

George Anton Kiraz

The Syriac Dot

A Short History



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To
Andrew bar Walter
(aka Andreas Juckel)

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Preface

I was inspired to write this introduction while reading David Crystal's *Spell It Out: The Curious, Enthralling, and Extraordinary Story of English Spelling* (St. Martin's Press, 2012) during the summer of 2014 on a trip to Istanbul and Jerusalem. Crystal takes his readers through a wonderful journey of English spelling and explains the complexities of English orthography from a historical perspective, a methodology that helps the reader understand current English spelling.

Like English spelling, the diacritical point in Syriac is confusing at best. All students of Syriac are aware of the dots on the letters ܐ <d> and ܝ <r> the same way English readers do not question the dots on *i* and *j* (although most would not know why the dots are there). All beginners are aware of the double dot plural mark on words like

ܟܬܒܝܢ <ktb²> [ktābē] 'books'

as opposed to singular

ܟܬܒܐ <ktb¹> [ktābā] 'book'.

Many, however, may wonder why the active participle plural masculine verb

كتبن <ktbyn> [kātbin] ‘they are writing’
 has no dots while its feminine counterpart

كتبن <ktbn> [kātban]
 has the dots. Advanced students may wonder what the
 two dots on the noun كتبن <ktbn> are doing. A few
 would have seen the triple dot mark in a phrase like

صى هك هصفه هك صى لهك
 <bṣwm[?] wbqwm[?] wbaṣlūt[?]>
 [bṣawmā wabqawmā wbaṣlūtā]
 ‘in fasting and in stature and in prayer’

My hope in writing this book is to introduce the reader to the various dots by a historical narrative. As is the case with Crystal’s English spelling book, if one understands the history of the dots, one will have an easier time recognizing their form and function in manuscripts and printed texts. Having said that, a warning here is in order. Our understanding of many dots, as well as the understanding of the classical grammarians of these dots, is incomplete. Even more problematic is the fact that what classical grammarians say about dots is not always what one finds in manuscripts. I have limited the presentation here to dots whose function is quite clear. As it turns out, there are plenty of such dots to talk about.

It must be emphasized that this introductory text is by no means comprehensive. If I help the reader under-

stand the basics of the most common dots, I will have achieved my goal. In an attempt to understand the origins of the dots, I present a number of hypotheses based on the little data that we have for the first few centuries of the Common Era. These hypotheses are not definitive but I hope they will help in formulating ideas about the origin of the dots.

Most of the data derive from examining images of manuscripts and in a few cases the physical manuscripts themselves. I also made use of data from my *Tūrrāṣ Mamllā: A Grammar of the Syriac Language, Volume 1, Orthography* (Gorgias Press, 2012). Further discussion and references can be found there.

I wrote the first draft of this book in Jerusalem, partly during visits to St. Mark's Monastery and partly at POLIS The Jerusalem Institute of Languages and Humanities where I taught immersion Syriac. During this trip, my ten-year old son Sebastian Kenoro Kiraz accompanied me. Not only was he good company, but he was also a good person with whom to discuss ideas. It was he who suggested the experiment of using dotless texts to determine which dot was the oldest in Syriac; hence, we named it *The Kenoro Dotless Experiment*. The book was completed at Beth Mardutho in Piscataway during subsequent months.

I would like to express my gratitude to Sebastian Brock, Chip Coakley, Jonathan Loopstra and Aaron Butts who read the penultimate draft. Melonie Schmierer-Lee of Gorgias Press did a marvelous job copy editing the text. Dayroyo Shim‘ūn Can of St. Mark’s Monastery, one of the few remaining Syriac scribes, explained to me *his* understanding of the dots, especially those which he himself placed in manuscripts he had produced. This gives us an insight into the mind of at least one modern scribe, and we learn how ancient dots are still actively used today, albeit sometimes with a different understanding. Jack Tannous of Princeton University provided many PDFs of papers essential to this study and images of MS Sinai Syriac NF M27N. Michael Penn shared with me images from a number of manuscripts. Dina Boero shared images of MS Vat Syr 160 and a draft of her dissertation on that manuscript. David Michelson shared Syriaca.org’s database version of Wright’s *Catalogue* which facilitated easier searches. James W. Bennett executed a number of SQL queries for me against the SEDRA database. My pupil Lisa Eroni, a professional typesetter, helped in the visual presentation and the choice of material for the printed product. Ari Paradise and Betsy Litz of Princeton University Press generously shared the printing specs of one of their vol-

umes after which the production of this book was modeled. As usual, members of hugoye-list have always been helpful in answering all sorts of queries.

The Vatican Library and Brigham Young University must be commended for making manuscript images freely available online. It is hoped that other libraries will follow their good example.

I would not have been able to write this book had it not been for the family support I always receive from Christine and the kids: Tabettha, Sebastian Kenoro, and Lucian Nuroño—*tawdi* not only for being who you are, but also for discussing ideas with me.

Finally, six-year old Nuroño insisted over the course of a few months that Mama read for him Baba's new book before bed time. This exercise produced empirical evidence that a chapter or two will put the listener—and sometimes the reader too—to sleep!

George Anton Kiraz

July 12, 2014

St. Mark's Monastery, Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul

Script and Transcription

The Estrangelā script is used throughout with a few exceptions. Readers familiar with other scripts, including Hebrew square script, can find a guide in Appendix 1. The following transliteration/transcription scheme is used.

Ⲁ	ʔ	Ⲇ	k̲	[χ]
Ⲃ	b	Ⲉ	l	
Ⲅ	b̲ [v]	Ⲋ	m	
Ⲇ	g	Ⲍ	n	
Ⲉ	g̲ [ɣ]	Ⲏ	s	
Ⲋ	d	Ⲑ	ʃ	
Ⲍ	d̲ [ð]	Ⲓ	p	
Ⲏ	h	Ⲕ	p̲ [f]	
Ⲑ	w	Ⲗ	ʃ̲ [ʃʰ]	
Ⲓ	z	Ⲙ	q	
Ⲕ	h̲ [h]	Ⲛ	r	
Ⲗ	t̲ [tʰ]	Ⲝ	š [ʃ]	
Ⲙ	y [j]	Ⲟ	t	
Ⲛ	k	Ⲡ	t̲ [θ]	

Vowels are transcribed as follows:

a ā e ē ī o ū

and schwa is indicated by [◌]. In addition, [◌] and [◌] are used instead of [◌] and [◌], respectively, for proper nouns and grammatical terms, e.g. pa[◌]el, Bar [◌]Ebroyo. Fricatization, i.e. the marking of *bgdkpt*, is usually not indicated except for the chapter that discusses this topic. Doubling, which was most likely the case during the early period covered in this book, is not indicated as it has no bearing on dots.

Examples are usually given first in the Syriac script, followed by transliteration in angle brackets < >, transcription in square brackets [], and an English gloss in single quotes ‘ ’, with the diacritical points appearing in the transliterations, e.g.

ܟܬܒܐ <ktb[◌]> [ktābē] ‘books’

While verbose, this system gives specialists in writing systems and general readers interested in dots access to some of the material without needing to know Syriac. There will be parts of the discussion that will require knowledge of Syriac. In the case of the emphatic sounds given in the table above with a sublinear dot, the transcription should be consulted to resolve any ambiguities. For instance, the sublinear dot on *ḥ* in

ܚܘܢ <ḥw> [hū] ‘he’

is for the consonant *ḥ* <h> and not for the consonant *ḥ* <ḥ>.

The First Single Dot

Our quest for the first single dot takes us back to the earliest known Syriac texts, the most ancient of which is an inscription from A.D. 6. A few lines (1–2 & 4–5) taken from this inscription are given below:

317	כ	ג	ו	ו	ג	נ	ו	ג	1
א	נ	א	ו	כ	ר	ב	א	כ	2
ב	כ	ו	כ	ט	א	מ	א	ל	4
כ	ו	כ	ט	א	ל	ב	ג	5	

You may have some difficulty reading the text because many of the letters are disconnected, a feature of the Syriac language from this very early period. But what may disturb you even more is the dotless ܐ graph. What is it? Is it $\text{ܐ} <d>$? Is it $\text{ܐ} <r>$?

Here is the same text with the letters connected and with the dots on *ṣ* <d> and *ṣ* <r> added along with a transcription and an English translation (I have also added the *syāmē* plural dots on the last word). This should be easier to read:

317	𐭠𐭣𐭥 𐭠𐭣𐭥 𐭠𐭣𐭥	1
	𐭠𐭣𐭥 𐭠𐭣𐭥 𐭠𐭣𐭥 𐭠𐭣𐭥 𐭠𐭣𐭥	2
	𐭠𐭣𐭥 𐭠𐭣𐭥 𐭠𐭣𐭥 𐭠𐭣𐭥 𐭠𐭣𐭥 𐭠𐭣𐭥	4
	𐭠𐭣𐭥 𐭠𐭣𐭥 𐭠𐭣𐭥 𐭠𐭣𐭥	5

Transliteration

- 1 byrḥ ʔdr šnt 317
- 2 ʔnʔ zrbyn br ʔbgr šlytʔ dbyrtʔ
- 4 ʔbdt byt qbwʔrʔ hnʔ lnpšy wlḥlwyʔ
- 5 mrt byty wlḥny

Transcription

- 1 bīrah ʔādār šnat 317
- 2 ʔenā zrbyn bar ʔabgar šaliṭā dbirtā
- 4 ʔebdet bēt qbūrā hānā lnapš(y) wlḥlwyʔ
- 5 mārat bayt(y) wlabnay

Translation

- 1 In the month of Adar of the year 317
[A.G. = A.D. 6]¹
- 2 I, Zarbiyan son of Abgar, ruler of Birta
- 4 made this tomb for myself and for Ḥalwiya
- 5 lady of my household, and for my children

As this inscription illustrates, the earliest Syriac texts that survive are devoid of any dots, not even the plural mark *syāmē* on ܘܠܒܢܝ <wlbny> (line 5). This dotless state of affairs is a feature of Old Syriac, the name given by scholars to this early form of the language that supposedly predates Classical Syriac (more on this later in Chapter 5). Old Syriac inherited the dotless ܐ from earlier Aramaic scripts, and Aramaic in turn inherited this state of dotlessness, if I may coin such a word, from Phoenician.²

The earliest Aramaic inscriptions are from a period ranging from the tenth to the sixth century B.C. The letters <d> and <r> are at first distinguishable, but become very similar later on. In cases when they are indistinguishable, one has to depend on context to distinguish one from the other.³ Even in the Aramaic script known today as Hebrew square script, ubiquitously used in Israel and the Jewish Diaspora, these two letters look very similar: ܕ <d> and ܕ <r>. The former has more of a square corner on the upper-right side, while the latter is more curved.

The same holds for Old Syriac which is known to us from 100 inscriptions of various sizes and three legal parchments. The texts are all pagan and date to the first

three centuries of the Christian era. Not a single dot can be found in this entire corpus (see Plates I–IV).



Was this a huge problem?

Let's first look at an example from English. Prior to the 17th century, English had two interchangeable sounds, [u] and [v]. Each of the two sounds was represented by the letters *u* and *v*. The letter *v* occurred in the beginning of a word and stood for *both* sounds. The letter *u* occurred at the middle of a word and also represented the same two sounds. For instance, we read in the Early Modern English version of the King James Bible:⁴

Joseph also went vp from Galilee... vnto the citie of
Dauid (Luke 2:4).

In modern spelling, this verse corresponds to

Joseph also went up from Galilee...unto the city of
David.

People were still able to read the older text, but English scribes, at some point, felt this was confusing and decided to separate the two letters into *u* for the sound [u] and *v* for the sound [v].

The same process took place in Syriac. While the dotless *ⲁ* was more-or-less readable from context, some-

one wanted to clearly distinguish between <d> and <r>. A genius scribe—or a group of scribes—used a dot: ܕ for <d> and ܠ for <r>.

Anyone who knows Syriac faced with the following dotless phrase:

ܠܒܐ ܠܘܒܐ ܠܘܒܐ ܠܘܒܐ ܠܘܒܐ

may hesitate a bit, but will ultimately be able to recognize the phrase as

ܠܒܐ ܠܘܒܐ ܠܘܒܐ ܠܘܒܐ ܠܘܒܐ

<bšm ʔbʔ wbrʔ wrwḥʔ qdyšʔ>

[bšem ʔabā wabrā wrūḥā qdišā]

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

While not absolutely necessary, the dot is certainly quite helpful.



Why a dot?

It is difficult to answer the question because we don't know what was going on in the mind(s) of our genius scribe(s). By analogy, however, it seems that throughout the history of writing systems, scribes found the dot quite useful. The Aramaeans who preceded our Syriac scribes by many generations used the dot as a word separator before they eventually invented word

spacing.⁵ Rabbinic sources from the second century mention dots in the Hebrew Bible which must date a few centuries earlier. These dots denoted doubtful readings.⁶ Ancient Alexandrian Greeks, in particular Aris-
tophanes of Byzantium (c. 257–c. 180 BC), had already used the dot to help readers know when and how long to pause when reading, a system that became the ancestor of the western comma, colon and period (or full stop).⁷ Arabic speakers or users—much later in history—used the dot to distinguish between letters that otherwise looked identical: ب (one sublinear dot), ت <t> (two supralinear dots), ث <θ> (three supralinear dots).⁸ The Europeans—much, much later—placed a dot on *i* in order to distinguish it from neighboring letters which were written with a similar vertical stroke such as *u* and *n* (two vertical strokes each) and *m* (three vertical strokes).⁹ Even in the font used in this very book, the letter *u* consists of two strokes each of which looks like the dotless *i*. If you don't believe me, I will type two instances of a dotless *i* without a space in between: *u* (compare it with the letter *u*). Which word is easier to read: *union* or *union*? While not absolutely necessary, a little dot goes a long way to clarify things.

The ancient Aramaic dot for word division, the Hebrew dots that marked doubtful readings, and the Greek

dots that were part of a critical marks system—all of which preceded the Syriac dot—were paratextual in nature.¹⁰ That is, they were not part of the text *per se*. None affected the segmental value (i.e. the sound) of letters. The Syriac dot was different. It was a structural and integral part of the text, in this case part of the letters ܐ <d> and ܝ <r>. Syriac can probably claim the honor of being the first language to give the dot a *linguistic* function. Throughout this book, we will see how Syriac overloads the dot with various linguistic functions probably more than any other language or script ever known.



When was the Syriac dot invented?

We shall visit this question a few times throughout this book. As far as the dots on ܐ <d> and ܝ <r> are concerned, we are certain that they were invented before A.D. 411. This is the year of the earliest dated Syriac manuscript—in fact the earliest dated literary manuscript in *any* language—another honor for Syriac! Almost all instances of ܐ <d> and ܝ <r> in the 411 manuscript are indeed dotted. The same can be said for other dated manuscripts of the fifth century as well as undated manuscripts that scholars think belong to the early fifth century.

