

Surāya is Asurāya from Ashurāya, meaning Assyrian

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When analyzing a culture or linguistic group, applying the grammatical, phonetic, or semantic structures of a foreign language to define native terms can lead to confusion and historical distortion. Just as native terms must be understood through the lens of a group's indigenous language, the linguistic reality of the Assyrian people provides a clear example of the distinction between how a people defines itself internally and how it has been named by foreign populations throughout history.

The historical development of the self-designation of the indigenous Assyrian people of the native region of “Māt Aššur”, or Assyria in English¹, who later formed the foundation of the Eastern Syriac-speaking Christian communities, is deeply rooted in linguistics. When the Assyrian population of Upper Mesopotamia converted to Christianity between the first and fourth centuries, they adopted the Eastern Aramaic dialect of Edessa (Urhay), known as Syriac, as their liturgical and literary language. They identified themselves in their native tongue as Surāye. Because of the historical evolution of the word, the native term Surāya (singular) is etymologically and historically identical to Assurāya [Ashurāya], meaning Assyrian. This relationship demonstrates that the modern self-designation of the Assyrians has remained unbroken for several millennia.²

The exonym, or foreign word, “Assyrian” causes some confusion among certain non-native Assyrians because it is not an endonym or native term. Ancient Assyrians did not refer to themselves using the foreign term “Assyrians”, which cannot be found in any ancient official document, tablet, monument, letter, or other surviving record. The ancient Assyrians identified themselves as Aššurāye (Ashurāye).

When an Assyrian today asks a fellow male Assyrian in the native language, “What is your ethnic background?”, the answer is “ܠܗܝܬܝ” (Surāya), which means Assyrian. Similarly, when an Egyptian asks a fellow male Egyptian in the native Arabic language, “Who are you?”, the answer is immediately given in Arabic: “أنا مصري” (ana Masri), meaning “I am Egyptian.” The answer is not “ana Egyptian”.³ This is not confined to Assyrians or Egyptians. A Greek would answer “Ellinas” (I am Greek), while an Armenian would say “Hay” (I am Armenian).

¹ Parpola, Simo and Michael Porter. “The Helsinki Atlas of the Near East in the Neo-Assyrian Period.” The CASCO BAY Assyriological Institute: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project. Helsinki, 2001, p. 21.

² Rollinger, Robert. “The Terms Assyria and Syria Again.” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 65, No. 4. University of Chicago Press, 2006, pp. 283-287.

³ I mentioned a male Assyrian and Egyptian, because verbs and names used for male and female are different in the Syriac and Arabic languages.

Surāya in the native Assyrian language derives from Asurāya, and this Asurāya is the Akkadian Aššurāya (Ashurāya).

Historical records indicate that, between approximately 1000 and 600 BC, increased phonetic fronting and backing of sibilants, together with graphic interchange between certain “š” (sh) and “s” series signs, became noticeable in administrative and literary texts. It may be argued, however, that between 600 BC and AD 400, as Imperial Aramaic replaced Akkadian as the lingua franca of Mesopotamia,⁴ native Semitic sibilants underwent structural shifts under Aramaic superstrate influence. These developments led to frequent changes in which historical Assyrian “š” (sh) sounds merged with, or were realized as, “s” in various regional sub-dialects.

This phenomenon is extensively documented within the Semitic language family, including Akkadian and Assyrian dialects, as part of a broader phonetic and orthographic evolution. Moscati writes that, in Middle and New Assyrian, the original “š” often appears as “s”. He further states that Hebrew transcriptions of Assyrian names confirm this development.⁵

The available linguistic evidence therefore indicates that the “š” (sh) sound gradually evolved towards the softer “s”, contributing to the transition from Aššuraya (Ashurāya) to Asurāya.

However, in everyday speech, Assyrians do not generally use Asurāya, but instead use Surāya, dropping the initial “A”. This linguistic process is known as aphesis. Professor of Assyriology Simo Parpola has shown that, in late seventh-century BC Aramaic documents from Assyria, the name Aššur (pronounced Assur and generally written ^asr) could also appear as “Sur” (written sr).⁶ This evidence indicates that the term was used in both forms, with and without the initial “A”.

