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Aramaic Script Derivatives in Central Eurasia

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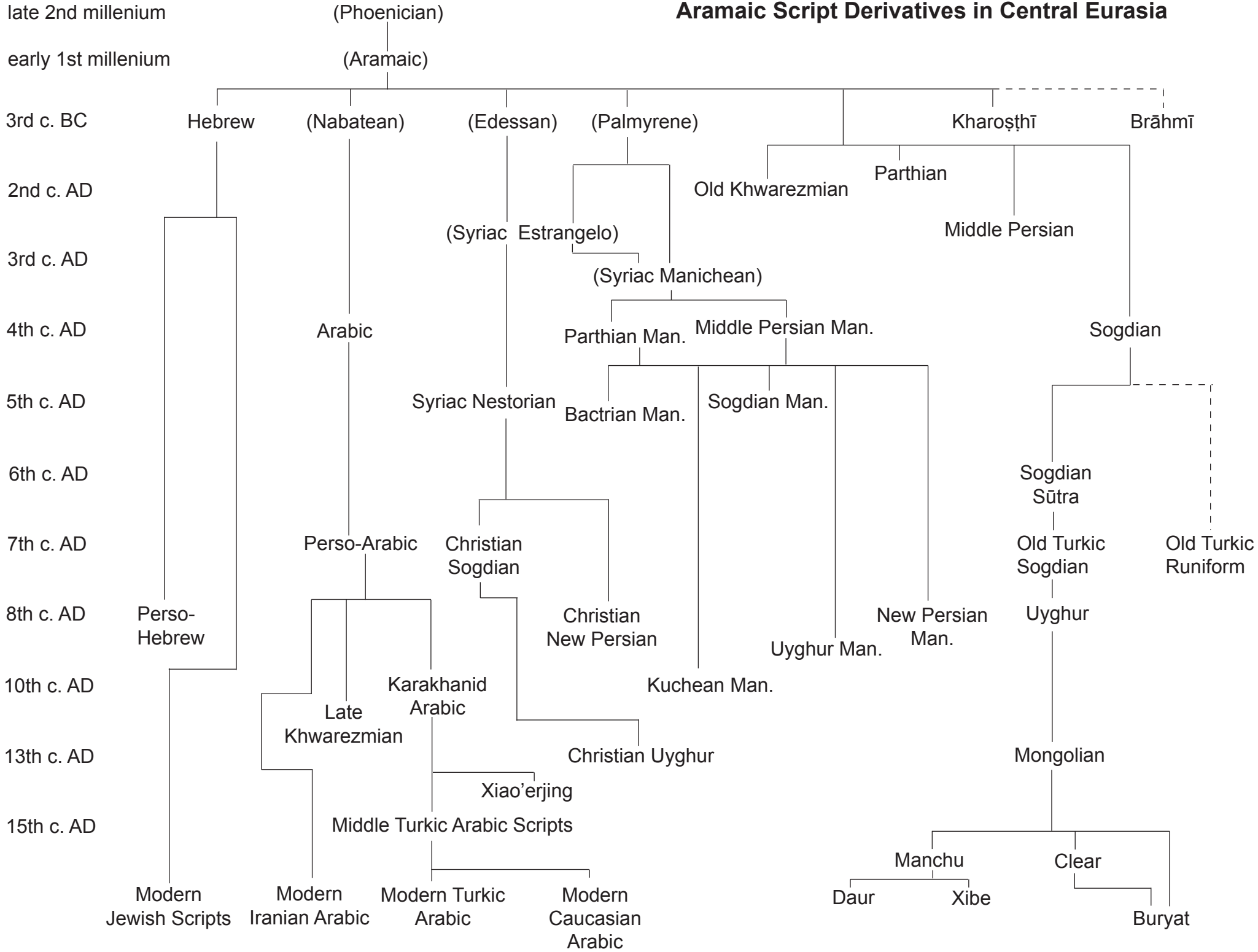
Whitehorse, Yukon

This project began with a request from Victor Mair for a chart showing the offshoots of Aramaic writing in Central Eurasia. The chart is meant to accompany an article in the catalog he has edited for an exhibition on the Silk Road and the Tarim Mummies to take place in 2010–2011.*

