THE ARAMEANS OF SYRIA:
SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THEIR ORIGIN AND
MATERIAL CULTURE

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1. Introduction

The Aramaeans were the dominant population group in Syria in the first millennium BCE. Their rise to political power was the result of the general collapse that put an end to the Late Bronze Age urban culture of the Levant and drastically changed the political landscape of Syria-Palestine. In this larger area, the old city-states of the second millennium BCE vanished and they were replaced by new geo-political entities. The great Hittite empire disintegrated and small neo-Hittite or Luwian kingdoms occupied southeast Turkey and part of North Syria. Aramaean kingdoms occupied most of the territory of what is today Syria, while Phoenician and Philistine city-states were established on the coast. Finally, the states of Israel, Judah, Ammon, Edom and Moab were founded in central Palestine and Transjordan. This historical reality is mirrored in the biblical record, mainly the Book of Kings, which echoes historical events involving Israel, Judah, and their neighbors, especially their tumultuous relations with the Aramaeans.

It is this aspect of Aramaean history, i.e. their relations with the Israelite kingdoms that first aroused the curiosity of scholars. Kraeling’s Aram and Israel, which appeared in 1918, was the first scholarly

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work to deal with this issue. These relations, in particular those with the kingdom of Aram Damascus, received in-depth treatments several decades later, and in the light of new epigraphic discoveries, like the Tel Dan inscription, are regularly reevaluated.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, Aramaic royal inscriptions were discovered in Zincirli (KAI 214–221), in Sefer (KAI 222–224), in Afis (KAI 202), in Hama (KAI 203–213) and in Breidj, 7 km north of Aleppo (KAI 201). They contributed, together with the newly translated neo-Assyrian annals, a wealth of information on the Aramaean kingdoms of Syria. The new evidence led to the first publication dedicated to Aramaean history by Dupont-Sommer, which replaced Schiffer’s earlier attempt at putting together the scanty information available on that topic. His book remained for almost half a century the only textbook on the subject. Subsequently, new editions of the royal annals of the middle and neo-Assyrian kings were published making new historical information about the Aramaean kingdoms of Syria available. New Luwian texts were also discovered and published

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