The Emergence of Aramaic Dialects in the Fertile Crescent

Aramaic first appeared in written documents in Syria, composed in the alphabetic script, soon after the beginning of the ninth century B.C.E. While there is little evidence for its earlier linguistic history, it may previously have been confined to a vernacular, with a certain amount of dialectal diversity, spoken by tribal groups that eventually settled in Syria and Western Mesopotamia and only then promoted their local dialects to official languages. Several linguistic varieties subsequently used for public display in Eastern, Central, and North-Western Syria can be clearly distinguished from neighbouring Semitic idioms, such as Hebrew and Phoenician, and among themselves, on the basis of phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. Aramaic texts from Central Syria constitute the lion’s share of the evidence and may point to a higher density of administrative centres there than at the periphery of the speech area. Regular local spelling conventions reflect conscious standardization and thus early forms of institutionalized scribal training, which indicates that Aramaic dialects must have taken on their shape at least some time before.

This earliest known stage of Aramaic until the rise of Assyrian provincial administration is now almost universally referred to as “Old Aramaic” (Altaramäisch) or, less frequently, “Ancient Aramaic”; scholars who extend...
the “Old Aramaic” period also to the seventh and sixth centuries (subsumed under “Imperial Aramaic” by others), prefer the term “early Old Aramaic” (as opposed to “late Old Aramaic”) for additional precision.127 Despite some internal variation, Old Aramaic as such can be distinguished from Achaemenid Official Aramaic on linguistic grounds due to the lack of the latter’s few but significant innovations in spelling and grammar, while certain changes in word order patterns, such as increasing fronting of direct objects and appositions, set its later stage apart from earlier Old Aramaic (see also Section 3.1.2).128 Moreover, the diffusion of some common Northwest Semitic developments, especially definiteness and direct object marking, is still unequal in texts from the earliest period.

The corpus of early Old Aramaic in the strict sense consists of some fifteen inscriptions with a total of a few hundred lines, including several lengthy ones with twenty lines or more, generally chiselled on stone and issued by local kings, as well as a number of short graffiti and some stray material like seals. Most of them come from Central Syria and, due to the impact of regional chancellery traditions, exhibit a largely standardized spelling. They have all been unearthed since the end of the nineteenth century, though some of them only in the past few decades or years, and are, for the major part, conveniently accessible in several modern collections of older Aramaic texts with translation and commentary. By and large, the most reliable one is still Donner – Röllig 3–5 1971–2002 (KAI, whose sigla will be used here for convenience’s sake, nos. 201–224, 231–232, and 309–312).129 Regrettably, discoveries from the last quarter of the twentieth century (nos. 309–312) only feature in the new edition of the first volume containing the bare texts (in square script instead of the more modern Latin transliteration), not in the German translation with commentary, which has not been updated.130 Annotated English translations of the monumental inscriptions with further references can also be found in

127 Following Beyer’s distinction between “frühes Altaramäisch” (“early Ancient Aramaic”) and “spätes Altaramäisch” (“late Ancient Aramaic”); cf. also the preceding note. So, too, Hug 1993: 139 and Gzella 2004: 35–41, both of whom have been trained by Beyer.
129 For a number of corrections, bibliographical additions, and alternative proposals on points of detail, see Degen 1971.
130 Similar restrictions apply to Koopmans 1962 and Gibson 1975. Unfortunately for English-speaking readers, the latter contains many mistakes and should only be consulted together with other studies. Some of the older manuals (see Degen 1971: 122 for references) have valuable philological notes, too.