Did you notice that I said “almost” all instances of \mathfrak{v} are dotted in fifth-century manuscripts? There are a number of instances where the \mathfrak{v} is undotted. For instance, a manuscript containing the life of St. Simeon, copied in April 473, contains a number of instances of a dotless \mathfrak{v} . Here are two examples where \mathfrak{v} stands for $\langle d \rangle$:¹¹

\mathfrak{v} $\langle 'bd \rangle$ [$'bad$] ‘he made’

\mathfrak{v} $\langle d\mathfrak{t}wbn^? \rangle$ [$d\mathfrak{t}\ddot{u}b\ddot{a}n\ddot{a}$] ‘of the blessed’

Here are two examples of \mathfrak{v} representing $\mathfrak{i} \langle r \rangle$ from a manuscript dated April 509:

\mathfrak{v} $\langle mrn \rangle$ [$m\ddot{a}ran$] ‘our Lord’

\mathfrak{v} $\langle dmdbrnwth \rangle$ [$damdabr\ddot{a}n\ddot{u}teh$]
‘of his administration’

The last example shows how some instances of \mathfrak{v} are dotted and others undotted in the same word. The vast majority of the dotless instances that I have seen represent $\mathfrak{a} \langle d \rangle$, especially as a prefix.

There are also odd instances where one finds over-dotting. For example, we sometimes find $\mathfrak{i}!$ This is as helpful as not having dots at all. Is $\mathfrak{i} \langle d \rangle$ or $\langle r \rangle$? For instance, we find it in the words $\mathfrak{v}\mathfrak{i}$ and $\mathfrak{v}\mathfrak{i}\mathfrak{v}$ in the manuscript of the St. Simeon text dated April 473.¹² We also find the words $\mathfrak{i}\mathfrak{v}$ and $\mathfrak{i}\mathfrak{v}\mathfrak{i}$ in a manuscript dated 550 or 551.¹³ In all of these cases, \mathfrak{i} stands for $\langle r \rangle$. What is going on?

These data can provide a dating clue. Almost all of the undotted instances of \aleph that I have seen are $\langle d \rangle$; almost all the over-dotted instances \aleph are $\langle r \rangle$ s. Is it possible that the dot of $\aleph \langle r \rangle$ predates the dot of $\aleph \langle d \rangle$?

Say our genius scribes wanted to dot the word

$\aleph \aleph \langle dbr \rangle$ [dabar] ‘to arrange’.

If our hypothesis is correct, they would have first marked [r] only like this: $\aleph \aleph$. Then at a later stage, when \aleph had its full dot, a later hand started adding dots on dotless instances of \aleph making them $\aleph \langle d \rangle$. The later hand made mistakes and dotted an existing \aleph again with the result $\aleph \langle r \rangle$. This hypothesis is not farfetched as the dot of \aleph by the original scribe was usually quite far from the base glyph \aleph as we shall see in Chapter 5. In fact, in many early manuscripts only a careful reading of the text can determine which dot is for which \aleph especially when inter line spacing is tight. If this hypothesis is correct, we can date the dot on $\aleph \langle r \rangle$ to be relatively older than the dot on $\aleph \langle d \rangle$.

Earlier inscriptions in Aramaic, Palmyrene and Nabataean give additional support to the dot of $\langle r \rangle$ pre-dating that of $\langle d \rangle$. A second-century (A.D.) inscription from Garni in Armenia already marks $\langle r \rangle$ with a dot. A Palmyrene inscription from Dura Europos, dated A.D.

160, also marks <r> with a dot. A Nabataean inscription, dated 356, does the same thing. None of these inscriptions mark <d> with a dot.¹⁴



Can we narrow down the date of the Syriac dot further? The easy solution is to look at the latest dated texts *without* dots. These would be three parchments written in Old Syriac and dated 240, 242, and 243, respectively. The only problem, for purposes of analogy, is that the parchments contain legal documents, a very distinct genre, and not literary texts as do the 411 manuscript and other fifth-century manuscripts. There is also a difference in medium, i.e. unbound parchment versus codex. Additionally, the language of Old Syriac differs slightly from Classical Syriac. Nonetheless, this is the only physical material that we have available for purposes of comparison. Using this approach, we can narrow down the date of the invention of the dotted ⲁ <d> and ⲓ <r> between 243 and 411, a mere 168 years.

However, easy solutions are not always necessarily the most thoughtful solutions. There is another, more difficult approach to consider.

Let's take into consideration texts that were authored *prior* to 411, even if the earliest witnesses to

these texts are post 411. We are fortunate to have two substantial corpora that meet this requirement: The Peshitta Old Testament, most of which was probably completed by the end of the second century, and the writings of St. Ephrem (d. 373). In addition, there are many smaller texts which have survived in post 411 manuscripts such as:¹⁵

1. The Old Syriac Gospels written towards the end of the second or early third century.
2. *The Book of the Laws of the Countries* associated with Bardaisan (154–222) “the Aramaean philosopher” or his pupil Philip.
3. The *Odes of Solomon*, a set of forty-two poems which belong to the second or third century.
4. The *Acts of Thomas* from the third century.
5. A discourse by a certain Melito, known as the Philosopher.
6. The *Sentences of Menander*, wisdom sayings attributed to Menander the Sage.
7. The *Letter of Mara* to his son Seraphion, consisting of advice and dating probably to the fourth century, though some scholars date it earlier.
8. The story of the Aramaean Sage Ahikar, a fourth-century text which derives from a much earlier Aramaic version.

9. The *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat, also from the fourth century, the first twenty-two of which are in the form of an alphabetic acrostic.
10. The anonymous *Book of Steps*, a spiritual text from the late fourth or early fifth century.

This is an impressive collection considering that there were other texts that did not survive such as the Diatessaron (a harmony of the four Gospels by Tatian) and other writings by Bardaisan known from refutations against him by St. Ephrem.

Of course, we cannot assume that the form of Classical Syriac of the first three centuries was exactly the same as the Classical Syriac that we know from fifth century manuscripts as all of these works are attested in post fourth century manuscripts. Scribes may have updated not only orthographic conventions, but also some of the linguistic features of the language. Having said that, we can safely assume that the pre 411 corpus did include the graphemes <r> and <d> regardless of how they were written.

The sheer size of the pre 411 corpora raises a question: Is it conceivable that all these texts, produced and copied down prior to 411, only used the dotless ʾ?

Before answering this question, we will need to learn more about the nature and usage of the Syriac dot. We need to gain more insight into what the Malphānē (teachers) and scribes were thinking. We will attempt to do this in the next few chapters and will revisit the history of the first dot in a subsequent chapter.



The 411 manuscript is full of other types of dots which we will introduce gradually throughout the book. One symbol differs from all other early dots. It is a *double* dot with a far greater linguistic function than the dot for ܐ <d> and ܝ <r>.

The First Double Dot

Another issue readers faced during the early history of Syriac was the ability to distinguish between homographs. Syriac, like other Semitic languages, is prone to homographs because its writing system is a consonantary (i.e. consisting of consonants only). This does not mean that vowels were not written at all; on the contrary, mostly *long* vowels were represented in writing as well as some short vowels. For example, in the inscription introduced in the previous chapter, we came across (line 4)

ܒܝܬ ܩܒܘܪܐ <byt qbwr[?]> [bēt q^əbūrā] ‘tomb’

where all the vowels, apart from the schwa [ə], are represented. The vowel [ē] is represented by the letter , <y>, the vowel [ū] by ܘ <w>, and the vowel [ā] by the final ܐ <ʔ>. The three letters are called in Latin *matres lectionis* ‘mothers of reading’, a term borrowed

from the Hebrew grammatical tradition. *Matres lectionis* mark long vowels. Short vowels, however, are not represented in a consonantary—at least before vowel marks were invented.* For instance, the verb ܘܒܕܬ <^ʿbdt> from the same inscription (also line 4) reads in this context [ʿebdet] ‘I made’. The same string of consonants can be read [ʿ^əbadt] ‘you made’, or [ʿebdat] ‘she made’. While all are possible readings of this verb, the context makes it clear that it can only be [ʿebdet] ‘I made’. As you can see, a consonantary by its nature gives rise to a high number of homographs.

One set of homographs arises from plural nouns. What if our inscription’s author had wanted to say [bēt q^əbūrē] ‘tombs’ or ‘tomb yard’ (notice the plural [ē] ending rather than the singular [ā] ending)? The consonant ܢ <[?]> also represented final [ē]. Hence, both the singular and plural forms are written ܢܩܒܘܪܐ <qbw^r>. Here is line 4 again from the inscription:

ܠܘܠܐ ܕܢܦܫܝܐ ܘܠܢܦܫܝܐ ܢܩܒܘܪܐ ܕܗܠܘܝܐ

<^ʿbdt byt qbw^r hn[?] lnpšy wḥlwy[?]>

[ʿebdet bēt qbūrā hānā lnapš(y) wḥlwy[?]]

I made this tomb for myself and for Ḥalwiya

* This is actually an oversimplification: vowel length in Syriac is distinct from vowel quality. In the word ܩܘܕܫܐ <qwdš^ʿ> [qudšā], for instance, the [u] vowel is short, yet it is represented by ܩ <w>.

Had the inscription not included the *singular* demonstrative pronoun ܢܗܢ <hn[?]> ‘this’, the reading would be ambiguous: one can read ܩܒܘܪܝܢ <qbwr[?]> both as [q^əbūrā] ‘tomb’ or [q^əbūrē] ‘tombs’.

Let’s consider the texts that were authored prior to 411 which I listed in the previous chapter. We find multiple instances where it is impossible to distinguish between the singular and plural nominal forms. The translator of Genesis, for example, would have already found instances that would cause confusion in the first chapter. Consider Genesis 1:14. The Hebrew text reads:¹

And God said, “Let there be *lights* in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as *signs* to mark sacred *times*, and *days* and *years*.”

The verse has five plurals shown in italics. The translator chose the following Syriac words for them:

ܢܗܝܪܝܢ	<nhyr [?] >	[nahirā] ‘light’
ܩܒܘܪܝܢ	<?tw [?] >	[?ātūtā] ‘sign’
ܐܘܪܝܢ	<zbn [?] >	[zabnā] ‘time’
ܝܘܡܝܢ	<ywm [?] >	[yawmā]
	‘day’	
ܫܢܝܢ	<šnt [?] >	[šatā] ‘year’ (the [n] is silent)

The last two did not pose any trouble for our translator. Their plurals are

יָמִים	<ywmt [?] >	[yawmātā]
	‘days’	
שָׁנָה	<šny [?] >	[šnayā] ‘years’

Note that the orthography of the plural is distinct from the singular in both cases. But the first three words are a problem as the following table illustrates:

	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
נְהִירָה	[nahirā]	[nahirē]
אֲתֻתָּה	[[?] ātūtā]	[[?] ātwātā]
זַבְנָה	[zabnā]	[zabnē]

While the singular and plurals sound differently, they are written exactly the same. Here, the context does not make it clear if these should be singular or plural, unless we expect the reader to know the underlying Hebrew text. There are many such cases in the pre-411 corpus.

This certainly would have posed difficulties in reading and comprehending texts. Maybe readers began to pause here and there while they mentally processed if an instance of a string was singular or plural. Malphānē and scribes must have realized early on that there was a problem. While looking for a solution, another genius scribe came up with the idea of placing two dots on plurals and no dots on the singular. Now, נְהִירָה <nhyr[?]> is unambiguously singular [nahirā], while נְהִירֶה <nhyr[?]> is unambiguously plural [nahirē]; אֲתֻתָּה <[?]tw[?]> is singular [[?]ātūtā], while אֲתֻתֶה <[?]tw[?]> is

plural [ʔāt̄wāt̄ā] etc. The 411 manuscript already makes use of the double dot plural mark extensively.



First, let's ask the question: Why two dots?









I personally can think of two possibilities (you may be able to think of others). Let's put ourselves in the shoes of the Old Testament translators of the first and second century. The translator of Genesis stumbled into a problem when he wanted to render

And God called the gathering of *waters* the *seas*"
(Genesis 1:10).

This phrase has two plurals: *waters* and *seas*. The Syriac word for *water*, ܡܝܢ <my[?]>, is always plural and hence is unambiguously read [mayā]. No problem. The word for *sea*, however, has a plural form: singular [yamā] and plural [yamē].² The singular is written ܝܡܐ <ym[?]>. The translator needed a way to write the plural [yamē]. Recall that the final ܐ <[?]> represents both [ā] and [ē] and hence is of no help.

The received consonantal text for this verse has ܝܡܡܐ <ymm[?]> for the plural. Could it be that the translator thought to write <m> twice to indicate plural [yamē] versus one <m> for singular [yamā]? Now the singular and plural can be distinguished by doubling the letter before the final ܐ <[?]>. Not a bad idea if in-

deed that was the intention. This argument is supported by similar words in Syriac where the plural doubles the final letter of the singular:

1.  <^ʿm^ʔ> [ʿamā] ‘nation’ as opposite to
 <^ʿm̄m^ʔ> [ʿamē] ‘nations’.
2.  <sm^ʔ> [samā] ‘medicine’ as opposite to
 <s̄m̄m^ʔ> [samē] ‘medicines’.
3.  <gl^ʔ> [galā] ‘wave’ as opposite to
 <ḡll^ʔ> [galē] ‘waves’.
4.  <ʿlt^ʔ> [ʿeltā] ‘cause’ as opposite to
 <ʿ̄l̄t̄^ʔ> [ʿelātā] ‘causes’.

Syriac also has the plural

 <ḡdd^ʔ> [gedē] ‘wormwood’

although a singular is not attested in the literature. If this argument is to be entertained, these cases could be remnants of the system that doubled the last letter to mark plurals.

Let’s go on with this hypothesis—yes, now that we have data to corroborate the idea, we can call it a hypothesis—to see where it takes us. In the next verse, our translator needed to render plural *fruits* in the expression

Then God said, “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear *fruit* with seed in it, according to their various kinds.” And it was so. (Genesis 1:11)

The word that interests us here is *fruits*. The singular form of the Syriac word chosen by the translator is ܦܝܪܐ <p²r²> [pērā]. Maybe our translator followed the same methodology and wrote

ܦܝܝܪܐ <p²rr²> [pērē]

for the plural. We have no evidence for this of course as no manuscript from the first century survives and the form ܦܝܝܪܐ <p²rr²> is unknown in Syriac. If our hypothesis is accurate, maybe the scribe next to our translator—a stingy scribe—looked at him and said, “*Mal-phānā*, you are wasting a lot of space and ink doubling letters for every plural. Just write the letter once and put *two* dots on top of the word to indicate that there are *two* instances of the letter.” And thus the double dot *syāmē* may have been born.