The paragraphs below, in alphabetic order, briefly describe every entry on the tree, explain lineages and dating, and refer to the authorities consulted. Many lineages and dates can be questioned. Some entries may appear to refer to languages rather than scripts, but it is assumed that when a script is transferred to a different language, the resulting writing system is unique. Often a script has conventions that come from a different source than the character shapes. In these cases the lineages on the tree refer to character shapes, and the sources of the conventions are mentioned in the descriptions. Some modern and pre-modern scripts are grouped together on the tree and individual scripts in each group are to some extent distinguished in the notes for each group. Useful comments on earlier drafts came from Nicholas Sims-Williams, Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst, Peter B. Golden, Peter Zieme, Jason Neelis, Peter T. Daniels, Charles Häberl, and Dan Levene, but remaining errors are mine alone.

* “Secrets of the Silk Road” will be at the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, California, from March 27, 2010, to July 25, 2010. It will then move to the Houston Museum of Natural Science from August 28, 2010, to January 2, 2011, and to the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology from February 5, 2011, to June 5, 2011. The exhibition catalogue is edited by Victor H. Mair: *Secrets of the Silk Road: An Exhibition of Discoveries from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China* (Santa Ana, California: Bowers Museum, 2010), with contributions by Elizabeth Wayland Barber (textiles), Spencer Wells (genetics), Lothar von Falkenhausen (history), and the editor (archeology).

Aramaic Script Derivatives in Central Eurasia



Arabic

The (North) Arabic script evolved from the Nabatean Aramaic. The first inscriptions in Arabic language in this script date to the fourth century AD (Bauer 1996:559). There are older inscriptions in languages closely related to Classical Arabic, but these are in a different, southern alphabet (O'Connor 1996:90). In the seventh century diacritic dots were added to Arabic to disambiguate characters (Bauer 1996:559).

Aramaic

In southern Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia Aramaic speakers used the Phoenician alphabet during the ninth and early eighth centuries BC, developing it into the distinctive Aramaic script by the mid-eighth century. After the founding of the Achaemenid Empire in the mid-sixth century the Aramaic language and script became official tools for administration from Egypt to Central Asia and India and are called Imperial Aramaic (O'Connor 1996:96). After Alexander's conquest of the Near East, Greek became the official medium of international communication. Aramaic was still widely used, but local variants now developed, becoming distinctive in the third century (Goerwitz 1996:489).

Bactrian Manichean

Just a single page in Bactrian language and Manichean script has been found, and that in the Turfan region, far from Bactria. The writing system has "conventions that differ from those in the 'native' Bactrian script (e.g., the regular word-final vowel of the latter is missing in the former)" (Durkin-Meisterernst 2005). It is plausible but not proven that this fragment reflects a wider tradition in Bactria. The date of origin for that tradition might be similar to that of the Sogdian Manichean but any date will be open to dispute.

Brāhmī

The Aśokan inscriptions from the mid-third century AD are the oldest datable samples of this form of writing (Salomon 1996:373). The origin is controversial with Aramaic, Phoenician, South Semitic, Indus Valley script, or outright invention all being suggested as possible sources. Aramaic is most plausible, not just for historical and geographic reasons, but because it exhibits certain patterns of potential borrowing such as the use of Aramaic

qoph, *het* and *tet* for the Indian aspirates *kha*, *gha* and *tha* respectively (Salomon 1996:378). Brāhmī is the source of most of the indigenous South Asian and all of the major Southeast Asian scripts. Many varieties have been found in documents in many languages from Central Eurasia. Just from Turfan, documents show the use of Brāhmī for a dozen languages (Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities 2007:9).

Buryat

In 1905 two Buryat scholars developed a script for modern Buryat based on Mongolian and Clear writing. It lasted about fifteen years before being superseded by Latin and then Cyrillic (Kara 1996:554).

Christian New Persian

At least one document in Nestorian script and Early New Persian has come to light in Turfan (Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities 2007:9). It is plausible that this is representative of a wider tradition among Nestorians in Iran. Dating this tradition is not easy, but perhaps it can be grouped with the Early New Persian in Hebrew script, Perso-Hebrew, of the eighth century.

Christian Sogdian

It is not known at what date Christian Sogdians began using Nestorian letters but possibly around the time that an Archbishopric was created in Samarkand, sometime before 650 AD (Foltz 1999:68). The script has a new consonant letter, *ž*, and can write vowels with the Syriac pointing system, and as such it is the only Sogdian writing which can distinguish between high *i/ī* and mid *e/ē* and between high *u/ū* and mid *o/ō* (Skjærvø 1996:533).

