is the founder of the Syriac Digital Library.

So from where did a people under this exact English name Syriacs come? It came from the English word for the language Syriac. Dr. Al-Jeloo states, it was the French Dominican Father and prominent Church historian and Syriacist Jean Maurice Fiey (1914 – 1995) who used the name of the language as the name of the people in the form *"les Syriaques"*.¹⁷ Fiey was known to have not liked the Assyrians. He also knew that the Chaldean title was wrong to use, so he created the *les Syriaques* term.

From the mid 19th Century, the science of archeology became the foundation of history. There is nothing in archeology about people called Syriacs, with this exact English form. So why use Syriacs and not the historic Assyrians. Many argue that history is being politicized by certain members of the Syriac-speaking churches. Many argue that, for example, the addition of the name Assyrian to the Church of the East title by Patriarch

13 <https://www.britannica.com/topic/alphabet-writing/Arabic-alphabet>

14 King James Bible, Jonah 3:10

15 <https://www.atour.com/history/continuity/20210129a.html>

16 <https://wca-ngo.org/heritage/288-fact-sheet-sueryani-means-syrian-syriac-or-aramean-aramaic>

17 Personal communication with Dr. Nicholas Al-Jeloo (independent scholar). (Nov 23, 2023)

Mar Dinkha in 1976 inflamed the name matter between the various church leaders. This has reflected negatively on this one people who lived historically in the same compact region of northern Mesopotamia and who share the same language, culture and history.

The various names applied on the one Assyrian people is a sign of a rich culture and civilization that ruled over, interacted with, or came under, many other different peoples and civilizations. However, it is important to understand what each word means. Many other people have used different names that define them. For example, Jews and Israelites stand for people, Hebrew for their language and Judaism for their religion. The intention here is not to cancel any segment of Assyrian society, it is rather to educate. The Assyrian (Ashuraya) name is historic, predates all other names and is all over archaeological sites in Iraq, Syria, Turkiye, Lebanon and other regions. Thus, there is a justification for using the name Assyrians over other names.