Parpola also argued that the indigenous designations Sūrāya and Sūryōyo ultimately derive from the Neo-Assyrian form Sūrāyu, which in turn is a variant of Aššūrāyu, or Assyrian.⁷

Further evidence is provided by Mar Touma Audo, the Chaldean Catholic Church Archbishop of Urmia. In his book “Qaryaneh Jobyeh” (Selected Readings), published in 1906, he stated on page 168:

⁴ I must clarify that while cuneiform script was replaced by Aramaic alphabet in the Assyrian Empire official communications around the mid-eighth century, the Assyrian Akkadian spoken language did not lose its status.

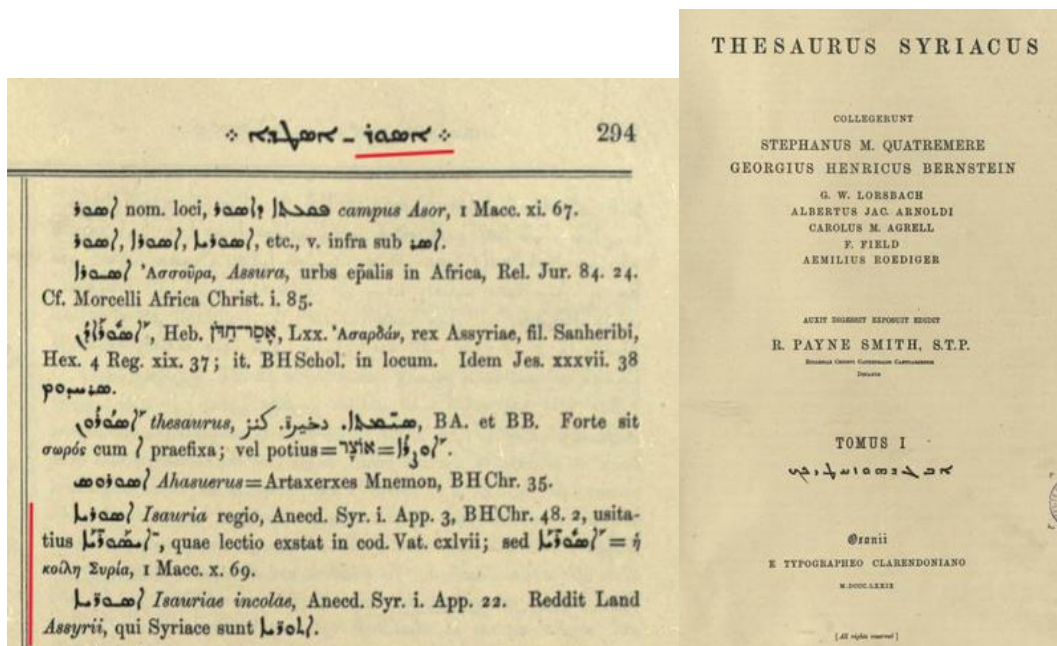
⁵ Moscati, Sabatino. “An Introduction to the Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages: Phonology and Morphology.” Edited by Sabatino Moscati. Third Printing. Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1980, p. 35.

⁶ Parpola, Simo. “National and Ethnic Identity,” pp. 16 f. with n. 55.

⁷ Parpola, Simo. “Assyrian Identity in Ancient Times and Today.” *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2004.

“We in fact call ourselves generally ‘Surāyeh’ and not Suryāyeh as some learned among us say. And it is obvious that ‘Surāya’ is derived from ‘Atourāya’ (Athourāya) as the ‘A’ was dropped and the ‘T’ (th) softened to an ‘S’ as it has been customary in many places. For example, in Sina and Seert they pronounce the softened ‘T’ as ‘S’ and they say ‘meesa’ instead of ‘meeta’ (meetha) and ‘Alahosa’ instead of ‘Alahota’ (Alahotha). Even in Urmia they say ‘Asas al-Bait’ instead of ‘athath al-Bait’ and ‘Ausman’ instead of ‘Autman’.”