This hypothesis, however, is not without its own problems. The double consonants are more likely to be remnants of earlier Aramaic spellings. In the case of ܦܝܡܐ <^ʿm̄m²> ‘people’, the double <m> is attested in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic and Mandaic. The double <d> in ܦܝܕܕܐ <ḡdd²> ‘wormwood’ is attested in Jewish Palestinian Aramaic.³ The philologist Nöldeke attributed the double letters to the loss of a very short vowel between the two instances of the doubled consonant.⁴ Indeed, the hypothesis is farfetched.



I have a second explanation for the dots, a mere conjecture this time. Aramaic speakers had a numbering system that used strokes: one stroke 𐤀 for 1, two strokes 𐤁𐤁 for 2, three strokes 𐤁𐤁𐤁 for 3, etc.⁵ The idea for two dots may have come from these strokes. Perhaps the scribes thought that a stroke was too large and cumbersome. Instead, dots would be more economical. If we follow this conjecture, the next question to ask is: Why two dots, not three or four?


Many dots would be quite cumbersome, especially when used with short words like

𐤀𐤁𐤁 <rš[?]> [rišā] ‘head’



which already has a dot for 𐤁 <r> thanks to the genius scribe we encountered in Chapter 1 (assuming for the moment that the dot in 𐤁 and 𐤁 was indeed invented before the plural dots, an issue we will revisit in Chapter 5). A two-dot plural sign would yield 𐤀𐤁𐤁 [rišē], a total of three dots. It would be worst in words like

𐤀𐤁𐤁𐤁 <dr[?]> [dārē] ‘generations’.

Here, the first letter <d> has a dot, <r> has a dot above, and somewhere the scribe has to fit the plural dots. I have put them above 𐤁 <d> but scribes could have put them anywhere. Imagine if the plural sign was three dots. We would end up with something like 𐤀𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 <dr[?]> or another combination of five dots!

In fact, scribes soon realized that even three dots, in cases when a word already has a *ī* <r>, was uneconomical and cumbersome. In time they would collapse the dot of *ī* <r> with the two-dot plural sign yielding  <řš[?]>. This did not take long to develop as the 411 manuscript already has collapsed dots. Traces of three dots (one for *ī* <r> and two for the plural sign) can still be seen in other manuscripts.

What if a plural had two instances of *ī* <r>? Scribes were not consistent. For example, in a manuscript dated April 473, one finds in the same folio two instances of the following word, one without a suffix and one with a possessive suffix:⁶

 <řwrbn[?]> [rawrbānē] ‘great ones’
 <rwřbyhwn> [rawřbayhūn]
 ‘their great ones’

The lexeme is the same in both, but the plural dotting is different.

To conclude the “Why two dots?” question, neither of the above explanations are likely: The doubling of the final consonant is better explained as a remnant of an earlier spelling and there is no evidence to support the Aramaic stroke numbering system having a direct bearing on the dots. The jury is still out on this question.



When were the plural dots invented?

Again, it is difficult to know in the absence of any dated manuscripts prior to 411, but we can try to hypothesize again. We can imagine that at some point in history before 411, the double dot was introduced on plural forms that are homographic with their singular counterpart, as in تَبَّ <ṭb²> ‘good’ for singular [ṭābā] opposite تَبَّ <ṭb²> for plural [ṭābē]. As time passed, scribes and readers alike started to associate the double dot with the notion of plural rather than with the concept of disambiguating a homographic pair. Scribes began to put the double dot on all plurals, even on a word like

مَلَّ <mll²> [melē] ‘words’

which is not a homograph with its singular counterpart

مَلَّ <mlt²> [meltā] ‘word’.

This hypothesis is not without basis. We will see in subsequent chapters how dots intended to disambiguate homographs lost the *disambiguation* meaning and became associated with linguistic features, usually morphological features. In this case, the two dots became the *plural* dots, not the dots intended to disambiguate two homographs.

In the 411 codex, as well as a manuscript dated April 473,⁷ we find the plural dots on

مَيَّ <m̄y²> [mayā] ‘water’

which does not have a singular counterpart at all as we have already mentioned. We even find the double-dot plural mark on numbers:⁸

ܛܡܢܝܐ < ṭmny[?] > [tmānyā] ‘eight’

ܛܝܫܐܘܢܐ < ṭš^{ʿ?} > [teš^ʿā] ‘nine’

There is no singular *nine* versus a plural *nine*. It is just *nine*. In fact, early manuscripts show much variety in the application of *syāme* on numbers. In later times, we encounter scribes who saw that the placing of the plural sign on numbers was overkill. Some stopped placing *syāmē* on numbers. In the *Antioch Bible*, a recent bilingual Syriac-English edition of the Scriptures from Gorgias Press, the editors chose not to place *syāmē* on numbers.

This process—whereby the dots lost their homograph disambiguation sense to become dots for plurals—would have taken at least a few decades if not much longer. As the dots are well established by 411, we can safely assume that their invention must go back at least to the mid fourth century if not earlier. If we are to argue that the Classical Syriac corpora authored before 411—the Old Testament, the Ephrem corpus, etc.—also were in desperate need of plural dots, we can even push for an earlier date.

One legitimate complaint to all of the above arguments is that the received physical evidence from the

Old Syriac inscriptions and the three legal parchments from the 240s does not support dots during the first three centuries. However, we should not look at Old Syriac as a strict predecessor of Classical Syriac. Old Syriac is a language that was probably closer to the vernacular Aramaic languages used in the area.⁹ Classical Syriac is concurrent with Old Syriac as so much literature was produced during the first three centuries *in* Classical Syriac (which of course may differ slightly from the Classical Syriac that has come down to us in manuscripts). Old Syriac not having dots should not have any bearing on Classical Syriac the same way other forms of Aramaic, especially the Aramaic script known as Square Hebrew, do not have any bearing on Syriac orthography either.



The use of *syāmē* was not limited to nouns, adjectives and numbers. It was also extended to verbs. Early manuscripts of the fifth and sixth century are inconsistent in this regard. One finds *syāmē* on both masculine and feminine verbs, but not all the time (today we expect them on feminine verbs only). Here is an example from a manuscript dated April 528 which contains a response by Severus of Antioch against Julian. Severus makes a reference to James 2:20–26:¹⁰

ומצות דא עליה. לא בן לא מלכות דא
 לאלהיה. וכן, ולא כוונתו כי רעא דא
 מלכות דא חקרא וצויה לא למלכות דא.
 And James the Apostle took the example of Abraham,
 that one is not justified from faith alone, but also
 from deeds which confirm faith.

Notice the last phrase. The noun חקרא <‘bd’> ‘deeds’
 is *masculine* plural and hence the verb צויה
 <msrryn> ‘confirm’ is also masculine plural. But it has
 syāmē. Today, we would write it without syāmē.

Here is another example from the Gospel of Mark,
 Chapter 16, when the women went to the tomb of
 Christ. We now expect all feminine plural verbs to be
 dotted with syāmē. Yet, a manuscript dated July 548
 reads:¹¹

¹ וכן ביום שבתא מריה מריה וסלומה
 מריה וכן מריה וסלומה. ² צויה דא
 כוונתו כי רעא דא חקרא וצויה לא למלכות דא.
³ וכן מריה וסלומה. וכן דא חקרא וצויה
 דא חקרא וצויה. ⁴ וכן מריה וסלומה
 וכן מריה וסלומה. ⁵ וכן מריה וסלומה
 וכן מריה וסלומה.

¹ When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary
 the mother of James, and Salome bought sweet spices
 so that they might go and anoint him. ² In the morn-
 ing on the first day of the week, after sunrise, they
 came to the tomb. ³ And they said among themselves,

“Who will roll the stone away from the tomb entrance for us?” ⁴ Then they looked and saw that the stone had been rolled away, for it was very large. ⁵ They went into the tomb and saw a young man sitting on the right side, wearing a white robe, and they were astonished.

This is a nice story because it has many plural feminine verbs. Here are all the feminine plural verbs:

Verse	With <i>syāmē</i>	Without <i>syāmē</i>
1		<zbn> [zben] ‘they bought’ זכב
		<dn ² tyn> [dnetyān] דנתינן ‘so that they might go’
		<nmšḥnyhy> [nemšḥānāy] נמשחנהו ‘anoint him’
2	<ʔty> [ʔetay] אתי ‘they came’	
3	<hwy> [way] הם	<w ² mrn> [w ² emarn] אמרו And they said
4		<whr> [whār] ראו ‘And they looked’

Verse	With <i>syāmē</i>	Without <i>syāmē</i>
	سَأَوْ < ḥzy > [ḥzay] ‘they saw’	
5	وَتَلَبَّ < w ^ṣ lyn > [w ^ṣ alen] ‘and they went into’	
	وَتَلَبَّ < wḥzy > [waḥzay] ‘and they saw’	
		وَتَلَبَّ < wtmh > [watmah] ‘and they were astonished’

There are even striking examples like the following sequence

وَأَبْصَرَ سَأَوْ < ḥr ḥzy > [ḥār ḥzy] ‘looked and saw’

where the first verb does not have *syāmē* dots but the second verb has them.

How did the plural dots end up on verbs? Assuming the strict homograph disambiguation model, scribes may have wanted to distinguish between the two past tense (i.e. perfect) readings of verbs like زَلَّ < ?zl >: It can mean ‘he went’ (singular 3rd masculine) or ‘they (feminine) went’ (plural 3rd feminine). Today, we would

write the latter with a silent , <y>, ܝܘܢ <?zly>, but in earlier Syriac (and still today in east Syriac) there is no silent , <y>. Note that in this case, the two forms are both homographs *and* homophones. The scribes placed a *syāmē* on the plural feminine form and kept the singular masculine form unmarked. As time passed, the dots were associated with feminine plural verbs, not with disambiguating homographs. As such, the usage of the dots was extended by analogy and we now find the dots on *all* plural feminine verbs, even participles.

While this makes a nice hypothesis, we have already seen examples that show plural masculine verbs with *syāmē* and feminine ones without. We need to reconcile the hypothesis with the later data.

Maybe the plural dots were extended not only to feminine verbs, but to all verbs. Then, at a later stage in history, Malphānē and scribes may have said, “Enough is enough! There is no point using the *syāmē* on masculine forms. Let’s just use them on feminine forms.” Regardless of the process, we find the dots in later Syriac mostly on feminine verbs.



Before leaving this chapter, let’s look at another, albeit a secondary, usage of *syāme*: to indicate a vowel!

In a recent study, Aaron Butts suggested that *syāme* was used in some Greek loan words to indicate a final [e] vowel. Examples cited include $\aleph\aleph\aleph$ <²nñq²> from Greek ἀνάγκη ‘necessity’ and $\aleph\aleph\aleph$ <dýtq²> from Greek διαθήκη ‘covenant’. Butts also suggest that the *syāme* on feminine forms of the teen cardinal numbers (11–19)

$\aleph\aleph\aleph$ <hd^fsr²> [hda^fesre] ‘eleven’

$\aleph\aleph\aleph$ <tít^fsr²> [tarta^fesre] ‘twelve’

...

$\aleph\aleph\aleph$ <tmn^fsr²> [tmāna^fesre] ‘eighteen’

$\aleph\aleph\aleph$ <tš^fsr²> [tšā^fesre] ‘nineteen’

marks the final [e] vowel.¹²



Setting aside when and how these dots came into being before 411, the main thing to realize is that the dots were originally used for one principal reason: to disambiguate between homographs. In the case of the single dot in \aleph <d> and \aleph <r>, we have graph (or letter) homographs. In the case of plurals, we have word homographs. It did not take long before scribes realized the power of the dot in distinguishing pairs of homographs. They would take the dot to a totally new level.

The Power of the Single Dot

We have seen that the first single dot introduced in Syriac was the one that distinguished ܕ <d> from ܪ <r>. We have also seen the double dot plural marker which has been used to mark plurals like

ܐܒܝܢܐ <ṭb̄> [ṭābē] ‘good’

to distinguish it from its singular form

ܐܒܝܢܐ <ṭb̄> [ṭābā].

We have discussed how the Syriac consonantal system gives rise to a huge number of homographs which necessitated the invention of the plural dots.

In fact, if we look at the list of Syriac words in any dictionary, i.e. lexemes without conjugation, we discover that almost 10% of the lexicon belongs to homographs.¹ If we take a corpus, such as the Syriac New

Testament, strip out all the vowels, and then look at the tokens (i.e. the strings of characters separated by space), we encounter a large amount of homographs. That is a lot of homographs.²

Let's consider the string ܐܒܐ <ṭb²> again. We have already seen that it can be either the singular [ṭābā] or the plural [ṭābē] with the latter being marked with the plural dots. There are still other readings for the string. Without the plural dots, it can also be the singular noun [ṭebā] 'news'. With the plural dots, it can be the plural [ṭebē]. (Unlike English *news* which is plural, but singular in construction,³ the corresponding Syriac word can be either singular, for one piece of news, or plural for much news.) There is still a disambiguation problem, and the problem is not confined to this string.

Take for instance the string ܡܠܟܐ <mlk²>. Our first instinct is to read it [malkā] 'king' or with the plural dots

ܡܠܟܝܐ <m̄lk²> [malkē] 'kings'.

But there are other readings. The dotless form can be [melkā] 'advice'; with the plural dots it can be [melkē] 'advices'.

The problem is more serious with verbs. Consider the string ܕܒܕܬ <¹bdt> found in line 4 of the inscription from Chapter 1. We have already seen that it could

be [ʿebdet] ‘I made’, [ʿebdat] ‘she made’, or [ʿʾbadt] ‘you made’. There are hundreds of such verbs in Syriac.

In addition to all this homographic madness, Syriac has a few homograph pairs that occur very frequently in texts: it is extremely unlikely to see a page without at least one of them used. Some of the frequent homograph pairs are:

1. ܐܗ <hw> which can be the personal pronoun [hū] ‘he’ or the masculine demonstrative pronoun [haw] ‘that’.
2. ܝܗ <hy> which can be the personal pronoun [hī] ‘she’ or the feminine demonstrative pronoun [hāy] ‘that’.
3. ܡܢ <mn> which can be the preposition [mēn] ‘from’ or the interrogative pronoun [man] ‘who?’ (in addition to a third [man] that represents a Greek particle and a fourth [mān] which is the absolute of [mānā] ‘what’).

Scribes began to look for a way to deal with this problem. Their best friend, the dot, was again the solution. They began to distinguish homograph pairs by placing a dot above one member of the pair and another dot under the other member. This resulted in:

ܐܗ	<ḥw>	[haw]	‘that’ (masculine)
ܐܗ	<ḥw>	[hū]	‘he’

ܚܝ <hy> [hāy] ‘that’ (feminine)

ܚܝܝ <hy> [hī] ‘she’

ܡܢ <mn> [man] ‘who?’

