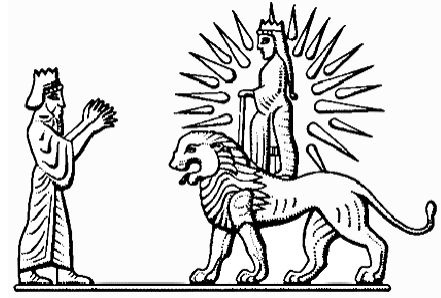


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“Mapping Assyria”

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Mapping Assyria

Political boundaries and names of lands change, but the name of a people is frequently preserved as the important identification of those who belong together and speak the same language. Foreigners frequently regard people speaking the same language as united, with few differences among them, whereas they know that they themselves have many divisions. Thus the German language provided a kind of unity of the various tribes north and east of the Rhine River, such that the Romans called the country Germania and the people Germans. But politically the people were not united until the nineteenth century when the many kingdoms of Bavaria, Saxony, Prussia, etc., came together into one country – Germany. The native name Deutschland over time was not forgotten by the people, and paralleled the foreign designations of their land. Invasions, however, can change names as well as populations. For example, Tunisia in north Africa, probably was inhabited mainly by ancestors of the Berbers. The Phoenicians were the first invaders whom we know, and they established the city of Carthage as their center. The Carthaginians never recovered from Roman domination, and after the fall of the Roman Empire the Germanic Vandals established a kingdom in North Africa, followed by Arab rule. So modern Tunisians can claim many changes in the history of Tunisia, but do they claim Carthaginians

as their principal ancestors? Or were proto-Berbers the ancestors *par excellence* of the present inhabitants of the land?

Assyria and Assyrians present a greater continuity than many other lands and peoples, although the area of land occupied and the number of people was reduced throughout time. Let us begin with an expansion of the original land of Assyria which, as everyone knows, was in present northern Iraq. We should examine the contention that the Aramaic speaking inhabitants of the neo-Assyrian empire were considered Assyrians, especially in light of the many deportations and mixing of peoples by the imperial government. For example, the realm of Sargon included most Aramaic or (A)Syriac speakers, similar to the German Empire, which united most German speakers after 1870. Just as the Bavarians, Saxons, and others were called Germans by English speakers, so the people of the ‘Fertile Crescent’ were called (A)Syrians by the Greeks, as I have explained elsewhere.¹ I suggest that, generally speaking, in the eyes of outsiders the Aramaic speakers and Assyrians were considered the same. So our first map should show Assyria at its greatest extent.

Just as German speakers existed in Austria and Switzerland, so Aramaic (Asyriac) speakers also were found outside of Assyrian domains, as in present Iranian Azerbaijan, where modern Assy-

¹ Frye, R.N., “Assyria and Syria: Synonyms,” *JNES* 51, no.4 (Chicago, 1992), pp. 281-5.

rians had their center in the city of Urmia. The discovery of a stele inscribed in Aramaic from the eighth century B.C. suggests the existence of Aramaic speakers in that area who were not under Assyrian but rather Mannaeian rule.² This discovery may revise our ideas about the expansion of Assyrians, not only into Cappadocia and Anatolia, but also onto the Iranian plateau.

The next reduction in size of Assyria came with the Achaemenid Empire, when the western part of Assyria (OP Athura) was called Ebir Nari, across the river (Euphrates). This division became fixed when the Romans created the province of Syria as distinct from Assyria in the east. The old homeland of Assyria, on the other hand, had been divided into a number of small principalities already under the Seleucids, with names such as Sophene, Zabdicene, Gorduene, Sittacene, Mygdonia (around Nisibis), and Apolloniatis on the Diyala River. Before the coming of the Romans into the Near East, probably under the early Parthians, the term Asuristan, Beth Aramaye in Aramaic, had been coined for old Babylonia, sometimes including northern Iraq, and at times not. It is difficult to identify Aramaic names under the Parthians with the Greek names of the Seleucids, and boundaries changed frequently. The area of the upper Diyala River basin was called Beth Garmai, while Arbela and the land between the Greater and Lesser Zab Rivers was called Adiabene or Hadhyab in Aramaic. The plain of ancient Nineveh was called Beth Nuhadra, but it is unknown whether it, as well as other regions, had independent rulers or were

Parthian provinces. The name Assyria, in the form Asuristan, was shifted to ancient Babylonia, probably by the Parthians, and this continued under the Sasanians. This is the information we glean from literary sources and maps, especially from Ptolemy, where Assyria occupies his sixth book.

