Local forms of Aramaic in Palestine at large (thus including Judaea, Galilee, and Transjordan) first reached the surface of the textual evidence under Hellenistic and early Roman rule. At that point, Aramaic ceased to function as a global language of imperial administration following the collapse of the Achaemenid empire. Regional vernaculars then began to be used in writing in particular forms of the Aramaic script and according to orthographic principles established by the scribal schools of newly-established local chancelleries (Chapter 5). The highly multicultural setting of Roman and Byzantine Palestine subsequently saw the evolution of three literary traditions of Jews, Samaritans, and Christians, each with its own script and spelling as a marker of supra-regional cultural affiliation in an age of emerging religious identities.

These three Aramaic languages remain thus visibly distinct despite considerable linguistic similarities. Jews had switched to square script in the Persian period and employed it for their literary and documentary texts in Palestine as well as in Babylon (and continued to do so even when writing the medieval European idioms Yiddish and Ladino); the Samaritan letters are directly related to the pre-Achaemenid epigraphic Hebrew script with its strong nationalist connotations (one may impressionistically compare the overtones of Gothic letter forms like Fraktur in the modern age); and Palestinian Christians adopted the Estrangela writing of their brethren in Syria and Mesopotamia (where a Christian-Aramaic literature first took on its shape). Nonetheless, the underlying dialects themselves all belong to the same branch of Aramaic, as will be seen in the ensuing discussion, and their speakers coexisted on partly friendly, partly hostile terms.

A much more extensive body of material than before enables one to describe the grammar and lexicon of Aramaic to a sufficient degree of completeness from about the fourth century c.e. onwards, that is, in the later Roman or Byzantine period. Since there is no longer a unifying lingua franca, an eventual

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943 The exact geographical boundaries of the region (also called “Eretz Israel” in the Jewish and “the Holy Land” in the Christian traditions) are not always clear and have changed over time. Hence the term “Palestine” denotes a more general cultural area here, situated between Syria in the north and east on the one hand and Arabia in the south on the other, and not a precise administrative district. Belayche 2001: 13–25 has a useful discussion of the matter.

944 Cf. Millar 2013: 65–74 for a number of examples from Greek historians of this period.
decrease of the Achaemenid Official Aramaic superstrate makes it possible, after the third and fourth centuries C.E., to define a broader spectrum of characteristic isoglosses of regional forms of Aramaic, verify their distributional patterns, and assess their diagnostic weight with reasonable confidence. As a result, Western Aramaic as a well-defined dialect group appears in the light of day and can henceforth be clearly distinguished from its Eastern Aramaic sister branch (which became visible at a somewhat earlier stage, see Section 5.5.1). A consistent geographical arrangement with a further subdivision into Jewish, Christian, and other varieties therefore constitutes the most viable classificatory principle for a history of Aramaic after the third century C.E. and is universally accepted in current research.945 There is thus good reason to postulate the beginning of a new stage in the evolution of the language at this point, no matter whether one prefers the widespread though somewhat infelicitous term “Late Aramaic,” following Fitzmyer, or Beyer’s “Middle Aramaic.”946

Both dialect groups obviously did not arise overnight, but the underlying vernaculars remained largely unwritten before they, influenced to varying degrees by the Achaemenid standard language, came to be used as written means of expression and a token of new regional cultural self-awareness in the Hellenistic and early Roman periods. Epigraphic production in the respective language varieties also continued in the public as well as in the private sphere

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945 Rosenthal 1939: 104–105 (his chronological category "Jungaramäisch" basically corresponds to Western Aramaic and is opposed to the more straightforwardly geographical notion of its counterpart "Ostaramäisch," but this terminological asymmetry is prompted by the inclusion of the language of Targum Onqelos and Jonathan, which cannot be assigned to either the one or the other branch on unambiguous linguistic grounds, and the synagogue inscriptions from Dura Europos, which, despite their Eastern place of discovery, may nevertheless reflect a Palestinian variety; cf. 105 and 115 n. 1); Beyer 1984: 59 and 1986: 43 (who correctly stresses the primacy of a dialectal bifurcation of Aramaic since the third century C.E. as opposed to the earlier interaction of regional varieties and common literary languages that obscures a similar distinction for previous periods); Fitzmyer 2004: 31 (who does not supply any linguistic arguments).

946 The latter would of course be more appropriate on grounds of terminological elegance thanks to its intuitively appealing division into an “old,” a “middle,” and a “modern” period (as, e.g., in Iranian). Such a division emphasizes the direct connection between older epigraphic forms of Jewish Palestinian and Syriac under Hellenistic and early Roman rule on the one hand and the corresponding literary traditions in the Byzantine period on the other. Unfortunately, “Middle Aramaic” is now mostly understood in Fitzmyer’s less adequate sense as an umbrella term for the very different Aramaic languages of the Greco-Roman period, where such a common notion seems much harder to justify linguistically (see Section 5.1.1).