Christian Uyghur

Most Turkic texts in Nestorian script are tomb inscriptions from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but there are also paper fragments from Karakhoto in the Turfan region (Róna-Tas 1998:134–135).

Clear

A seventeenth-century revision of the Mongolian vertical Uyghur writing, Clear script featured new letters and diacritics which completely eliminated the ambiguities of its parent. It became the system of the Mongols in the West, the Oirats and Kalmyks, and is still used today in Jungaria (Kara 1996:548).

Daur

(see **Manchu**)

Edessan

A local derivative of Aramaic script which arose in the third century BC around Edessa (modern Şanlı Urfa in Turkey), after Imperial Aramaic ceased to be an international standard. This evolved into the Syriac script used for Christian texts (O'Connor 1996:98; Wikipedia: Edessa,_Mesopotamia). The local Aramaic dialect evolved into the Syriac language.

Hebrew

The Hebrew language first appears in texts in the ninth century BC in Phoenician script. Over time the writing evolved distinct features and is called the Old Hebrew script, which has survived in use among Samaritans until today. In the mid-third century a distinctive Jewish form of Aramaic script emerges. Also called Square Hebrew, this is the script listed on the tree and is the ancestor of the form of writing most familiar from Hebrew today (Goerwitz 1996:489).

Karakhanid Arabic

The earliest usage of Arabic (strictly speaking Perso-Arabic) script for writing Turkic was confined to the Karakhanid Empire beginning in the eleventh century. One important work, "Compendium of the Turkic Dialects," by Maḥmūd al Kāšyarī, contains technical information on the language and writing system (Róna-Tas 1998:131). Kāšyarī knew about the Uyghur script but believed it to be inadequate to represent the sounds of Turkic (Dankoff and Kelly 1982:53).

Kharoṣṭhī

The earliest datable attestation of this unique Gandhāran (N Pakistan and E Afghanistan) adaptation of Aramaic script is from the third century BC inscriptions of Aśoka (Salomon 1996:373). The language written with Kharoṣṭhī is usually called Gāndhārī Prakrit. Gāndhārī may have been the main language of the earliest Buddhist missions to China as it appears that many of the earliest translations into Chinese are from Gāndhārī rather than from Sanskrit (Brough 1965:607–611), and a foundation inscription in Kharoṣṭhī and Gāndhārī from the late second or early third century AD was found in Loyang (Brough 1961:530). In the Tarim Basin the earliest use appears to be in the first century AD coins of King Gurgamoya of Khotan, which feature Prakrit on the obverse and the monetary designation in Chinese on the reverse (Jason Neelis pc; International Dunhuang Project undated: Sino-Kharoṣṭhī coins; Wikipedia: Kharosthi). The latest use of Kharoṣṭhī and Gāndhārī anywhere appears to be from the seventh century in administrative documents from Kucha on the northern rim of the Tarim Basin, but neither the script nor the language are well understood (Salomon 1996:376; Hitch 2009: fn. 45).

Kuchean Manichean

Properly speaking, there was no Kuchean (Tocharian B) Manichean writing system. Rather, Manichean letters were used to phonetically transcribe a Kuchean Manichean hymn. We have two versions, one of which uses the orthographic conventions of Middle Persian Manichean practice (two documents with overlapping text), while the other uses Uyghur Manichean conventions (Hitch 1993: 97–128). The second version appears to be from the tenth century (ibid.: 98).

Late Khwarezmian

This later stage (see also **Old Khwarezmian**) of this East Iranian language is attested from the eleventh to the fourteenth century in a script derived from Perso-Arabic with further native modifications such as the addition of a letter to write /β/ (MacKenzie). The Turkish language that supplanted it in Khwarezm is called Khwarezmian Turkic (see **Middle Turkic Arabic**).

Manchu

Nurhachi, founder of the Manchu Empire, in 1599 ordered that a script be made for Manchu. Some new symbols were added to the Mongolian, and then after a reform in 1632 it could be said that, "this easternmost descendant of the Aramaic script is an ideal tool for recording Manchu phonemes and some allophones" (Kara 1996:550). The script was also used formerly for writing Mongolic Daur and is still used today for the Manchu dialect of the Shibe (Xibe) people (ibid.).