Furthermore, according to Robert Payne Smith, Asor includes Asora, Asoraya, and Asoraya [Asurāya]. It also denotes Assyrii, a term occasionally used during the Greek classical period in reference to Assyria.⁸



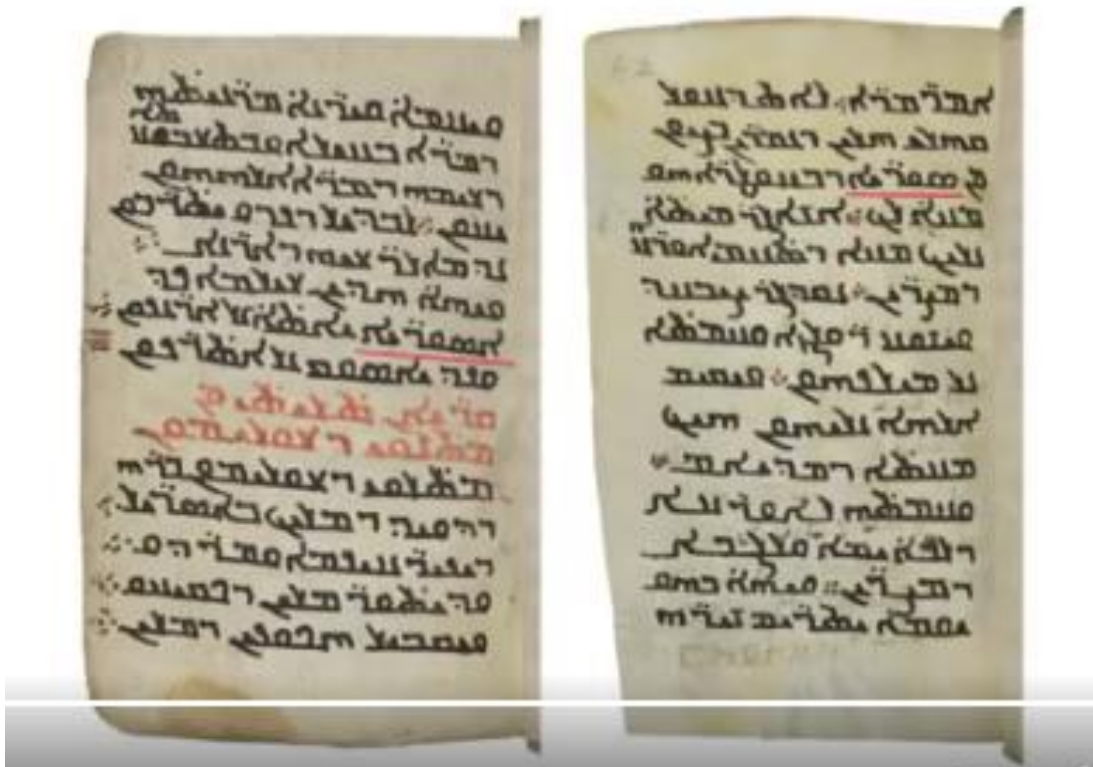
The dropping of the initial “A” is common in the Assyrian (Syria) language. Consider the following examples:

1. “ܢܫܐ” Nasha means a person. It is actually written “ܢܫܐ” Anasha.
2. “ܙܠܐ” Zala means to go. It is actually written “ܙܠܐ” Azala.
3. “ܟܠܝܐ” Kharaya means the last. It is actually written “ܟܠܝܐ” Akhraya.
4. “ܟܠܬܐ” Khalta means food. It is actually written “ܟܠܬܐ” Akhalta.
5. “ܡܪܐ” Mara means to say. It is actually written “ܡܪܐ” Amara.
6. “ܣܝܩܐ” Syaqa means to do up or ascend. It is actually written “ܣܝܩܐ” Asyaqa.

⁸ Smith, Robert Payne. “Thesaurus Syriacus: Syriac-Latin dictionary.” Tomus I. E. Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1879, p. 294.

7. “ܣܝܪܐ” Syara means to bind or join. It is actually written “ܐܣܝܪܐ” Asyara.
8. “ܪܙܢܐܝܐ” Razanaya means sacramental. It is actually written “ܐܪܙܢܐܝܐ” Arazanaya.
9. “ܬܝܐ” Taya means coming. It is actually written “ܐܬܝܐ” Ataya.
10. “ܓܪܝܗ” Gareh means roof or terrace. It is actually written “ܐܓܪܝܗ” or Agareh.
11. “ܫܬܐ” Shata means fever. It is written “ܐܫܬܐ” Ashata.
12. “ܚܪܢܐ” Khrena means the other. It is written “ܐܚܪܢܐ” Akhrena.⁹

At Westminster College, Cambridge, there exists an eleventh-century CPA (Christian Palestinian Aramaic) scripture manuscript containing syntactical constructions based on Greek. In chapters five and ten, both Surāya and Asurāya are used interchangeably.¹⁰



Thus, Ashurāya and Surāya are endonyms, while Assyrian is the English exonym for Ashurāya, Asurāya and Surāya.

