

# Christian Palestinian Aramaic: An Introduction

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Christian Palestinian Aramaic (henceforth CPA) is not one of the best-known, let alone studied, among the varieties of Late Aramaic.<sup>1</sup> The language developed around the provinces of *Palaestina Prima*, *Palaestina Secunda* and the *Provincia Arabia*<sup>2</sup> around the fifth century (or earlier)<sup>3</sup> and got standardised into a literary and liturgical language by a community of Melkite Christians. CPA is one of the six communal literary languages spoken between 200 CE and 1200 CE in the Syrian and Mesopotamian regions, alongside Jewish Palestinian Aramaic (JPA), Jewish Babylonian Aramaic (JBA), Samaritan Aramaic (SA), Mandaic (MA), and Syriac. CPA belongs with JPA and SA to the Western subbranch, while MA and JBA belong

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**1** A label applied to Aramaic varieties employed from 200 to 700 CE, or 1200 according to other studies, e.g., Butts 2019, 273 fn. 9. Butts applies this periodization to the case of Syriac, which did not die out as a consequence of the Arab conquests of the seventh century, and has witnessed the production of many original texts not only during the Arab period (eight-to-tenth century), but also during the Mongol period, a time known as ‘Syriac Renaissance’ on account of a revamping of Syriac original literary production. In the case of CPA, manuscripts were produced until the thirteenth century, well into the Arab period.

**2** These regions correspond to an area stretching from South-Eastern Syria to the northern part of the Sinai Peninsula.

**3** Müller-Kessler 1991, 1.



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to the Eastern one. Syriac was originally considered to be part of this latter group, but recent scholarship places it now in a central position.<sup>4</sup>

CPA literary production is usually divided into two periods: an earlier phase (fifth to eighth century), when CPA was still spoken, and a later phase (tenth to thirteenth century), a period of cultural revival during which new CPA texts were copied for liturgical reasons.<sup>5</sup> In between these two moments, we find what Müller-Kessler proposed to call the ‘medium’ phase, identified on palaeographical grounds.<sup>6</sup>

Originally labelled ‘Palestinian Syriac’, CPA suffered from its proximity to the best-known Late Aramaic variety, which lent it its script and some of its features, and from the fact that most of its literary production encompasses translations from Greek texts. Even though CPA detached itself from Syriac through the creation of its own version of the *estrangela* abjad<sup>7</sup> and the development of several distinctive features (e.g., the loss of distinction between absolute and emphatic states or the peculiar ways in which infinitives are created),<sup>8</sup> it is nonetheless true that the only original documents produced directly in CPA are a group of inscriptions (incisions, graffiti, and mosaics) scattered over a large area,<sup>9</sup> and a handful of magical texts and amulets, written on parchment or metal.<sup>10</sup> This corpus of original texts usually suffers from a poor state of preservation, obscure language or references (which is fairly common for texts of magical content), and a general lack of scholarly interest.

The texts in CPA that were transmitted on manuscripts – mostly translations of the Old and New Testament, apocrypha, homilies, and hagiographies<sup>11</sup> – are equally problematic, being frequently written on the uppertext or undertext of palimpsests. All these difficulties, alongside the greater popularity of other coeval Aramaic varieties, most notably Syriac, contributed to the slowness with which the earliest necessary learning tools appeared. The first modern

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**4** Already, for instance, Boyarin (1981) and Contini (1995, 90-2), more recently Butts (2019, 224). See Nicosia 2021, 178, fn. 11, for a discussion on the current scholarly debate on the topic.

**5** Morgenstern 2011, 629-31.

**6** Müller-Kessler 1999.

**7** See Desreumaux 1987.

**8** See the list of “notable morphological features” in Morgenstern 2011, 633-4.

**9** See the map created by Alain Desreumaux in this volume.

**10** See Abudraham 2017; Baillet 1963; Puech 1996; 2007; 2012.

**11** See Díez Merino 2003 for an overview of CPA texts, and Desreumaux 2015, 132-6 for a codicological study on CPA manuscript production.

grammar of CPA was published in 1991 by Christa Müller-Kessler,<sup>12</sup> while the first comprehensive dictionary was published by Michael Sokoloff in 2014.<sup>13</sup> Previously, even though some scholarly attention had been paid to the language and its literature, thanks to the contribution of illustrious scholars such as the Scottish twins Agnes Smith Lewis (1843-1926) and Margaret Dunlop Gibson (1843-1920) (e.g., Lewis 1897; 1900; Lewis, Gibson 1899; 1912),<sup>14</sup> CPA was often neglected.

The first collection of texts and fragments was published by Hugo Duensing (1906), and other fragments had already appeared in 1905 thanks to Frederich Schulthess. Still, it was thanks to Sebastian Brock, many decades later, that we have a catalogue of the fragments preserved in the Sinaitic monastery of Saint Catherine (Brock 1995, 79-91; 121-8), where the vast majority of CPA manuscripts were either found or originally kept (before they were illicitly relocated).<sup>15</sup> It is thanks to the painstaking work of Christa Müller-Kessler and Michael Sokoloff that we can rely on published corpora of CPA texts (Müller-Kessler, Sokoloff 1997-1999; Sokoloff 2014b), and thanks to the publication of single texts in isolated publications (e.g., Baarda 2005; Brock 1971; Capron 2010; 2019).