Middle Persian

This variant of Aramaic evolved in Southern Iran during the late Parthian era and was the official system for writing Middle Persian in the Sassanian Empire, 221–651 AD (Skjærvø 1996:517).

Middle Persian Manichean

If the scripture that Mani composed in Middle Persian was written in Manichean script, then this tradition might have begun in the middle of the third century AD. The older Middle Persian script used heterograms and historical spellings that the Manichean largely eschewed in favor of a more phonological representation (Durkin-Meisterernst 2005). Also see **Parthian Manichean**.

Middle Turkic Arabic

This includes Volga Bulghar inscribed on tombstones from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Khwarezmian Turkic used in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in the Golden Horde, East Chagatay Turkic used in the fifteenth-sixteenth century Timurid realm, and Kipchak Turkic documented from the fourteenth century on and used in the khanates succeeding the Golden Horde (Johanson 1996:85–86).

Modern Caucasian Arabic

Modern languages from the Caucasus that have been written in an Arabic-derived script include Adyghe, Kabardian, Avar, Chechen, Ingush, Dargwa, Lak, and Lezgian (Comrie 1996:782).

Modern Iranian Arabic

Modern Iranian languages written in derivatives of the Perso-Arabic script include Tajik, Pashto, Baluchi, and Kurdish.

Modern Jewish Scripts

Modern Jewish languages that are or were written in Hebrew script include Judeo-Tajik (Bukhori) and Judeo-Tat (Juhuri) from the Iranian sphere, and Judeo-Crimchak from the Turkic (Hary 1996:728; Wikipedia: Bukhori language, Juhuri language, Krymchak language).

Modern Turkic Arabic

Modern Turkic languages from Central Eurasia that are or were written in an Arabic-derived script include Azerbaijani, Balkar, Bashkir, Crimean Tatar, Karachay, Karakalpak, Kazakh, Kirghiz, Kumyk, Noghay, Volga Tatar, Kazan Tatar, Turkmen, Uyghur, and Uzbek (cf. Comrie 1996:782; Johanson 1998:87).

Mongolian

From the thirteenth-century beginning of the empire of Chinggis Khan, the Uyghur script became the writing system of the Mongols. No new letters were added until the seventeenth century. Several other scripts for Mongolian were introduced, but the Uyghur remained dominant until today in Inner Mongolia (Kara 1996:545). In the Mongolian Republic Latin was introduced for official purposes in 1931, then Cyrillic in 1937 and in 1941 Uyghur was officially banned. Today the Mongolian Uyghur script is taught in schools and used for decoration but literacy is highest in Cyrillic (www.omniglot.com/writing/mongolian.htm).

Nabatean

After Imperial Aramaic ceased to be an international standard, the Arabic-speaking Nabateans, centered around Petra, developed the local offshoot of Aramaic script in the third century BC but continued to write in Aramaic (O'Connor 1996:98; Daniels 1996:499).

New Persian Manichean

"The Modern Persian texts in Manichean script tend to use regular Manichean Middle Persian orthography, but they date from after the Arab conquest and are recognizable as Modern Persian by the frequent use of Arabic words and occasional Persian forms" (Skjærvø 2006). On the tree this use of Early New Persian is dated with that of the Perso-Hebrew materials from the eighth century.

Old Khwarezmian

This older stage of the original East Iranian language of Khwarezm or Chorasmia is first attested from about the end of the second century AD from coin inscriptions and texts on wood and paper. The latest samples are from inscriptions mostly on ossuaries but also on silver vessels from the seventh century AD (Mackenzie).

Old Turkic Runiform

At first thought to be related to Germanic runic because of superficial similarities, a semitic heritage of the script was suggested in the late nineteenth century, and this is widely accepted today. The precise evolution is not clear. Róna-Tas proposes that the script "developed in at least four phases" (1998:127), while Kara suggests that "Non-cursive Sogdian script inspired the runiform alphabet of the ancient Turks" (1996:536). The earliest inscriptions are from the 720's in Mongolia, and the latest sample on paper is likely no older than the tenth century (Róna-Tas 1998:127). The script has interesting features. Words are divided by two dots, like a colon. Many consonants are denoted by two letters, one for back vowel words and the other for front vowel words, that is, vowel harmony is written with the consonants. There is a series of poorly understood runiform alphabets, from the Talas Valley to the Carpathian Basin, some or all of which may be related to the Old Turkic (cf. Kara 1996:538).