⁹ The above examples were collected by the author of this paper from several Syriac dictionaries.

¹⁰ Lewis, Agnes Smith. “A Palestinian Syriac Lectionary.” Cambridge University Press, 2015. Accessed August 18, 2026.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_Palestinian_Aramaic#/media/File:Palestinian_Syriac_lectionary_by_M._D._Gibson.png

Another native word that evolved from Ashur is Athur. The linguistic shift from the name Ashur, or Aššur, to Athur, or Athura, represents a phonetic evolution that occurred primarily during the transition from the Old Persian period into the Achaemenid period and was heavily influenced by Aramaic phonology.

In ancient Assyrian, the name of the national god, city, and empire was pronounced and written with a central sibilant, š or šš. However, when the Achaemenid Persians conquered the former heartlands of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, they administered the province using Imperial Aramaic as the lingua franca. In Aramaic, š or šš frequently underwent dentalisation through interaction with surrounding dialects and Persian administrative transcription. This process led to the substitution of the “sh” sound with a “th” or “t” sound and consequently to the use of forms such as Athura or Athur.

In the Behistun Inscription of Darius I (c. 520 BC), written in Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian, the region of Assyria is explicitly referred to as Āthura in the Old Persian sections, while the Elamite version uses A-ḫu-ra and the Babylonian version uses Aššur.^{11 12}

COL. II.

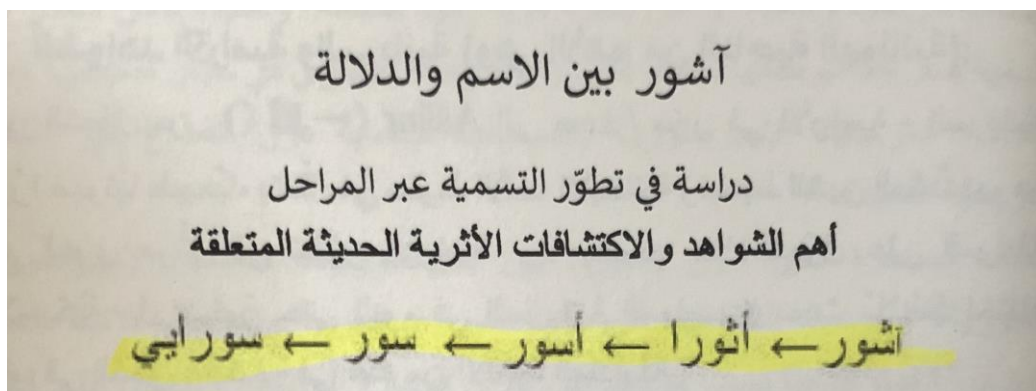
1	1	Thātiya	Dārayawuš	k'ishāyathiya	pasāra	Natitabira	ha
		Dicit	Darius	rex :	postea	Natitabiros	
2	da	kamamābīsh	asāramābīsh	abīya	Bābir'um	ashiya	
	eum	fidelibus	equitibus	ad	Babylonem	fugie-	
3	wa	pasīwa	adam	Bābir'um	ashiyawam	āha	utā
	let :	postea	ego	Babylonem	progredebam,	et	Bā
4	bir'um	agarbāyam	utā	awam	Natitabiram	agarbāyam	pasīwa
	bylonem	expiebam,	et	eum	Natitabiram	expiebam,	postea
5	m	Natitabiram	adam	Bābiruwa	awājjhanam	II. Thātiya	Dār(a)yawuš
	um	Natitabiram	ego	Babylone	occidebam.	Dicit	Darius
6	shāyathiya	yātā	adam	Bābiruwa	āham	imā	dahyāwa
	rex :	dum	ego	Babylone	eram,	hæ (sunt) provincie	tyā
							hachāma
							hæ
7	mītriyā	abawa	Pārsa	Uwajha	Māda	Athurā	Arminā
	bellæ	habant :	Persia,	Susiana,	Media,	Assyria,	Armenia,
							Parthwa
							Marghush
							Tha
8	taghu-h	Saka	III. Thātiya	Dār(a)yawuš	k'ishāyathiya	I martiya	Martiya
	tagydin,	Sacia,	Dicit	Darius	rex :	homo	Martius
							no-
9	ma	Chichik'hrāish	putrā	Khuganakā	nāma	wardanam	Pārsiya
	minutus,	Sisicris	filius,	Kugansea	nominatum	oppidum	Persidis,
							eo loco
							habitavit :