ܡܢܢ <mn> [mēn] ‘from’

(The dot under *h* in the transcription is for the diacritical dot, not for Syriac ܚ <ḥ>.)

Now, a reader can figure out how to pronounce these words without confusion. For example, in the 411 codex, containing the Pseudo-Clementines, we encounter a numbered list of epistles and their contents:⁴

The first contains... ܠܚܝܝ ܩܘܪܝܢܘܢ ܘܥܘܪܝܢܘܢ

And that second on... ܠܚܝܝ ܩܘܪܝܢܘܢ ܘܥܘܪܝܢܘܢ

And that third on... ܠܚܝܝ ܩܘܪܝܢܘܢ ܘܥܘܪܝܢܘܢ

And that fourth on... ܠܚܝܝ ܩܘܪܝܢܘܢ ܘܥܘܪܝܢܘܢ

And that fifth on... ܠܚܝܝ ܩܘܪܝܢܘܢ ܘܥܘܪܝܢܘܢ

And that sixth on... ܠܚܝܝ ܩܘܪܝܢܘܢ ܘܥܘܪܝܢܘܢ

We immediately know that ܘܥܘܪܝܢܘܢ <whw> ‘and that’, which starts the second and subsequent items, is not [whū] because of the position of the dot. In fact, one can read the dotted words without any context as single words standing on their own. (Also notice the variation in placing the *syāme* plural dots on numbers: they are on two, four and five, but not on three and six.)

The seventh item on the list exhibits more dots. It reads:⁵

ܐܢܘܢ ܕܝܘܚܘܢܐ ܕܝܘܚܘܢܐ ܕܝܘܚܘܢܐ ܕܝܘܚܘܢܐ ܕܝܘܚܘܢܐ
ܕܝܘܚܘܢܐ ܕܝܘܚܘܢܐ ܕܝܘܚܘܢܐ ܕܝܘܚܘܢܐ ܕܝܘܚܘܢܐ ܕܝܘܚܘܢܐ

And that seventh [epistle] on those [things] which those twelve witnessed in front of the people in the temple.

Let’s first look at the dots on

ܘܘܢܐ ܘܘܢܐ <h̄nyn dh̄nwn> [h̄ānēn dh̄ānun].

Both words are plural demonstrative pronouns for ‘those’: ܘܘܢܐ is feminine and ܘܘܢܐ is masculine. The expression means something along the lines of ‘those [things] which *those* [twelve witnessed]’. The first pronoun ܘܘܢܐ is feminine because abstracts (e.g. *things, matters*) are feminine in Syriac. The pronoun ܘܘܢܐ is masculine because it refers to twelve males. Regardless of this syntactic construction, the reason both have a dot above is because each one of them is homographic with another word: ܘܘܢܐ <h̄nyn> [h̄ānēn] is homographic with the plural feminine personal pronoun

ܘܘܢܐ <h̄nyn> [h̄ēnēn] ‘they’,

and ܘܘܢܐ <h̄nwn> [h̄ānun] is homographic with the plural masculine personal pronoun

ܘܘܢܐ <h̄nwn> [h̄ēnūn] ‘they’.

Before leaving this example, let’s see what else it tells us about dots. The numbers ܘܘܘܘܘܘ <šb^ᶛr̄> and ܘܘܘܘܘܘ <ti^ᶛsr̄> have the double dot plural marker. The ܐ <d> of ܐܘܘܘܘܘܘܘܘ ‘witnessed’ is dotless. This is another

example of how dots are in continuous flux in this early period.



The disambiguation dot was used beyond frequent homographs. We see it used with the string **𐭠𐭡𐭣** <mlk²> mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. Scribes placed a dot above for [malkā] ‘king’ and a dot below for [melkā] ‘advice’. Hence, we have **𐭠𐭡𐭣̇** <ṁlk²> and **𐭠𐭡𐭣̣** <ṁlk²>, respectively. By the same token, we have the three pairs:

𐭠𐭡𐭣̇	< [̇] bd ² >	[[̇] bādā]	‘work’ [†]
𐭠𐭡𐭣̣	< [̣] bd ² >	[[̣] abdā]	‘slave’
𐭠𐭡𐭣̇	<̣ṭb ² >	[ṭābā]	‘good’
𐭠𐭡𐭣̣	<̣ṭb ² >	[ṭebā]	‘news’
𐭠𐭡𐭣̇	< [̇] lt ² >	[[̇] lātā]	‘offering’
𐭠𐭡𐭣̣	< [̣] lt ² >	[[̣] eltā]	‘cause’

A single dot was powerful enough to disambiguate all sorts of homographs.



Is it possible to date this dot?

We have already seen examples from the 411 manuscript. All other fifth and sixth century manuscripts that I have examined use the disambiguation dot in one form

[†] We will see later in Chapter 9 another usage of a dot above **𐭠𐭡𐭣̇** to indicate the feminine active participle [[̇]ābdā] ‘she is doing’.

or another. The homograph dot, however, seems to be absent from the Sinai manuscript of the Old Syriac Gospels from the early fifth century (although being a palimpsest, it is difficult to know for sure). It is therefore safe to assume that the dot was invented prior to 411. How much earlier than 411? Before we can answer the question, we need to look a bit further into how this disambiguation dot is utilized.

We have seen the dot used on frequent pronouns as well as non-frequent nouns. We have also seen it used with verbs. In fact, the majority of homographs are the result of verbal conjugations as in the string ܘܒܕܬ <ʿbdt> mentioned above. Another verbal homograph, which occurs in every sound verb, is the distinction between the P^{al} perfect and active participle. For instance, ܘܩܬܠ <qṭl> may be perfect [q^oṭal] or active participle [qāṭel]. Here again, the scribes used the same dot to distinguish them. They placed a dot under the perfect and another above the active participle. This is why we see in manuscripts ܘܩܬܠ <qṭl> [q^oṭal] and ܘܩܬܠ <qṭl> [qāṭel].

While it is impossible to determine how far before 411 was this dot invented, the process of using it on frequent homographs, homographic nouns, and the various verbal forms could not have taken place within a

short period of time. At least a few decades are needed for this process to come to the stable state found in the 411 manuscript and other fifth century manuscripts. We can easily date this dot at least to the mid-end of the fourth century. If we opt to argue that the pre 411 corpus had so many more homographs that needed disambiguation, we can take that date a bit earlier.

The early manuscripts also show that the supralinear dot is far more frequent than the sublinear dot. This may indicate that the supralinear dot was invented before the sublinear dot. (Compare this with the earlier argument in Chapter 1 that the dot for $\dot{\text{r}}$ <r> may predate that of $\dot{\text{d}}$ <d>.)

The single dot was expanded by analogy. For instance, we have seen it used with the pair:

ܡܠܟܐ <mlk[?]> [malkā] ‘king’
 ܡܠܟܐ <mlk[?]> [melkā] ‘advice’

As time passed, scribes began to use the dot with derivative forms; hence, we start to see

ܡܠܟܘܬܐ <mlkwt[?]> [malkutā] ‘kingdom’

although there is no homograph in this case (ܡܠܟܘܬܐ <mlkwt[?]> [melkūtā] does not exist). Of course, the productive nature of Syriac morphology does not prohibit us from coining ܡܠܟܘܬܐ but no one has done it yet.

Before concluding this chapter, let us give a table of the most common homograph pairs and how they are distinguished by the dot.

- | | | | | |
|----|------|----------|---------|-----------------|
| 1. | هٰؤن | < ḥnwn > | [henūn] | ‘these’ (masc.) |
| | هٰؤن | < ḥnwn > | [hānūn] | ‘those’ |
| 2. | هنن | < ḥnyn > | [henēn] | ‘these’ (fem.) |
| | هنن | < ḥnyn > | [hānēn] | ‘those’ |
| 3. | بطل | < ḥbl? > | [ḥablā] | ‘cord’ |
| | بطل | < ḥbl? > | [ḥbālā] | ‘corruption’ |
| 4. | تبع | < ṭb? > | [ṭebā] | ‘news’ |
| | تبع | < ṭb? > | [ṭābā] | ‘good’ |
| 5. | مكل | < mlk? > | [melkā] | ‘advice’ |
| | مكل | < mlk? > | [malkā] | ‘king’ |
| 6. | من | < mnn > | [men] | ‘from’ |
| | من | < mnn > | [man] | ‘who?’ |
| 7. | سفر | < spr? > | [seprā] | ‘book’ |
| | سفر | < spr? > | [sāprā] | ‘scribe’ |
| 8. | عبد | < ʿbd? > | [ʿabdā] | ‘slave’ |
| | عبد | < ʿbd? > | [ʿbādā] | ‘work’ |
| 9. | علت | < ʿlt? > | [ʿeltā] | ‘cause’ |
| | علت | < ʿlt? > | [ʿlātā] | ‘offering’ |

In addition, every single verb uses the dot to distinguish the P^{al} perfect form for the active participle, e.g. قتل [qṭal] versus قاتل [qāṭel].



It may seem daunting to remember all of these pairs. Which member of the pair takes a dot above and which one takes a dot below? Is there a system? As it turns out, our scribes *were* indeed geniuses. They did not place the dots randomly. There was a system.

An Intelligent Dot

We have seen in the previous chapter how the dot was used to distinguish pairs of homographs: a dot was placed above one member of the pair; another was placed below the other member. We concluded the previous chapter by posing the question: were the dots placed randomly or was there a thoughtful system behind the position of the dots?

Indeed, our genius scribes *were* geniuses! They did not assign the supralinear dot and the sublinear dot randomly on homographs. Can we figure out their system?

Consider the data of homograph pairs given in the previous chapter (on p. 39). You may have noticed that each pair differs in one vowel only. For example, [ē] in [hēnēn] versus [ā] in [hānēn] (no. 2 on the list), and [e] in [melkā] versus [a] in [malkā] (no. 5). You may have

	Vowel for 1 st word	Vowel for 2 nd word
	فهد < q̣ṭl > [q̣āṭel]	[ə] فهد < q̣ṭl > [q̣tal]

It seems that if we are to distinguish between [a] and [e] (row 1), the former takes the dot above and the latter takes the dot below. If we are to distinguish between [ā] and [a] (row 2), then [ā] takes the dot above and [a]—which in row 1 took the dot above—now takes the dot below. Finally, if we are to distinguish between [ā] and [e] (row 3), then [ā] still takes the dot above, while [e] takes it below.

It may still not be very obvious as to what is going on. Looking at the table more closely, however, one will realize that [ā] always takes a dot above, while [e] always takes a dot below. Why does [a] take a dot above in some cases (as in row 1), while in others (as in row 2) it takes it below?

It seems from the above data that there is some sort of a vowel hierarchy in this order:

[ā]

[a]

[e]

The schwa [ə] falls at the bottom of this hierarchy.

If you choose any two vowels, the one that is higher on this hierarchy takes a dot above, while the vowel that is lower takes a dot below. There must be a phonological feature that is determining this order.

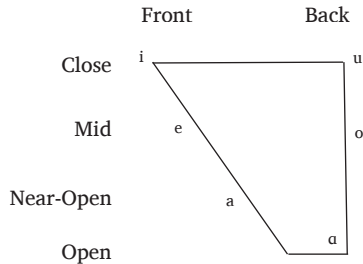
Indeed there is and we know this from the grammatical tradition. In his *Letter on Orthography*, the grammarian Jacob of Edessa (d. 708) wrote:¹

Vowel sounds are thick and thin. Every word, where it is thick or broad in vowel sound, takes a dot above; where it is fine or thin, it takes a dot below.

In other words, Syriac grammarians thought of vowels as *thick/broad* versus *thin/fine*: [ā] is the thickest or broadest, [e] is the thinnest or finest, and [a] is somewhere in between. If we consider the first vowel in each homographic pair, the thicker vowel takes a dot above, while the thinner vowel takes a dot below.

Today, phonologists—linguists who study the sound system of languages—do not talk of *thick* or *thin* vowels. Rather, they place vowels on a vowel chart as shown below.

Phonologists classify vowels as *back* or *front*. A back vowel is said with the tongue positioned as far *back* as possible in the mouth. This is the case with the vowel ā (whether it is realized as east Syriac [ɑ] or west Syriac [o]). A front vowel, on the other hand, is said with the



tongue positioned as far *forward* as possible in the mouth. This is how [e] is said. The vowel [a], as illustrated in the diagram, stands somewhere in the middle. In modern linguistic terms, the vowel that is further to the back takes a dot above, while the vowel that is closer to the front takes a dot below.

Another modern classification of vowels, also illustrated in the diagram, is whether a vowel is open or closed. An *open* vowel is said with the tongue positioned as far as possible from the roof of the mouth; i.e. the tongue is towards the bottom of the mouth. This is the case with \bar{a} in its east Syriac manifestation [ɑ] which is more likely to have been the vowel at the time the disambiguation dot was invented. A *closed* vowel is said with the tongue positioned as close as possible to the roof of the mouth as the vowel [e]. Looking at the diagram, you find that [a] is again in between. Using this terminology, we can say that the more open the vowel

Next, we turn our attention to the question of dating the invention of the Syriac dot. More precisely, we ask the question: which dot was invented first?

The Kenoro Dotless Experiment

We have seen in Chapter 1 that the first single dot to be invented by Syriac scribes was the dot that distinguished ܐ <d> from ܐ̇ <r>. We tried to date this invention. We saw that the 411 codex already used the dot extensively, while the Old Syriac inscriptions as well as the three parchments from 240–243 did not use the single dot. We also discussed the possibility of looking at the Syriac literary material that was produced *before* 411—even though the earliest manuscripts representing this material is post 411—to learn about the literary productivity of this period. We learned that Syriac authors and translators produced an impressive corpus before 411 consisting of the Syriac Old Testament, the Ephrem corpus, and no less than ten works that have survived, in addition to books that we know existed but

did not survive such as the Diatessaron and Bardaisan's works (see a list of these works on p. 11). We raised the question: Is it possible that this huge corpus did not distinguish between 𐤏 <d> and 𐤍 <r>?

We also have seen that the first double dot to be invented was the plural mark *syāmē*. While also absent in the Old Syriac inscriptions and parchments of the 240s, it is well attested in the 411 manuscript and other fifth century manuscripts. Having seen that the plural mark is placed on both homographic and nonhomographic pairs—even on words that do not have a singular counterpart like ܡܝܢܐ <my²> 'water' and numbers like ܫܘܘܘܢܐ <tmny²> 'eight'—we assumed that their invention would have taken at least a few decades dating them back to the mid fourth century if not earlier.



In this chapter, we revisit the dating issue. More specifically, we look into the question: which was invented first? The single dot for 𐤏 <d> and 𐤍 <r> or the double dot *syāmē*?