Old Turkic Sogdian

The Bugut (Mongolia) inscriptions of 581–587, by Turkic rulers but in Sogdian language (Róna-Tas 1998:128), show the preeminent role of Sogdian literacy among the eastern Turks. Buddhism came to the Turks through Sogdian monks, and "it is natural that the

Soghdian script was first used almost without any changes" (ibid.). The adaptation to Turkic probably began after the sixth century; otherwise one might expect Old Turkic language in the Bugut inscriptions.

Palmyrene

A local derivative of Aramaic script that arose in the third century BC around Palmyra, a city on the caravan routes, now in central Syria. The Palmyrene language was a dialect of West Aramaic (Wikipedia: Palmyrene). Some scholars consider the script to be the source of the Estrangelo and Manichean forms of writing (see **Syriac Estrangelo** and **Syriac Manichean**).

Parthian

Inscriptions in Aramaic script from as early as the second century BC are in Iranian and likely in Parthian, but because of the extensive use of heterograms (Aramaic spellings read as Iranian) this is not certain. The official Parthian script had attained its standard form by the second century AD and the latest known inscription, at Paikuli (Iraq), is from 292 (Skjærvø 1996:517).

Parthian Manichean

Our main source of information about the Parthian language is from the texts in Manichean script found in Turfan. No Parthian Manichean script texts have been found farther west, but it seems likely that many of the Manichean Parthian as also Middle Persian texts from Turfan were imported from areas of the Sasanian Empire where Parthian and Middle Persian were spoken (Durkin-Meisterernst 2005). The first use of Manichean script for Parthian was likely soon after it began to be used for Middle Persian.

Perso-Arabic

Often simply called the Persian script (also Arabo-Persian), this Arabic derivative has several modifications from Arabic, such as the use of diacritics to create new letters for /p, g, č, ž/ (Kaye 1996:746). The date on the tree is approximate and based on the seventh century conquest of Iran by the Arabs. The date probably also follows the introduction of diacritic

dots to Arabic, a practice the Perso-Arabic expands upon (see **Arabic**). Most of the Arabic scripts east of Iran are based on Perso-Arabic, rather than directly on Arabic.

Perso-Hebrew

Just as the Arabic script used for Persian is called Perso-Arabic, the Hebrew used for Persian may be called Perso-Hebrew. The oldest known materials in the Perso-Hebrew script are in Judeo-Persian language and are from the eighth century. There are rock inscriptions from the Tang-e Azāo valley in Afghanistan with a date of 752/3, and there is a letter written on paper from the Dandān Öilīq archeological site in the east of the Khotan region, probably from the second half of the eighth century. The Judeo-Persian language is important for the study of the evolution of New Persian (Gindin 2009).

Phoenician

Name given to the early Iron Age alphabet from the Levant, because most of the major texts are in the Phoenician language (O'Connor 1996:94).

Sogdian

The earliest example of Sogdian writing, dating from the early fourth century, is in the letters found in a Chinese watch tower, about 90 kilometers west of Dunhuang (Sims-Williams and Waugh). A later stage is represented by the royal archives at Mt. Mug (8th c.) and by the calligraphic *sūtra* script in Buddhist and Manichean texts (Skjærvø 1996:517), which had evolved by around 500 AD (Róna-Tas 1998:128). In addition to the Sogdian and Old Turkic Sogdian shown on the tree, samples of Chinese, Sanskrit, Middle Persian, and Parthian in Sogdian script have come to light in Turfan (Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities 2007:9).

Sogdian Manichean

While the shapes of letters are Manichean, it seems that the script "follows most of the general historical conventions of the native script" (Durkin-Meisterernst 2005), that is, of the Sogdian script proper. So the date for the development of the Sogdian Manichean script follows that of the Sogdian. On the tree this is given, with reservation, as fifth century.

Sogdian Sūtra

See **Sogdian**.