In light of the new scholarly tools that are now at our disposal, our collective volume aims to infuse further energy to the study of this Aramaic variety by offering five papers, which touch upon the rich array of CPA-related topics. The volume opens up with a contribution discussing the language, its history and development, and offering new hints on its positioning within the Late Aramaic group. Its author, Christian Stadel (Ben Gurion University of Negev), proposes a new selection of morphological, morphosyntactic, and

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**12** CPA had already been the object of a first dedicated study by Bar-Asher in 1977.

**13** Some previous (and partial) attempts had been made by Miniscalchi Erizzo (1861, 1-47), who published a glossary of the Gospels, Land (1875, 217-24), Schwally (1893, who created a glossary of unknown words in CPA texts known at the time), and Schulthess (1903). For a brief history of CPA lexicography see Sokoloff 2014a, xiii-xiv

**14** Lewis and Gibson travelled to Sinai six times. During one of those travels, in 1892, they discovered the so-called *Syriac Palestinian Gospel*, which was published under the names of three other scholars (males and more prominent at the time): Robert L. Bensly, James Rendel Harris, and Francis C. Burkitt (1894). See Soskice 2010, 133-45 for an account of how they stumbled upon the manuscript. The twins were also the ones who purchased the manuscripts containing the *Codex Climatici rescriptus* in 1905 (in England) and 1906 (in Port Tewfik) from manuscript dealers. For an account of these purchases, see Soskice 2010, 285 and the narration provided by Lewis herself in the introduction of her edition of the *Codex* (1909, xi-xvi). For a list of the works authored by the sisters, see Whigham Price 1987, 236-40.

**15** In 2011, Brock authored a brief but thorough account about Syriac, CPA, and Arabic manuscripts in Saint Catherine's Monastery, which also features an abridged history of scholarship and some black and white pictures. I am grateful to Jacob Lollar for drawing my attention to the volume hosting this publication.

lexical elements in support of the attribution of CPA to the Western branch of Late Aramaic varieties, and its relevant differences from Syriac. The paper also includes a discussion on some selected features that are exclusive to CPA and proposes a new hypothesis about the possible place of birth, the so-called ‘cradle’, of CPA.

The second paper of this collection, written by the author of this introduction, offers a first overview of the borrowing strategies employed in CPA to acquire Greek (and Latin) loanwords. Through a selection of meaningful examples, the paper provides a first look into the subject, which will hopefully be expanded into a complete list of Greek loanwords in CPA comparable to that of Greek loanwords in Samaritan Aramaic published by Stadel and Shemesh in 2018. A study of borrowing strategies from Greek in CPA, whose foundations are laid in this paper, will contribute to bringing the field closer to the level of investigation on the topic reached by other Late Aramaic varieties.

The third paper of the volume proposes a detailed overview of the available inscriptions in CPA, and it is written by Alain Desreumaux (CNRS, Paris).<sup>16</sup> The contribution offers the first mapping of these inscriptions, a categorisation of their provenance, type and topic, and proposes some new considerations about the social setup as it can be inferred from such documents. The paper is equipped with pictures of the discussed material, some of which appear here for the first time.

The fourth paper, composed by Sebastian Brock (Oxford University), deals with the Psalter that was brought to light from Saint Catherine's Monastery, written on a fragment labelled *Sparagma* 12. The paper details the content of the Psalter and compares it with the other known Psalms translated into CPA and preserved elsewhere (notably in the *Horologion*). Brock also discusses some previously unknown CPA words that appear in the Psalter and publishes the upper text of *Sparagma* 12.

The last paper, written by Laurent Capron (CNRS, Paris), offers new insights into the collection of *apophthegmata* preserved in Saint Catherine's Monastery manuscripts M58N, M59N, CPA *Sparagma* 5 and 14. According to Capron's analysis, this collection seems to belong to a part of the so-called “Sabaite-type collection,” and presents a rich array of new vocabulary and texts. Particularly, Capron discusses the possible etymology of some unclear loanwords from Greek, as well as some CPA words which were not attested elsewhere.

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**16** The author had already contributed to the topic on many occasions throughout his career. See, as an example, Desreumaux 1996; Bazou et al. 1998.

The collection of studies offered by this volume is complemented by a bibliography of CPA studies, which will hopefully assist those who wish to tackle the language and its literature for the first time. The present volume is the development and expansion of an international online workshop on *Christian Palestinian Aramaic*. *Not quite the right 'Syriac'*, organised by Riccardo Contini and Emiliano Fiori for *Syriaca - The Italian Association for Syriac Studies* in July 2021.<sup>17</sup>

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**17** The editors of this volume are grateful to *Syriaca* and, in particular, to Vittorio Berti (University of Padua, currently *Syriaca's* president), Riccardo Contini (University of Naples "L'Orientale", who presided *Syriaca* in 2021, when the project of this CPA volume was born), Giovanni Gomiero (Ghent University, *Syriaca's* secretary), Alberto Camplani (University of Rome "La Sapienza", *Syriaca's* treasurer), Margherita Farina and Marianna Mazzola (CNRS, Paris and University of Pisa, respectively, members of *Syriaca's* directive committee). I am particularly grateful to Riccardo Contini for sharing his annotated bibliographies of Aramaic and CPA, a treasure trove for the history of Aramaic studies and linguistics, and for gifting me copies of *The Ladies of Castelbrae* and *Sisters of Sinai*.

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