I spent some time pondering the question, but alas, there is no physical evidence to rely upon. Dots first appear in 411 and other fifth century manuscripts. All sorts of dots appear in this period: the dot for 𐤏 <d> and 𐤍 <r>, the double dot plural mark, the homograph

disambiguation dots, as well as dots we have not yet discussed. There seems to be no way to separate them chronologically.

Whenever I am stuck with a question, I resort to my children. Sometimes we overthink questions and lose sight of simple solutions. I was at the time in Jerusalem teaching Syriac, and my (then) ten-year old son Sebastian Kenoro was with me (playing on his iPad of course).

Kenoro can read Syriac. It didn't take long to point out to him that the dots on ܐ <d> and ܝ <r> and the double dot *syāmē* did not exist in the first century. I told him to imagine that there are no dots and he is the inventor of the dots. Which dot would he invent first?

Kenoro's first question—in his own version of Kthobonoyo Syriac which exhibits a lot of code switching with English—was

How do ܐܘܪܘܫܠܝܡ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ in the first century?¹

Translation:

How do you know that there were no dots in the first century?

I explained to Kenoro the evidence from the Old Syriac inscriptions, that they did not have dots and that we have a manuscript from 411 with the dots.

Kenoro suggested that he would first invent the dots for whatever was more confusing. My next question to him then was: which case is more confusing, distinguishing ܐ <d> from ܝ <r> or the plural forms? I genuinely didn't know how to approach the problem.

Kenoro immediately suggested that we write a dotless paragraph and try to read it to see which case is more confusing. This developed into an experiment. Luckily, we had access to the monks of St. Mark's Monastery in the Old City.

I extracted Old Testament verses from the *Antioch Bible* and a text from the Ephrem corpus. Both were fully vocalized and pointed. I stripped all dots and marks. I printed them in a font that resembles manuscripts.² The next day, Kenoro and I went to St. Mark's and recorded two monks reading the dotless texts. After we went back to our room that evening, I collated the data. The result was surprising: we can certainly live without the dots on ܐ <d> and ܝ <r>. In the case of the double dot plural marker *syāmē*, we found out that it was not necessary for words where the singular and plural are not homographs, like ܘܠܒܢܝ <wlbny> 'and for my children' in the

inscription from Chapter 1 (line 5). But when the singular and plural are homographs and the context does not give any indication, it is impossible to know if one has to read a singular or a plural form. (The texts from the experiment and the results are given in Appendix 2.)

Linguists, through experimentation, have already established that when people read, they recognize words rather than spell words one letter at a time. Consider the following phrase:

ܨܒܪܐ ܕܥܒܪܐ ܘܢܩܕܝܫܐ ܘܩܪܝܫܐ ܘܗܘܐ ܘܥܒܪܐ ܘܨܒܪܐ

Some of the words are indeed ambiguous vis-à-vis *ܐ* <d> versus *ܝ* <r>: The string ܨܒܐ can be the noun ܨܒܝ <br[?]> [brā] ‘son’ or the verb ܨܒܐ <bd[?]> [bdā] ‘to speak falsely’. The string ܩܘܕܝܫܐ can be the adjective ܩܘܕܝܫܐ <qdyš[?]> [qadišā] ‘holy’ or the noun ܩܘܕܝܫܐ <qryš[?]> [qrišā] ‘brass’. The string ܘܗܘܐ can be the number ܘܗܘܐ <ḥd> [ḥad] ‘one’ or the verb ܘܗܘܐ <ḥr> [ḥār] ‘he looked’. However, anyone who reads Syriac comfortably can immediately recognize that the phrase is:

ܨܒܪܐ ܕܥܒܪܐ ܘܢܩܕܝܫܐ ܘܩܪܝܫܐ ܘܗܘܐ ܘܥܒܪܐ ܘܨܒܪܐ

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit one true God.

In a less common text, there are of course some words that can be read both ways and cause difficulty

for readers such as **וַיִּשְׁרַח** which can be **יִשְׁרַח** <šdr> [šadar] ‘he sent’ or **יִשְׂרַח** <šrr> [šarar] ‘he confirmed’. In fact, our experiment had this word in the following phrase

וַיִּשְׁרַח הַבָּקָר אֲשֶׁר עַל גְּבוּל בֵּית שֶׁמֶשׁ
וַיִּשְׂרַח

The verse is taken from 1 Samuel 6:12. (Note again that we even gave our readers the text in an Estrangelā font, Estrangelā Antioch from the Meltho fonts, which is based on a manuscript hand). The corresponding vocalized text in Sertā is

וַיִּשְׁרַח הַבָּקָר אֲשֶׁר עַל גְּבוּל בֵּית שֶׁמֶשׁ
וַיִּשְׂרַח

The heifers were sent by the pathway that runs along the border of Beth-shemesh.

One reader read **וַיִּשְׂרַח** as **יִשְׂרַח** <w²šrr>. The more advanced reader first read it **יִשְׂרַח** <w²šrr> then corrected himself to **יִשְׁרַח** <w²šdr> after reading a few more words from the phrase.

The *Kenoro Dotless Experiment* leads us to conclude that the double dot *syāmē* must have been invented prior to the single dot for **א** <d> and **י** <r>. We have seen an imagined scenario as to how the double dot *syāmē* may have been invented in Chapter 2.



Let's now put ourselves in the shoes of the translators of the Old Testament to understand how the dotless א may have obtained its dots.

At the beginning of Genesis, the translator came across Adam and wrote it down אדם. After some chapters, he came across Aram. He wrote it down ארם as well. The translator must have recognized that there was a problem. No context can help in the case of proper nouns. What to do?

One translator says "let's put a dot on Adam." A fellow translator says, "no, let's put a dot above one of the names and another dot beneath the other." The fellow translator does not want any further ambiguities.

An argument follows as to which name takes the dot above and which one takes it below. After some intense shouting, another genius stands up. He has a great idea. "Listen," he says, "[aram]... [adam], [aram]... [adam], [aram]... [adam]."

"What's your point?" some enquire of him.

"Listen to the vowels," the genius scribe says, "[aaram]... [aadam], [aaaraaam]... [aaadam]. Listen how I open my mouth when I say Aram. The vowel is *thick*! But when I say Adam, the vowel is *thin*!"

Everyone is astonished. "Let's put a dot above the thick vowel and a dot below the thin vowel," suggests

our genius scribe. Everyone is in awe. No one complains. They all go through the translated texts and write ܐܪܡ for Aram and ܐܕܡ for Adam. They don't fix the dot on any specific letter. They go home as they have accomplished enough for the day.

After a couple of days, the Genesis translator came across a Hebrew word in verse 8:7 that he decided to translate into Syriac [šadar] 'to send'. He wrote it down ܫܘܘܐ. Another translator sitting next to him, working on Psalm 18, says, "Wait a minute! I wrote down ܫܘܘܐ for [šarar]."

The [šarar] translator says to the [šadar] translator, "I shall put a dot above [šarar] like this ܫܘܘܐ and you put a dot under [šadar] like this ܫܘܘܐ."

The [šadar] translator complains. "Why? My word has *rīsh* too. My vowel sounds are as thick as yours."

The [šarar] translator says, "True, but my word has two instances of *rīsh*. You only have one! ܠܠܡܠܟ [l'ālam]—never—will I put a dot beneath my word! You put a dot beneath *your* word."

Before things got out of hand, a quiet translator stood and said. "Brothers, how will we write [dardrē] 'thistles' (Genesis 3:18)? I know it does not have a homograph, but there are too many instances of ܪ in ܕܪܪܪܪ." He suggested that they put a dot for each instance of ܪ.

They all turn to the genius who recognized the thick and thin vowel types. He tells them that [r] always causes the vowel near it to be thick ('open' in our modern terminology). "Let's put a dot above [r] like this ܐ <r>." Then it was natural for them to put a dot under [d] as ܐ <d>.



The above story is clearly fiction. But perhaps it can help us put forward a hypothesis. The hypothesis suggests that first a dot was placed on homograph pairs that contained [d] and [r], respectively. Taking the thick/thin vowel distinction retroactively, as [r] causes a vowel to become thick, the word containing an [r] took a dot above and that containing a [d] took a dot below.³ As time passed and more problems arose, the dots were fixed on the letters themselves rather than on the entire word.

This is not a wild hypothesis. We can find some evidence to support it. First, let's consider the suggestion that not all instances of ܐ took a dot initially. We can find instances of the dotless ܐ in dated manuscripts of the fifth century, even in some early sixth century manuscripts as we have seen in Chapter 1. There is also textual evidence that comes from proper nouns in the Old Testament. In a number of places, the Syriac Old Testa-

ment does not agree with Hebrew in some proper nouns that contain [d] or [r]. For example, the Syriac version of Jeremiah has the name ܕܡܘܨܐ <?dwm> for Hebrew ארם <?rm> (Jer. 35:11). (An equally acceptable explanation is that this confusion in proper nouns occurred as an inner Syriac corruption; i.e. the name was translated correctly into Syriac, but as Syriac scribes copied the text, they made mistakes).

Second, the suggestion that the dot was not fixed on ܐ but placed in its vicinity can be corroborated with ample evidence from fifth and sixth century manuscripts. In fact, the dot does not become anchored on the base graph ܐ until much later.



This is at least a hypothesis. To cover our bases, let's attempt to pose a counter hypothesis. Is it possible that the invention of the dots on ܐ belongs to a much later date and all the dots that we encounter in early manuscripts are added by later hands?

This idea can be entertained in light of the non-fixed position of the dot with respect to the base letter. There is even a very late manuscript dated 928/9 that has dots for ܐ when it is the first glyph of the line almost in the outer margin!⁴ The second hand did not have much freedom as the base glyphs were already there. One can,

however, come up with three valid counter arguments against the counter hypothesis: First, the later hand is indeed that of the original scribe. The scribe first wrote the base text and after completing a page added the dots, sometimes haphazardly which explains why dots are not fixed on the base graph 𐤀. Indeed, scribes today do exactly this with all sorts of dots, though not for 𐤀 or *syāme* or the final 𐤀 (to be introduced in Chapter 8) as they write these dots while writing words.⁵ If these manuscripts are examined with a magnifying glass, it seems indeed that the dots are original.

The second counter argument is the lack of colophons that say, “I did it!” Syriac manuscripts are rich with colophons not only by original scribes but also by later people who restored the manuscripts, bound them, bought or sold them, donated them, or even simply read them. I am not aware of any colophon that indicates someone added dots to a dotless manuscript. There are colophons, however, that indicate someone added additional dots to an already dotted manuscript. Such a note appears in a thirteenth century colophon.⁶

Third, if indeed dots were added by later hands to all the fifth and sixth century manuscripts that we received—we have many of those—one might expect to see at least a few page-turning mistakes that permit a

dotless page to remain totally dotless. I am not aware of such pages (of course one can argue that subsequent readers would have filled such pages, but the ink style would be evident if this indeed happened). The first hypothesis seems more plausible.



Were the dots confined to formal scripts?

Syriac manuscripts are all written in a formal hand by professional scribes. We are fortunate to have a few letters and notes written in an informal hand. One such example is a purchase note dated July 576.⁷ Another is a letter that survives on a papyrus from the seventh century.⁸ The purchase note has the dots for ܐ <d> and ܝ <r>, *syāmē*, a homograph dot on ܐܘܢ <ḥw>, an active participle dot on ܩܪܝܘܢ <q̄r̄> [qārē] ‘reads’, and the feminine dot on ܚܘܢܐ <ḥ> (which will be introduced in Chapter 8). The parchment also has dots for every ܐ <d> and ܝ <r> as well as *syāmē*. There is even one instance of punctuation dots . (to be discussed in Chapter 13). There are no feminine suffixes in this short text so we do not know if ܚܘܢܐ was employed, but it probably was. This means that informal writing also made use of the dots.



Where would we be now if the ܐ never attained its dots?

Those who can read Syriac well could probably live without the dots for ܐ <d> and ܝ <r>, but that would require an exceptional competence in the language.

In our 13,000 lexeme lexicon today, there are over 5,500 lexemes that contain at least one ܐ <d> or ܝ <r>. That constitutes about 42% of the lexical inventory of the language. If these were dotless, 162 lexemes would end up being homographic pairs such as ܡܐ for

ܡܐ <daq> [daq] ‘to beat’

and

ܡܝ <raq> [raq] ‘to spit’.

There are a few words that would have more than one ܐ such as ܕܪܘܝܐ for

ܕܪܘܝܐ <drwy²> [dārūyā] ‘winnowing’

and

ܕܪܘܝܐ <rdwy²> [rādūyā] ‘fluid’;

and ܫܘܕܪܐ for

ܫܘܕܪܐ <swdr²> [sūdārā] ‘cloth’

and

ܫܘܕܪܐ <swrd²> [sūrādā] ‘terror’.

Imagine having a dotless ܕܪܘܝܐ for ܕܪܘܝܐ [dārdārīn] ‘for ages’!



Before leaving this chapter, we need to consider a caveat regarding the results of the *Kenoro Dotless Experiment*. The experiment shows that—at least psycholinguistically—the *syāme* dots predate the dots for 𐤁 <d> and 𐤂 <r>. Recall the Aramaic, Palmyrene and Nabataean inscriptions from Chapter 1. They marked <r> with a dot, but none have *syāme*. This only demonstrates how difficult it is to support the various hypotheses that are presented here.



Regardless of which dot came first, now that the dots of 𐤁 <d> and 𐤂 <r> and the double dot plural mark had been set in motion—as well as the homograph dot introduced in Chapter 3—the path was clear for scribes to indulge themselves more and more with the dot.

The Silent Dot

The Malphānē and scribes found out that the dot paid off. They were able to use it to distinguish between ܐ <d> and ܝ <r>. They managed to indicate the plurals with the double dot *syāmē*. Moreover, they used it to distinguish between homographs like ܡܠܟܐ <mlk[?]> [malkā] and ܡܠܟܐ <ṁlk[?]> [melkā]. There was no stopping them!

Prior to the seventh century, the Malphānē, more specifically the Mhagyānē and Maqryānē who were entrusted with teaching pupils how to read, faced another challenge with enclitics.¹ An enclitic is a word pronounced with so little emphasis that it is shortened and forms part of the preceding word, for example 't in English *can't* for *cannot*. In Syriac the personal pronoun ܐܢܐ <[?]n[?]> 'I' is usually pronounced [ʔenā]. But in certain syntactic constructions, the pronoun becomes enclitic

and is pronounced [nā]. One such syntactic construction is when it occurs after the active participle (or present tense) as in

‫אני יודע‬ <yd^f ?n[?]> [yāda^f nā] ‘I know’.