¹¹ Olmstead, A. T. “Darius and His Behistun Inscription.” The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Oct., 1938). The University of Chicago Press. Accessed August 18, 2026 https://archive.org/stream/DariusAndHisBehistunInscription/Olmsted19380DariusAndHisBehistunInscription_djvu.txt

¹² Rawlinson, H. C. “The Persian Cuneiform Inscription at Behistun, Decyphered and Translated; With a Memoir on Persian Cuneiform Inscriptions in General, and on That of Behistun in Particular.” Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1848. Accessed August 18, 2026 <https://archive.org/details/jstor-25581217/page/n5/mode/2up>

English remained largely unknown to Assyrian communities until the arrival of Western missionaries in the early nineteenth century in the historic Assyrian region of northern Mesopotamia. Given these historical circumstances, it would be difficult to expect Assyrians and their immediate neighbors to have used the foreign English term “Assyrian”, itself derived through Greek and Roman sources, to describe themselves.

Consequently, when searching for historical references to Assyrians, an investigation should begin with native records employing terms such as Ashurāya, Athurāya, Surāya, or Suroyo, depending on geographical location and historical period, together with the plural form Surāye. Such an investigation should then consider records produced by the Assyrians’ immediate neighbors. These include Arabs, who used Ashuri or Athuri; Persians, who used Ashuri and Asori; Turks, who used Asurlar; and Armenians, who used Asori¹³. Records produced by more geographically distant populations may then be examined within their appropriate historical and linguistic contexts.¹⁴



Courtesy of Eshu Marcus, “The Church of the East: Between Ecclesiastical Identity and National Identity.”

The terminological ambiguities introduced by certain Western historians and theologians have contributed significantly to confusion surrounding Assyrian identity and historical continuity. For example, early Christian historians frequently used the term “Syrian” to refer to Assyrians. This confusion was partly the result of English translations that rendered certain Greek terms in a manner that obscured distinctions between the region and its people. This practice persisted in Western historiography for centuries, despite several historical accounts that addressed the issue directly.

¹³ Al-Jeloo, Nicholas. “Syrian, Aramean or Assyrian? Reflections on the Armenian word ‘Asori’.” Guest lecture at Yerevan State University (Armenia), 2025. Accessed July 28, 2026 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFPyHF_BxRw

¹⁴ Marcus, Eshu. “The Church of the East: Between Ecclesiastical Identity and National Identity.” In Arabic. Lulu, 2026.

During the classical period, the Greek terms Syria and Assyria were used interchangeably.¹⁵ This was famously noted by the fifth-century BC Greek historian Herodotus in his *Histories*: “These [Assyrians] are called by Greeks Syrians, but the foreigners called them Assyrians.”¹⁶

In ancient Greek literature, terminology evolved alongside political boundaries and ethnic designations. Classical authors such as Herodotus, Xenophon, and Strabo frequently discussed the region and its populations, although they occasionally used the terms Assyrii and Syrii interchangeably, particularly in the post-Achaemenid period.

Nevertheless, the direct Hellenic linguistic equivalent expressing the geographical and ethnic continuity of the ancient Assyrians remained Ἀσσύριοι (Assyrioi). This classical designation forms the etymological root of modern European terms, including the English word “Assyrian”, thereby linking classical Hellenic descriptions of the ancient Near East directly to modern historical lexicons.¹⁷

This linguistic relationship was further confirmed in 1997 with the discovery of the Çineköy inscription, a bilingual Luwian-Phoenician monument dating to the eighth century BC and uncovered in the vicinity of Adana, modern Türkiye¹⁸. The inscription provides important evidence that the Greek word Syria is a direct derivative of the Akkadian Assurayu (Assyria), in which the initial “A-” was dropped in Western Anatolian and Greek pronunciation.^{19 20}

The terminological ambiguity surrounding the term Syrian was further compounded by the creation of the modern Arab Muslim country of Syria in 1941, whose citizens also came to be known as Syrians. This development introduced further confusion between an Arab Muslim citizen of the modern state of Syria and a Syriac-speaking Christian.

The purpose of this paper has been to demonstrate that Surāya and Ashurāya, from which Aturāya and Athurāya evolved, are native words, whereas Assyrian is a non-native term.