Syriac Estrangelo

O'Connor appears to suggest that Syriac writing is descended from the Edessan variety of Aramaic around 200 AD (1996:89, fig. 4). Aydin suggests that the earliest Syriac language inscriptions, 1st and 2nd centuries AD, use a script close to Palmyrene cursive, which by the time of the earliest manuscripts of the fifth century had evolved into the more formalized Estrangelo. But at the same time, he says that Syriac started as the local language of Edessa (1997).

Syriac Manichean

It has been long recognized that this Mesopotamian script, chiefly attested in incantation bowls, was the likely parent of the scripts used for Manichean documents in Middle Persian, Parthian, Sogdian and Old Turkic found in Turfan. But it was not clear if this was a form of writing developed and used largely by Manicheans, as Hebrew script is by the Jews or as Mandaic script is by the Mandaeans, or if it was simply a provincial Syriac script. As shown by Shaul Shaked (2000), this writing was "no more Manichean than the Greek or Coptic scripts" (2000:73). He showed it clearly in use by adherents to Christianity, and probably also to Babylonian paganism as well as to Manicheism (*ibid.*). According to Dan Levene "Most of these [bowl inscriptions] seem to have been written by Gnostics although there are a number that were clearly written by Christians" (2002:14). It has been commonly called pre- or proto-Manichean script. In the name used here, Syriac Manichean, "Manichean" refers to the character shapes rather than to the religion. The script is mostly attested from incantation bowls dating to around the sixth century AD (*ibid.*:58 and fn. 1), but apparently there are some papyrus fragments from Kellis, the desertified site in Egypt which was abandoned some time after the year 392 (Hope and Bowen 2002:205–6), which probably pushes the date of the oldest sample back by two centuries or so. About the origin of the character shapes Durkin-Meisterernst writes that it is "closely related to the Palmyrene script of Aramaic and the Estrangelo script of Syriac" (2005). He also notes that with regard to the

Central Eurasian offshoots some of the orthographical conventions are also to be found in the Mandaean script (*ibid.*).

Syriac Nestorian

By the time of the earliest Syriac manuscripts, in the early fifth century AD, the Estrangelo had evolved into two scripts, Nestorian and Serto. These reflect a schism in the Syrian Christian church with the Persian (East) adherents becoming Nestorians and the Roman (West) becoming Monophysite or Jacobite Christians (Daniels 1996:499–500; Aydin).

Uyghur

The Uyghur script proper evolved from the use of Sogdian script for Old Turkic. One of the new conventions was the use of single 'āleph for the low front vowel /e/ (or /ǣ/) and double 'āleph for /a/ (Róna-Tas 1998:128). The direction of writing changed from horizontal to vertical columns, ordered from left to right. It was used in the Uyghur Empire (8th–9th c.) and continued in use by some Uyghur groups in Gansu until the seventeenth century (Kara 1996:539).

Uyghur Manichean

The principles of vowel marking are almost the same as in the regular Uyghur script (Kara 1996:542). This shows that, similar to the development of Sogdian Manichean writing, the Uyghur Manichean is based on a pre-existing Uyghur system and should appear later in the tree than the Uyghur. "Though the Uyghurs adopted Manichaeism officially around 762, Turkic texts in Manichaean script, found in Turfan and Dunhuang, do not seem to have been written earlier than the ninth to eleventh centuries" (Róna-Tas 1998:130).

Xiao'erjing

The Arabic-derived script for Chinese is called Xiao'erjing. It is used in China mostly by the Hui, but also by other Muslim minorities. The oldest sample may be on a fourteenth century stele from the courtyard of a mosque in Xi'an (Wikipedia: Xiao'erjing). Turkic mediation in the development of the script is suggested by the use of kāf with three dots $\text{ك}^{\text{ۛ}}$ to show /ŋ/ which is or was otherwise found only in Turkic forms of Arabic script, Uyghur, Kazakh,

Kirghiz, and Ottoman (Wikipedia: Ng [Arabic]). The Dungan people of the countries of the former Soviet Union used to employ this form of Arabic script, but the Soviets replaced it with Latin and later with Cyrillic, which is still in use (Wikipedia: Xiao'erjing).

Xibe

Xibe is a modern and innovative Manchu dialect spoken in northeast China and in Xinjiang where the Qing had placed a Xibe garrison. The language has not been influenced to the same degree by Chinese as has Manchu (Wikipedia: Xibe). In 1947 Manchu writing was reformed for modern Xibe and is still used officially today (ibiblio.org: Xibe).

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