Here, the first ‫א‬ <?> of the pronoun is silent. We even often see it written, especially in early manuscripts, as one word, ‫אני‬ <yd^fn[?]>.² Another syntactic construction in which the pronoun is enclitic is when it is repeated to play the role of the verb *to be* as in the New Testament phrase

‫אני הן‬ ‫אני הן‬ ‫אני הן‬ ‫אני הן‬

<?n[?] ?n[?] r^fy[?] t̥b[?]>

[?enā nā rā[?]yā t̥ābā]

‘I am the good shepherd’ (John 10:11)

In this case, the first occurrence of ‫א‬ is fully pronounced, while the second is enclitic: [?enā nā], not [?enā ?enā].

It is not clear if this sound rule always existed, but certainly just before the seventh century readers were confused between [?enā] and its enclitic [nā]. The Mhagyānē and Maqryānē needed a tool to distinguish between the fully pronounced ‫א‬ <?n[?]> and the enclitic one. They resorted to the dot.

The same methodology used previously was used again here: the form with a *thicker* vowel would take the dot above and the one with the *thinner* vowel would

which appears in a manuscript dated April 528.³ Another example is the word

ܠܠܦܐ <^llp^a> [l^ʔelpā] ‘to the ship’

from a manuscript dated July 548.⁴ The scribes really tried hard, but they lost the battle. Until this day, west Syriac readers read [waytī] and [lelpā]. The glottal stop is gone after a prefix.



The silent dot became useful to mark enclitics other than ܢܢ <ⁿnⁿ>. Before we dwell on this, let’s explain the syntactic phenomenon in more detail.

Syriac uses two consecutive personal pronouns, like ܢܢ ܢܢ <ⁿnⁿ ⁿnⁿ> above, to express the verb *to be*. If I want to say *you are the king* in Syriac, one option is to say

ܢܢ ܐܘܢ ܡܠܟܐ <ⁿnt hw mlk^a> [ʔatū malkā]

(Mt 27:11)

Literally, this means

You, he the king

which makes no sense in English. But it makes perfect sense in Syriac. The second pronoun ܐܘܢ <hw> ‘he’ serves as the verb *to be*:

You *are* the king.

The same construction can be used with the feminine pronoun

ܢܢ ܐܘܢܝܬܐ ܡܠܟܐ <ⁿnty hy mlkt^a> [ʔatī malktā]

You are the queen

In these syntactic constructions, the pronouns are enclitics. The above phrases are pronounced [ʔatū malkā] not [ʔat hū malkā], and [ʔatī malktā] not [ʔat hī malktā] (the [n] of the pronoun is silent as well). In other words, the [h] of the 2nd person pronouns is silent. Scribes marked them as such with a dot:

𐤀𐤃𐤕 𐤀𐤓 𐤁𐤏𐤓 <ʔnt ḥw mlkʔ> [ʔatū malkā]

and

𐤀𐤃𐤕 𐤀𐤓, 𐤁𐤏𐤓 <ʔnty ḥy mlktʔ> [ʔatī malktā]

Here we see a confusion. We have already mentioned that the homograph disambiguation dot introduced in Chapter 3 distinguished 𐤀𐤓 [haw] ‘that (masculine)’ from 𐤀𐤓 [hū] ‘he’ and distinguishes 𐤀,𐤓 [hāy] ‘that (feminine)’ from [hī] ‘she’. Here, however, the dot on 𐤀𐤃𐤕 𐤀𐤓 𐤁𐤏𐤓 and 𐤀𐤃𐤕 𐤀𐤓, 𐤁𐤏𐤓 can also be interpreted as the *silent dot*. In this interpretation, it tells the reader not to pronounce the [h].

What if you wanted to say *you are that king or you are that queen*? You would have to write

𐤀𐤃𐤕 𐤀𐤓 𐤀𐤓 𐤁𐤏𐤓 <ʔnt ḥw ḥw mlkʔ>
[ʔatū haw malkā]

𐤀𐤃𐤕 𐤀𐤓, 𐤀, 𐤁𐤏𐤓 <ʔnty ḥy ḥy mlktʔ>
[ʔatī hāy malktā]

It might be this confusion that led later scribes to use a little line, called in Syriac *serṭūnā*, instead of the dot to indicate silent letters. Nowadays, we write

ܠܢܬ ܗܘ ܗܘ ܡܠܟܬ <[?]nt ḥw ḥw mlk[?]>

ܠܢܬܝ ܗܝ ܗܝ ܡܠܟܬܝ <[?]nty ḥy ḥy mlkt[?]>

This type of a *serṭūnā* is called *mbaṭṭlānā*. It is used to mark silent letters.⁵



Another enclitic case is the substantive verb

ܠܗܘܐ <hw[?]> [hwā] ‘to be’.

It also plays the role of an auxiliary verb in which case it becomes an enclitic, pronounced [wā]. Here too, a dot below marked the enclitic form. A manuscript dated April 528 has enclitic ܠܗܘܐ <hw[?]>.⁶ This dots persists even in modern manuscripts. The non-enclitic form is sometimes unmarked, but in the later tradition one finds two sublinear dots as in ܠܗܘܐ <hw[?]>.



Let’s go back to ܠܢܬ ܠܢܬ <[?]n[?] ?n[?]> mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. You will find it in many manuscripts written ܠܢܬ ܠܢܬ <[?]n[?] ?n[?]> where the dots shifted from <[?]> to <n>. The imprecise positioning and shifting of dots is a source of confusion, especially in manuscripts. There are a number of reasons why dots are quite often found in places where we do not expect them to be.

The Shifting Dot

What sometimes complicates matters is that dots tend to shift from one place to another. There are a number of reasons for this. The first is a simple, systematic shift in position as the shifting of the silent dots in $\text{نن} <{}^2\text{n}^2>$ from

$\text{نن} \text{نن} <{}^1\text{n}^2 \text{ }^2\text{n}^2>$

to

$\text{نن} \text{نن} <{}^2\text{n}^2 \text{ }^1\text{n}^2>$

encountered in the previous chapter. This shift is systematic and is still practiced by modern scribes today.

In fifth century manuscripts, one finds that the dots of $\text{د} <\text{d}>$ and $\text{ر} <\text{r}>$ do not have a precise position as we have discussed earlier. Sometimes they are above or below د where we expect them to be, but more often they are to the left or right edge of د , and quite often much farther. In the 411 manuscript, we find $\text{د} \text{د}$ for

دٰل <d^fl> and دٰل for دٰل <dyd^f>. This is because the right-most edge of د extends under ل. In later times, the dot would shift closer and closer to the base graph ل.

We talked earlier about the homograph dot on words like ملك <mlk²> ‘king’ versus املك <mlk²> ‘advise’. In typography, we don’t have much choice and place the dot above or below a specific consonant. Fonts even tend to center dots above their respective consonants. In manuscripts, however, the dot can be anywhere in the vicinity, even anchored on an adjacent letter or between letters.



The dots that exhibit the most movement are the *syāmē* plural dots. There is no fixed position for them. One can see *syāmē* in all sorts of positions. Typesetting using modern fonts usually has *syāmē* centered on top of a letter, but in manuscripts one can find the *syāmē* between letters. Additionally, when typesetting fully vocalized texts—something that is infrequent in manuscripts—the typesetter may place *syāmē* in a place where it does not conflict with other dots and marks.

What may cause difficulty is placing a dot in an unexpected position, especially when the space between lines is tight and a dot under a word in one line may appear as if it is above a word in the next line. Consider

the following example from a sixth/seventh century manuscripts of the Old Testament which is the basis of the Leiden edition (Amos 5:16–17):¹

And to those who are skilled in wailing. And in all the vineyards, lamentations.

The Leiden edition has a typo in this verse: ܘܠܘܢ <wly^ry>. Why a typo? It looks right. As it turns out, the ܘ glyph is a <d> and its dot is above the ܢ <?> of ܕܘܢܘܢܐ <křm²> in the next line! This is not a case of the dot shifting. Early Syriac scribes quite often did not place the dot exactly near ܘ as we mentioned earlier.

❖ ❖ ❖

One dot, however, did not move around much throughout its entire history. That dot was the one scribes placed on the feminine suffix ܗ <h>. When present, it is always close to the base graph.

A Suffix Dot

We have seen that various dots had already developed by the time of the 411 manuscript. We have seen the development of dots on **ا** <d> and **ي** <r>, the double-dot *syāmē* for plural forms, and the homograph dot for words like

هٰؤَؤَ <h̄nwn> [hānūn] ‘those’

versus

هٰهٰهٰ <h̄nwn> [henūn] ‘these’.

We have also encountered the silent dot on enclitics like

اَنْتْ هٰؤَؤَ <ʔnt h̄w> [ʔatū] ‘you (masc.) are’

and

اَنْتِي هٰؤَؤَ <ʔnty h̄y> [ʔatī] ‘you (fem.) are’.

Another issue that faced the Malphānē and scribes prior to 411 was the possessive suffix **ه** <h> as in **مَلِكْه** <m̄lk̄h> (the dot on <m> is to distinguish **مَلِكْ** <m̄lk̄ʔ> [malkā] ‘king’ from **مَلِكْه** <m̄lk̄ʔ> [melkā] ‘advise’). Is it [malkeh] ‘his king’ or [malkāh]

‘her king’? The same issue arose with the object pronominal suffix. Is ܡܠܟܗ <qtłh> to be read [qaṭleh] ‘he killed him’ or [qaṭlāh] ‘he killed her’?

If I were to give you the task of disambiguating these forms, you would probably follow the example of the genius scribes we encountered earlier and assign a dot above for the more open, thicker vowel [ā] and a dot below for the less open, thinner vowel [e]. This would yield:

ܡܠܟܗ <mlkḥ> [malkāh] ‘her king’
 ܡܠܟܗ <mlkḥ> [malkeh] ‘his king’,
 ܡܠܟܗ <qtłh> [qaṭlāh] ‘he killed her’
 ܡܠܟܗ <qtłh> [qaṭleh] ‘he killed him’

This is not, however, what we were taught when we studied Syriac. We learned that only the feminine suffix takes a dot above. The masculine suffix does not take a dot at all. We learned to put a dot on ܡܠܟܗ [malkāh] and ܡܠܟܗ [qaṭlāh], but to leave the masculine forms [malkeh] and [qaṭleh] alone without a dot: ܡܠܟܗ without a dot is unambiguously [malkeh] and ܡܠܟܗ is unambiguously [qaṭleh].

The true story of this dot lies somewhere in between. Indeed, a few instances in a manuscript dated December 522 have ܒܗ <ḥ> such as:¹

ܒܗ <bḥ> [beh] ‘in it’
 ܠܗ <lh> [leh] ‘to it’

منه <mnh> [mneh] ‘from it’

But this practice does not seem to have persisted. Is it possible that the initial intention was to put a dot under masculine forms? It is indeed possible.

The existence of a few instances of the masculine suffix having a dot below raises another question. Is it possible that the original intention was not to distinguish [ā] in feminine [āh] from [e] in masculine [eh], but rather to mark [h] to be fully pronounced in feminine [āh] and silent in masculine [eh]? This would fit with the silent dot introduced in Chapter 6. Indeed, [h] in *both* suffixes is silent in the Received Pronunciation.

We also have to allow for the possibility of the dot having *two* functions: To distinguish between [ā] and [e] and to mark [h] as silent or pronounced. If so, this would be the only case where a dot has two functions, and this is quite unlikely. Regardless of the original intention, the masculine form lost its dot early on, and only the feminine suffix retained it. More importantly, along with the ى / ِ dots and *syāmē*, the ھ <ḥ> dot is now ensconced on the throne of obligatoriness. No editor today would think of intentionally omitting it from any text.²

There is still another possibility. The dot under ھ <ḥ> is a pause or punctuation dot. This is quite likely

𐩦𐩣𐩪𐩠 < wʔ^hnwh > [wʔa^hnūh]

and

𐩦𐩣𐩪 < ʔbwh > [ʔabūh].

The former is an object pronominal suffix; the latter is a possessive pronoun. (Note that 𐩦𐩣𐩪𐩠 < ʔwd^h > and 𐩦𐩣𐩪𐩠 < ʔpysh > are referring to masculine 𐩦𐩣𐩪𐩠 < ʔwbn^ʔ >.) This example clearly illustrates that in the late fifth century, the usage of 𐩦 < ʔ > was still in flux.

This feminine suffix dot on 𐩦 was expanded by analogy to forms where there is no homographic masculine counterpart. For example, we see the object pronominal suffix above in

𐩦𐩣𐩪𐩠𐩪𐩠 < wʔytywḥ > [wʔaytyūh]

‘and they brought her’

and

𐩦𐩣𐩪 < ʔlyh > [ʔlēh] ‘upon her’.

The masculine counterparts are not homographs:

𐩦𐩣𐩪𐩠𐩪𐩠 < wʔytywḥy > [wʔaytyūy]

‘and they brought him’

and

𐩦𐩣𐩪𐩠 < ʔlwhy > [ʔlaw] ‘upon him’,

respectively. The expansion by analogy also affected the possessive suffix. We now see

𐩦𐩣𐩪𐩠 < mlkyh > [malkeh] ‘her kings’

with a dot, although

𐩦𐩣𐩪𐩠 < mlkwhy > [malkaw] ‘his kings’

is not a homograph.

The dot of $\dot{\text{h}}$ <ḥ> shares an important feature with the dots of ḏ <d> and ṛ <r>. The dots on these letters are unambiguous and are understood without even writing a single word: ḏ is [d], ṛ is [r], and $\dot{\text{h}}$ is the feminine suffix, although how you read it would require a word attached to it. This clarity, however, cannot be said for the dot on ḥ <ḥ>. This dot is meaningless. It only makes sense when we have two pairs of words: مَلَكَةٌ <ḥmalk²> [malkā] and مَلِكَةٌ <ḥmelk²> [melkā]. The two words need not appear in the same sentence or the same text, but a pair does need to exist in the language.

Unlike the dots of ḏ <d> and ṛ <r>, however, the dot on $\dot{\text{h}}$ <ḥ> does not represent a phoneme; rather, it represents a morphological feature: 3rd person singular feminine suffix. This is not the first time that a dot has been used for a morphological purpose. The double dot *syāmē* is also morphological: it tells us that the word in question is plural. But in the case of the $\dot{\text{h}}$ <ḥ> dot, it is the first time a *single* dot is used for a morphological purpose. Think of it as the earliest instance of morphological tagging. This gave the Malphānē and scribes a powerful idea to exploit the dot further.

Tagging Dots

The most powerful, overloaded dot we have encountered thus far was the homograph disambiguation dot which was used to distinguish between homographic pairs like the perfect and active participle verbal forms such as

قتل <qtal> [qʰʔal] ‘he killed’

versus

قتل <qtal> [qāʔel] ‘he kills’

and between nouns like ملك [malkā] ‘king’ opposite
 ملء [melkā] ‘advice’.