¹⁵ Frye, Richard. “Assyria and Syria: Synonyms.” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Oct., 1992), pp. 281-285.

¹⁶ Herodotus. “The Histories.” Translated by A. D. Godley. Vol I, Books I & II. Harvard University Press. London, William Heinemann Ltd. First printed 1920.

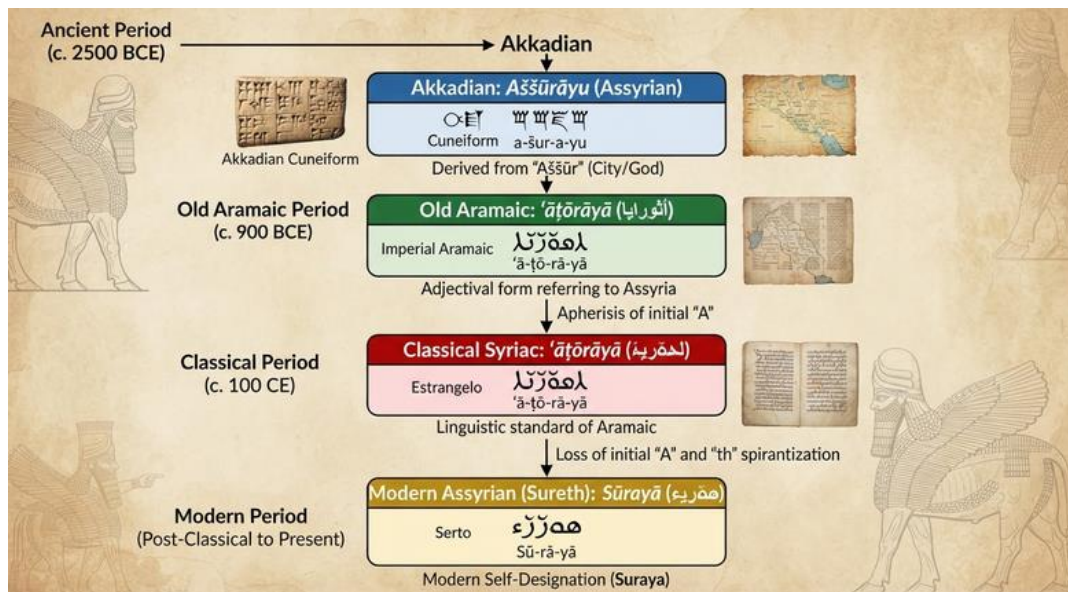
¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Adana was known as “Quwê” during the Neo-Assyrian Period. See Simo Parpola & Michael Porter. *The Helsinki Atlas of the Near East in the Neo-Assyrian Period*. Helsinki, The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001, p. 19.

¹⁹ Aprim, Fred. “The Çineköy Inscriptions: Proving Syria is Derived From Assyria.” Published December 2022. <https://www.fredaprim.com/pdfs/2022/The%20Chinkoy%20Inscription.pdf>

²⁰ “Çineköy inscription: Bilingual inscription from Anatolia in 8th century BC.” Accessed August 13, 2026. https://reference.org/facts/cinekoy_inscription/gLRLQock

The illustration below summarises the proposed etymological development of the term Surāya and serves as a useful visual aid to the linguistic relationships outlined in this study.



Readers may also wish to consult the recently published paper by Dr. Daniel Sada entitled "Assyria, Syria, and Syriac: An Interdisciplinary Reassessment of Their Historical, Linguistic, and Cultural Continuum." The paper provides a detailed and informative examination of many of these complex terms, together with their historical, linguistic, and cultural development.²¹

²¹ Sada, Daniel. "Assyria, Syria, and Syriac: An Interdisciplinary Reassessment of Their Historical, Linguistic, and Cultural Continuum." Version published August 14, 2026. Accessed August 16, 2026. https://www.academia.edu/169687321/Assyria_Syria_and_Syriac_An_Interdisciplinary_Reassessment_of_Their_Historical_Linguistic_and_Cultural_Continuum?fbclid=IwY2xjawTvITRwZG9mBWV4dG4DYWVtAjExAHNydgMGYXBwX2IkEDlYmJAzOTE3ODgyMDA4OTIAAR6dEzOOU82I2n4fj8qyTKY3C9FJO31P1QeZGSAvnFYavxm21nfCvki0g1EvrA_aem_ZgQmp5vdNFSII79ETbq5UQ