In 116 A.D. the name Assyria, for the homeland, was revived by the Roman emperor Trajan, who conquered all of northern Mesopotamia and created the short-lived province of Assyria.³ So both in the east and in the west the name Assyria was not forgotten. The next question to ask is whether some, if not all, of the Aramaic speaking inhabitants of this large area used the term Assyrian for themselves. They probably did not exhibit any solidarity complex or unity in this regard until the end of the Sasanian Empire, when a unity of the Christian religion combined with the linguistic unity to cause many people to consider themselves (A)syrians. Such was the situation when the Muslim Arabs arrived and gave the designation Nabat (Nabatean) to *all* Aramaic speakers of the 'Fertile Crescent.'

We should now call those inhabitants Syriac speakers, after the Christianized language, whose classical form came from Edessa, Urhai or Urfa. Even in the east where the name Assyrian was current, the language came to be called Syriac or Suryani. Many Christian people in that part of the world knew they spoke Syriac, or rather a dialect of the church language, although there were differences of both tongues and sects. Under the Umayyad Caliphate the names Syria,

² Lemaire, A., "Une inscription Araméenne du VII^e S. Av, J.-C. trouvée à Boukân," *Studia Iranica*, 27, fasc. 1 (Paris, 1998), pp. 15–30.

³ A. Maricq, "La province d'«Assyrie» créée par Trajan," *Syria*, 36 (1959), 257.

Asuristan, and Assyria, however, received new Arabic designations: al-Sham, al-Sawad and al-Jazira. As usual new boundaries did not coincide with the old, but the Arabic designations also did not last after the coming of Turkish dynasties.

On the map of Idrisi, made in Sicily about the middle of the eleventh century, we find only the Arabic names for the areas of the 'Fertile Crescent.' The designation of the ancient homeland of the Aramaic speaking people as Assyria, however, did not vanish among some educated Assyrians. For example, Bar Hebraeus, writing at the end of the thirteenth century, mentions Assyria (*Athor* in Syriac), in his *Chronography* several times.⁴ He distinguishes Syria from Assyria, as does the Syriac geography of an unknown author, usually designated as pseudo-Bar Hebraeus.⁵ As I have mentioned elsewhere, when the Carmelite missionaries came to Isfahan in the reign of Shah 'Abbas, the designation Assyrian was current, as were also the synonyms Chaldaean, Nestorian, and Syrian.⁶ Surely now we can claim that among *some* Assyrians the names Assyria for the homeland and Assyrian for the people continued to exist to the present time. We must remember, however, that in the Middle East throughout history, the mass of people, who lived in villages, considered their identity as bound with their village, or if on a larger scale, as followers or subjects of their chief religious leader, such as Mar Shimun for the Nes-

torians in more recent times.

We may quote Edward Gibbon, who in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, written in the 18th century, long before excavations by Europeans in the Near East. He says, "Nestorians, who, under the name of Chaldaeans or Assyrians, are confounded with the most learned or the most powerful nation of Eastern antiquity."⁷ We may interpret this statement as a complaint that people in his day called themselves Assyrians, which term should only be used for the inhabitants of the ancient Assyrian Empire. It means that the name 'Assyrian' was in use, which has been denied by some scholars.

Hopefully, I have convinced those who contend that the name Assyrian was resurrected and first brought to the neo-Syriac or neo-Aramaic speaking people in the nineteenth century by missionaries and then archaeologists, that their argument is untenable. Their position may be rescued, however, with the observation that the Europeans did publicize, spread, and support the belief that the present Assyrians were descendants of the ancient Assyrians. This happened in spite of the attempts of most scholars to disclaim any connection between modern and ancient Assyrians. In this regard they still can claim that they awakened the Assyrians to an interest in, and concern with, their roots and their history. Here I only wished to show that the name did not vanish, but continued to exist throughout history in the memories of

⁴ Budge, E. W., *The Chronography of Gregory Abū'l Faraj Bar Hebraeus*, (Oxford, 1932), vol. 1 (trans.) p. 411 (text of Bedjan p. 481), p. 454 (text p. 533), p. 463 (text p. 544), p. 467 (text p. 549), etc.

⁵ Gottheil, R., "Contributions to the history of Geography. Adcensus Mentis of Gregorius Bar 'Ebhryā," in *Mitteilungen des Akademisch-Orientalischen*

Vereins zu Berlin, 3 (Berlin, 1890), p. 9, text p. 33.

⁶ Frye, *op. cit.*, and "Reply to John Joseph," *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies*, XIII, no. 1 (Chicago, 1999), pp. 69–70.

⁷ Gibbon, quoted from *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Maynard Hutchins, vol. 41 (Chicago, 1952), 154.

some Assyrians, as well as their neighbors. I feel confident that if ever DNA samples can be secured, this proposition

finally will be proved to those who do not accept it.