We have already seen in Chapter 4 that the choice for placing the dots was not random. Rather, it was based on the quality of the *first* vowel of the word. The more open vowel, called by classical grammarians the *thicker* vowel, took a dot above. The less open vowel, called by classical grammarians the *thinner* vowel, took

a dot below. Recall that the order of vowels in terms of open versus closed is

ā
a
e / °

with [ā] being the most open. This is why [ā] always takes a dot above, while [e/°] always takes a dot below. The mid vowel [a] fluctuated in position. When compared with [ā] it takes a dot below, but when compared with [e/°] it takes a dot above.

Fifth century manuscripts already mark the [ā] of the active participle with a dot. We see the following examples in a manuscript dated April 473:¹

جَبَد <^ʔbd> [ʔābed] ‘he makes’
 اَمَر <^ʔmr> [ʔāmar] ‘he dwells’
 رَنَّي <rñ^ʔ> [rānē] ‘he thinks’

Why is the dot above?

Because the active participle is contrasted with the perfect which has the vowel [°], although the earliest examples of a sublinear dot that I have found are from the sixth century. In other words, corresponding perfect verbs, if dotted, would be

جَبَد <^ʔbd> [ʔ^obad] ‘he made’
 اَمَر <^ʔmr> [ʔ^omar] ‘he dwelled’
 رَنَّي <rñ^ʔ> [r^onā] ‘he thought’

Another case of verbal homographs is found in participles with the prefix מ <m>. The following forms are from a sixth century manuscripts:²

מחבול <mḥbl> [methabal] ‘ruined’

מביא <mībyn> [maytēn] ‘they bring’

מפקד <mpqd> [mpaqed] ‘he orders’

With time, scribes began to think of the dots differently. The end result was exactly the same, but the interpretation of why a dot takes a certain position changed, especially when [a] was involved because its position fluctuated. For instance, in the case of perfect קטל [q^ətal] versus active participle קֹטֵל [qāṭel], scribes no longer thought of the dots as distinguishing [°] from [ā]. They thought of the dots as distinguishing the perfect from the active participle. The dot on מפקד <mpqd> was now thought of as an active participle dot. Hence, scribes began to think of the dots as marking morphological features.

The verbal string כתבת <ktbt> was also a challenge. It had *three* readings as we saw earlier: singular 2nd feminine [ketbat], 2nd masculine [k^ətabt] and 1st common [ketbet]. How can one distinguish them from each other? Initially, there were no dots at all. We see in a manuscript dated April 473 the phrase:³

מרת קרת דינא
<hy dyn kprt w²mrt>

[hī dēn keprat w'emrat]
 'she then denied and said'

Presumably, the context was quite clear because of the pronoun ,ܐ <hy> 'she' and the wider context as well.

By the eighth century, the feminine form took a dot above the final ܐ <t>. Here are some examples from a manuscript dated September 736:

ܫܬܩܗܬܐ <ʔštkḥī> [ʔeštakḥat] 'she was found'

ܫܬܘܘܩܬܐ <ʔtzyʕī> [ʔettziʕat] 'she was moved'

ܘܢܦܩܐ <wnpqī> [wnepqat] 'she went out'

The single dot, however, was not sufficient to disambiguate the 3-way homograph. Later, scribes came up with three dot positions: the singular 3rd feminine form took a dot after the suffix as in ܫܬܩܬܐ <ktbt̄> in west Syriac, while east Syriac designated this form with two dots under the final consonant as in ܫܬܩܬܐ <ktbt̄̄>. The 2nd masculine form took a dot under as in ܫܬܩܬܐ <ktbt̄> by analogy with ܩܬܐ <ktb̄>. Finally, the 1st person took a dot above as in ܫܬܩܬܐ <ktbt̄̄̄>.

The imperfect ܩܬܐ was also problematic as it could be a singular 3rd masculine form, or a plural 1st person. Note that in this case it is a homophone as well: [nektüb]. The scribes put a dot under for the 3rd person ܩܬܐ <n̄ktwb̄>, and a dot above for the 1st person ܩܬܐ <n̄ktwb̄̄̄>. Here too the choice was not random but based on analogy. The dot above was analogous to

the perfect 1st person ܟܬܒܬ <ktbt> [ketbet]. The analogy is not phonological; rather, it is morphological (1st person).

Remember the dot on ܚܘܘܐ <hw[?]> [hwā] versus its enclitic ܚܘܘܐ <ḥw[?]> [wā] from Chapter 6? The dot on ܚܘܘܐ is ambiguous as it can stand for the active participle [hāwē]. We find a nice example from a manuscript dated April 528 that combines the morphological dot with the silent dot:⁴

ܚܘܘܐ ܚܘܘܐ <ḥw[?] ḥw[?]> [hāwē wā] ‘had become’

The first dot is the active participle dot. The second dot is the silent dot.



This does not mean that from now on scribes began to mark all instances of verbs. Each scribe had his own unique style of pointing. If the scribe thought the text was clear, the verb was left dotless.

Sometimes we encounter dots that do not seem to play any morphological function at all. Indeed, these are not verbal dots. They belong to another breed of dots that frequently—especially in post eleventh century west Syriac manuscripts—are written in red ink.

Red Dots

By the end of the sixth century, Malphānē and scribes faced yet another challenge. This time, the new challenge had to do neither with disambiguation between word pairs nor with morphological tagging. The new problem had to do with how to pronounce certain consonants—six to be exact. First, let's describe the linguistic problem.

Since ancient times, probably as far back as the sixth century B.C. according to one prominent Aramaist, six of the Aramaic consonants began to have double pronunciation, one plosive and one fricative.¹ For example, the letter ܒ began to have two sounds: plosive [b] and fricative [v]. The letter ܦ <p> was either plosive [p] or fricative [f]. If this is the first time that you have come across the terms *plosive* and *fricative*, here is an explanation.

A plosive sound is produced by first making a complete closure somewhere in the vocal tract. This closure causes air pressure to build up behind the closure. It is then released *explosively*. Say [b]. First, you create a closure at the lips. You then build up air pressure behind the lips. Once you open your mouth, the sound [b] comes out. In contrast, when saying a fricative, the vocal organs come very close together but they allow a movement of air between them. Say [v]. Your upper teeth come close to the lower lip, but the air is continuously flowing causing audible *friction*.

The six Syriac letters affected by this phenomenon are shown in the table below:

Consonant	Plosive	Fricative
Beth ܒ	[b]	[v]
Gāmal ܓ	[g]	[ʒ] as French <i>r</i> in <i>Paris</i>
Dālath ܕ	[d]	[ð] as <i>th</i> in English <i>that</i>
Kāph ܟ	[k]	[χ] as Scottish <i>loch</i>
Pe ܦ	[p]	[f]
Taw ܬ	[t]	[θ] as <i>th</i> in English <i>thin</i>

These letters are known collectively as the *bgdkpt* letters, or using the mnemonic to make it easier to say, the *bgādkpāt* letters.



When do you pronounce these particular letters as plosive and when fricative?

In ancient times, there was one simple rule: after a consonant they were plosive, and after a vowel they were fricative. Very simple indeed. For example, in

𐤎𐤌𐤍𐤔𐤕 <mlkwt²> [malkūθā] ‘kingdom’

The 𐤎 is plosive, [k], because it comes after the consonant [l]. The 𐤌 is a fricative, [θ], because it comes after the vowel [ū] (the 𐤍 <w> is part of the vowel). Because the rule was so simple, there was no reason to orthographically distinguish plosive from fricative sounds. By the late sixth or early seventh century A.D, however, things had changed.

If you were born around that time and your Mhagyānā (the Malphānā teaching you how to read) asked you to apply the rule on the word

𐤌𐤕𐤁 <ktb²> ‘book’

you would say to yourself, “well, 𐤌 follows the consonant [k] so I am going to pronounce it as a plosive [t], but 𐤁 is after the vowel [ā] so I am going to say it as a fricative [v].” You stand in your classroom and raise your voice confidently saying “[ktāvā].” All of a sudden,

your Malphānā, who had been so very proud of you, gives you a look of disapproval. “No,” he shouts “[kθāwā]” stressing the [θ], “write it down 100 times on the *lūhā!*”

What had happened?

Long before you were born (remember, you are living in the sixth century A.D.), in fact sometimes between the third century B.C. and the third century A.D., a sound shift took place in all Aramaic dialects including Syriac. Linguists do not have a dramatic name for this change, like the *Great Vowel Shift* in English. Let’s be dramatic and give it a descriptive name: The *Short Vowel Deletion*. As its name implies, short vowels were lost in Aramaic, but not all short vowels. Only those *short vowels* that occurred in unstressed *open syllables*. Let’s take a small detour and talk a bit about short vowels and open syllables.



There are seven vowels in Syriac. Remember, we are still in the sixth century and we have no way of indicating vowels apart from the single diacritical dot. So we will represent them in transcription as well in the following table:

Vowel	Example
Ptāhā [a]	ܐܳܘ [haw] ‘that’ (masc.)

Zqāpā	[ā]	ܘܢ	[hāy]	‘that’ (fem.)
Rbāṣā	[e]	ܡܠܟܐ	[melkā]	‘advice’
Long Rbāṣā	[ē]	ܡܠܟܐܐ	[dēbā]	‘wolf’
Ḥbāṣā	[ī]	ܒܝܫܐ	[bišā]	‘evil’
ṣaṣā	[ū]	ܢܘܢܐ	[nūnā]	‘fish’
Rwāḥā	[o]	ܩܕܫܐ	[qdoš]	‘holy’

Did you notice that some of these vowels are transcribed with a macron, a supralinear line? These are the long vowels. The vowels without a macron are the *short* vowels. These are [a], [e], and [o].

Let’s now talk about syllables. An open syllable consists of a consonant (C) and a vowel (V), designated by the sequence CV. For example, the Syriac negation

ܘܠ <l’> [lā] ‘not’

consists of an open syllable. (When determining syllables, it is easier to look at the transcription [lā] rather than the Syriac orthographic representation.) A closed syllable consists of the sequence CVC. The preposition

ܘܠ <’l’> [’al] ‘on’

is a closed syllable. The word

ܡܪܢܐ <mrn> [māran] ‘our Lord’

has two syllables, *mā-ran*. The first is open and the second is closed. (Syllables in Syriac must start with a consonant.)

We said that the *Short Vowel Deletion* caused short vowels to be deleted in open syllables. Let’s revisit the

word כּטבָּ ‘book’ which caused your embarrassment with the Malphānā. Before the *Short Vowel Deletion*, it used to be pronounced [ketābā] or [kitābā] (we don’t know the precise quality of the first vowel). We know that there was a vowel after the [k] by comparing this word with other Semitic languages, e.g. Arabic *kitāb*. Also, we know that Semitic languages do not start a word with a consonant cluster; i.e. with two consecutive consonants. This is why Semiticists hypothesise that the word כּטבָּ was pronounced [ketābā] with an [e] vowel after the [k] (or maybe [kʰtābā] with a shorter vowel, but a vowel nonetheless).

Let’s go back to our *bgādkpāt* rule: after a consonant plosive, and after a vowel fricative. Applying the rule to כּטבָּ [ketābā], the כּ <t> becomes [θ] because it occurs after the vowel [e] and the ט becomes [v] because it occurs after the vowel [ā]. The result is [keθāvā]. But when the *Short Vowel Deletion* was established in Aramaic-speaking lands, the [e] was deleted.

Let’s go over the process slowly. First, divide up the word into syllables: [ke-θā-vā]; i.e. three open syllables. The *Short Vowel Deletion* causes the short vowel [e] to be deleted because it is in an open syllable. The two instances of the vowel [ā] are retained because they are long and the deletion rule only applies to short vowels.

The result is [kθāvā]. The *order* in which the rules are applied is important. The *bgādkpāt* rule is applied first, and *then* vowel deletion.

The order of the rules is important not only in providing a correct result, but also because it explains what may have actually happened. Fricatization—that is the changing of the sound from plosive to fricative—must have been originally productive. (In linguistics, ‘productive’ means that the rule was alive and caused the sound change when the rule was triggered.) At some point in history, it seems that the *bgādkpāt* sounds became fossilized; i.e. they stopped changing. Whatever was plosive remained plosive and whatever was fricative remained fricative. When the *Short Vowel Deletion* affected Aramaic, the fossilization had already taken place.²



Now back to you and your Malphānā. He explains to you the history of the *Short Vowel Deletion* and convinces you to always assume that there was an old vowel that was deleted whenever you see a word starting with two consonants. You then prove to your Malphānā that you understand everything. You recite Psalm 92:1–2:³

.כִּי יִשְׁרָאֵל אֱלֹהֵינוּ
 .כִּי יִשְׁרָאֵל אֱלֹהֵינוּ

“Go to the window and look outside,” your Malphānā commands. You follow the order and gaze at the vast fields surrounding your school. You are puzzled.

“Do you see the School of Nisibis?” he asks you disapprovingly.

“No Malphānā,” you reply “we are in Qenneshrin.”

Ah! Now you get it! Your friends further east say the word ܠܗܘܢ differently. Firstly, instead of a long [ū], they say a short [u]. Secondly, they double the ܗ <t> saying [ħuttāmā]. You are smart enough to recognize that the double [t] remains plosive. Now, you smile and say to your Malphānā “[ħūtāmā]”. No [θ]. Your Malphānā now shows you a smile. He asks you to sit down. You are off the hook.

In fact, you are lucky. Can you imagine if your Malphānā had asked you to sound the word

ܠܗܘܢ <dhb[?]> ‘gold’?

Yes, it is syllabified [dah-bā]: no short vowels in open syllables and no consonant clusters to indicate an earlier vowel that may have gotten deleted before you were born! But the [b] in this case is not plosive as you may expect; rather, it is a fricative [v]: [dahvā]. Why?

Comparing the word to other Semitic languages, we know that it must have been [da-ha-bā] in former times. It is *zahav* in Hebrew and *dahab* in Arabic, both with a

short [a] after [h]. Since [b] used to be after an [a] in former times, it became a fricative [v]: [dahvā].

But wait a minute. In the original [da-ha-bā], there are *two* short vowels and *both* are in open syllables. Which one to delete?

The *Short Vowel Deletion* is actually more specific than what I have described before. It applies *backwards* from the end of the word! Hence, you have to find the *last* short vowel in an open syllable and delete it first. Applying the rule on [da-ha-vā] yields [dah-vā] with the [v] intact. The same process applies to the word هالفة [ḥalvā] ‘milk’.



As you can see, the pronunciation had already changed in two ways: The *Short Vowel Deletion*, and in regions west of the Euphrates the loss of doubling. However, the *bgādkpāt* rule remained fossilized, oblivious to these changes. The rule was no longer productive. This obviously began to cause problems for readers and by the sixth century it seems that the situation was intolerable.

The Malphānē and scribes looked for a device to indicate if a sound was plosive or fricative. Surprise, surprise. They used the dot again!

As we saw earlier in the case of vowels, they decided to mark what they called a *thick* vowel with a dot above and a *thin* vowel with a dot below. They looked at the consonants and thought of the plosive versions as *hard* and the fricative versions as *soft*. They followed their logic and decided to put a dot above the *hard* (plosive) sounds, and a dot below the *soft* (fricative) sounds. This is how we ended up with:

𐤀𐤁𐤃 < kṭḅ[?] > [kθāvā] ‘book’

𐤀𐤁𐤃𐤀 < ḥwīm[?] > [ḥūtāmā] ‘concluding’

𐤀𐤁𐤃𐤀 < dhḅ[?] > [dahvā] ‘gold’

𐤀𐤁𐤃 < ḥlḅ[?] > [ḥalvā] ‘milk’

By the eleventh century, some scribes, especially those living west of the Euphrates, saw that there were far too many dots on words. If the word had the plural double dot *syāmē* and, say, a homograph disambiguation dot, then adding *bgādkpāt* would overcrowd the word. To distinguish dot types, the scribes—again those living west of the Euphrates—used red ink for *bgādkpāt* dots. Nineteenth century grammarians used little circles in printing to indicate the red dots as in

𐤀𐤁𐤃 < kṭḅ[?] > [kθāvā] ‘book’.



Of course, having more than one dot on a word is indeed confusing and in reality one does not usually encounter many dots on a single word apart from spe-

cial types of text: either grammatical works or manuscripts of the genre called the *Mashlmānutho* ‘tradition’ (the so-called ‘masora’).⁴ The latter are manuscripts that have extracts of difficult phrases from the Scriptures or the writings of the Church fathers marked with many dots.

But this does not mean that normal texts did not begin to have more than one dot on a single word early on. A problem arose when scribes wanted to distinguish three-way or four-way homographs from each other. So far, we have seen two-way homographs like مَلَك <mlk^ʔ> [malkā] and مَلِك <mlk^ʔ> [melkā]. But how about the string آت <ʔt^ʔ>? As a verb, it can be past tense [ʔetā] ‘he came’, present tense [ʔātē] ‘he is coming’, or an imperfect 1st person [ʔitē] ‘I shall come’. As a noun, it can be [ʔātā] ‘sign’. The scribes needed a new solution.

A Pair of Dots

Clearly if one had to distinguish three-way homographs—say the string ⲗⲏⲗ <?t?>: [ʔetā] ‘he came’, [ʔātē] ‘he is coming’, and [ʔātā] ‘sign’—then a single dot would not suffice. The single dot can at best distinguish between two forms only. For example, the scribe of a manuscript dated April 473 had no way to distinguish [ʔātā] ‘sign’ from [ʔātē] ‘he comes’ which occur on the same page.¹

We have already seen the quote from the grammarian Jacob of Edessa (d. 708) regarding the homograph dot back in Chapter 4. That was just the beginning of the quote. Here it is now in full:

When a word is thick or broad in vowel sound, it takes a dot above; when it is fine or thin, it takes a dot below. If it is medium, between fine and thick,

and there are two other words similar to it in spelling, it takes two dots, one above and one below.

In other words, Jacob tells us to apply the two-way homograph dots as we have already done:

𐤀𐤁𐤀 <[?]t[?]> [ʔātē] ‘he comes’

and

𐤀𐤁𐤀 <[?]t[?]> [ʔetā] ‘he came’.

Remember that open [ā] takes the dot above, while closed [e] takes it below. Now, the third member of the three-way homographs takes *two* dots, a dot above and a dot below: 𐤀𐤁𐤀 <[?]t[?]> [ʔātā] ‘sign’. Since the invention of *syāmē*, this is the first time that we encounter a sign that consists of *two* dots.

But we must be careful. As I mentioned in the Preface, what grammarians say about dots does not always match what we find in manuscripts. Grammarians are prescriptive; they want to tell us how to do things. The single dot is indeed attested with this string in sixth century manuscripts. For example, a manuscript dated July 548, exactly 160 years prior to the death of our grammarian, has 𐤀𐤁𐤀 <[?]t[?]> for the active participle [ʔātē].² Another manuscript, dated April 564, gives 𐤀𐤁𐤀 <[?]t[?]> for the perfect [ʔetā].³

How about the noun [ātā] ‘sign’? As per Jacob’s description, we expect two points: one above and another

below. But that is not what we find in the July 548 manuscript. Instead we find one dot, but in a peculiar position:⁴

ⲛⲁⲛ <[?]t[?]>

Note where the dot is located, between ⲁ <t> and ⲛ <[?]>. There are two extraordinary things about this dot. Firstly, it is the first dot that appears between two letters, neither above nor below the line but vertically between the base line and the ascender of ⲁ <t>. Today, using terminology from typography, we would say that the dot is near the ‘x-height’ of ⲁ <t>. Secondly, the position of this dot still persists today. I have a video where a scribe shows how he puts the dot exactly in the same position for this same string.



Back to Jacob’s system. Which member of the set is to take the two points? Jacob of Edessa does not provide a clue in his grammar. He talks of a *medium* sound which is hard to interpret. We can, however, deduce the answer from the above example, as well as other examples from manuscripts. Here too, our scribes had a good system. It is the item that belongs to a *different* grammatical category that takes the two dots (or in the above case the dot between the letters). In the case of ⲛⲁⲛ <[?]t[?]>, both ⲛⲁⲛ <[?]t[?]> [[?]ātē] and ⲛⲁⲛ <[?]t[?]> [[?]etā]

are *verbs* and are distinguished by the single dot. The two dots are reserved for the *noun* ܐܬܐ <[?]t[?]> [ʔātā]. Note that the two dots on ܐܬܐ <[?]t[?]> act as one unit. Either one of them is meaningless on its own.

Do you remember the dots on ܐܢܐ ܐܢܐ <[?]n[?] ʔn[?]> from Chapter 6? This was the silent dot. The dot above indicates that one ought to pronounce the ܐ <[?]>, while the dot below marks it silent: [ʔenā nā]. These silent dots should not be confused with Jacob’s double dots on ܐܬܐ <[?]t[?]> ‘sign’, although by mere coincidence the silent interpretation works here as well.

Modern west Syriac scribes follow a slightly different convention to mark the various readings of ܐܬܐ <[?]t[?]>, including the imperfect [ʔitē] ‘I shall come’:

ܐܬܐ <[?]t[?]> [ʔetā] ‘he comes’

ܐܬܐ <[?]t[?]> [ʔātē] ‘he comes’

ܐܬܐ <[?]t[?]> [ʔitē] ‘I shall come’

ܐܬܐ <[?]t[?]> [ʔātā] ‘sign’

Recall that the dot for [ʔātā] ‘sign’ appears as early as the July 548 manuscript discussed above. This convention practiced by modern scribes is attested as early as the tenth century. In fact, many Mašlmānūtho manuscripts used the ܐܬܐ <[?]t[?]> as an illustration.⁵

East Syriac has a different convention for the word ‘sign’. It is marked by two dots under ܐ ̣ <ṯ̣> as in ܐܘܪܐܝܢ <ʔṯ̣ʔ>.



Even before Jacob’s time, scribes had figured out that they could use two dots on one word. From the sixth century onward, we begin to see pairs of dots in words that have two vowels, usually [a] and [e] such as:⁶

ܡܘܥܝܢ <ṁpn̄ʔ> [mapnē] ‘he returns’

ܡܘܥܝܢ <ṁḥʔ> [maḥē] ‘he makes live’

The first dot does not stand for [a], nor does the second dot for [e]. The pair of dots work together to indicate an [a-e] vocalization sequence which usually occurs in participles of P^cal and Pa^cel verbs. We even begin to see it on P^cal participles of verbs whose roots end in ܐ <ʔ> as in

ܫܘܘܢ <šwʔ> [šwē] ‘equal’.

These dots are still in common use today especially in the case of ܐ-ending verbs.

Two vowels, two dots... Hmm! Why not assign each vowel its own unique dots?

Vowel Dots

Just prior to the seventh century, we find in ancient manuscripts traces of a double dot sign, but unlike the two dots on

رَجَعُ <ṛpṇ̣ṇ̣> [mapnē] ‘he returns’

which we have just encountered in the previous chapter, the pair of dots now mark *one* vowel. The dots act as *one* unit as well. This is quite a departure from all previous dots. The first such double dot that we encounter prior to the seventh century is ڤ for the vowel [a]. It is found on the word

،شَرِي <ṣ̌ry> [šari] ‘he began’.

To emphasize the importance of this new *invention*, allow me to reiterate. The double dot ڤ is not used to distinguish a homographic pair, nor is it to mark a specific morphological feature. It is not something that ap-

plies to an entire word like *syāmē*. The double dot ◌◌ is now a vowel sign, unique only to [a]. It is a *segmental* sign.

In linguistics, and more specifically in phonology, each sound in the language is called a *segment*. In English, each letter of the alphabet is a segment. In Syriac, only consonantal segments have letters, as well as (mostly) long vowels. Short vowels, which are still phonological segments, had hitherto rarely been written with an unambiguous sign. Now, the double dot ◌◌ would represent the segment [a] the same way the English letter *a* represents an English segment. The only difference is that writing down ◌◌ [a] in Syriac is optional while in English it is obligatory. Hence, the two dots are *one* and *only one* symbol and represent *one* vowel. They go hand in hand.

Also note that this is the first time—and would be the only time—where a symbol has two dots bound to a single base graph one of which is placed above and the other below the line. This remarkable development was so widely accepted that the symbol survives as *the* sign for [a] until the modern day in both east and west Syriac circles.

This marks the beginning of a process that would eventually define for each vowel its own unique dots. The process would take some time.



The next double dot to appear on the scene, some-time after the seventh century, was ِ for the vowel [e], i.e. two dots under the line. It appears early under the word

دِهَل <dhl> [ḍhel] ‘he was afraid’.

The next development, which seemed logical to scribes, was to mark each vowel independently. Now, we begin to see words like

سَكَل <skl> [sakeɫ] ‘he taught’.

That is, one word with two vowel signs, each of which consisted of two dots. Now, if you wanted to fully vocalize the word مَظَنَ [mapnē], you could write it like this: مَظَنَ <ṡpṡṡ?> with each vowel having its own dots.

Sometime during the eighth century, a new vowel sign appeared, again in the form of two dots, but now the dots were *slanted* and one dot was higher than the other. This double dot mark was above the line and indicated the vowel [ā] as in

قَامَ <qām> [qām] ‘he rose’.

During the same period, another slanted double dot symbol appeared for the vowel [ē] but was placed under the line as in

ﻟﻪ <لِه> [lēh] ‘to him’.

(Due to typographical constraints, I could not represent the two slanted supralinear dots in the transliteration and have instead resorted to two vertical dots. At any rate, some manuscripts indeed use vertical dots instead.)



We must ask ourselves: why was َ placed above the word, while ِ and ٍ were placed under?

Our single diacritical dot gives us the clue to the answer. Recall that when the fifth century scribes wanted to distinguish homographs that differed in [ā] versus [e], they placed a dot above for [ā] and a dot below for [e] as in ﺗﻪﺑﺎﺏ [tābā] versus ﺗﻪﺑﺎﺏ [tebā]. There was no need to change the system. This is why َ ended up above and ِ and ٍ below. Now we can write these words as ﺗﻪﺑﺎﺏ <ṭāb̄> and ﺗﻪﺑﺎﺏ <ṭeb̄>, respectively (remember that one dot under ṭ in the transcription is part of the letter).

Is there a reason why the marks for [a] and [e] developed almost a century before the marks for [ā]? It was probably because [a] and [e] had hardly any orthographic representation, while [ā] was already represented by ﻛ <ḳ>, at least at the end of words, as in

ﻛﺘﺎﺏ <ktb̄> [ktābā] ‘book’.



By now, four of our seven vowels have their own unambiguous signs:

◌◌̣ for [a]

◌◌̣̄ for [ā]

◌◌̣̇ for [e]

◌◌̣̇̄ for [ē]

These are vowels that were not represented by letters (apart from the ◌̣̄ <ʾ> that marked final [ā] and [ē] in words like ◌̣̄◌̣̄◌̣̄ [ktābā] ‘book’ and its plural ◌̣̄◌̣̄◌̣̄ [ktābē]). The remaining three vowels are [i], [o] and [ū]. These were always represented by a *matres lectionis*, the letters ◌̣ <w> and ◌̣̄ <y>. For example, the [i] in [bišā] ‘evil’ is indicated by ◌̣̄ <y> in ◌̣̄◌̣̄◌̣̄ <byšʾ>. So are [o] and [ū] in

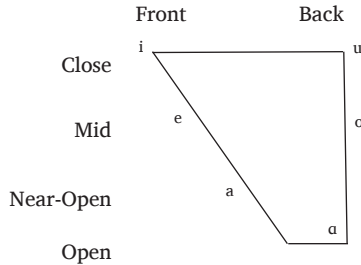
◌̣̄◌̣̄◌̣̄◌̣̄◌̣̄◌̣̄ <qd̄wš qwdš̄yn> [qdoš qūdš̄in]

‘Holy of Holies’

The scribes wanted to mark these vowels with their own dots as well, or maybe they wanted to indicate when ◌̣̄ <y> and ◌̣̄ <w> acted as *matres lectionis* instead of consonants. They resorted to the single dot: ◌̣̄̇ for [i], ◌̣̄̇̇ for [o] and ◌̣̄̇̇̇ for [ū]. Now, we can write ◌̣̄̇̇̇◌̣̄̇̇̇◌̣̄̇̇̇◌̣̄̇̇̇ <qd̄wš qwdš̄yn>.

Again, let us ask: why a dot above the ◌̣̄ <w> for [o] and a dot below for [ū]?

We have seen earlier that open vowels take a dot above, while closed vowels take a dot under. Our ancient grammarians thought of vowels as thick and thin which seem to correspond to our categorization of open and closed, respectively. The choice does not seem to be random. The Malphānē and scribes thought that [o] was thicker than [ū]. The vowels are shown below in the vowel chart. Indeed, [o] is more open than [ū].



We have seen earlier how homographs like

ⲁⲥⲱ <ḥw> [haw] ‘that’

and

ⲁⲥⲱ̄ <ḥw̄> [hū] ‘he’

were distinguished by a dot. Similarly, homographs like

ⲁⲥⲱ̄̇ <ḥȳ> [hāy] ‘that’

and

،هـ <hy> [hī] ‘she’

were distinguished by the single dot. Is it possible that bit by bit, the dots under the line came to be associated with the vowels [ū] and [ī] when used with ا <w> and هـ <y>, respectively? Certainly, this could have been the source of these dots.

At any rate, a full vocalization system came to exist by the eighth century. Now, each vowel sound had its own unique symbol as the following table shows:

1. ◌◌ for [a].
2. ◌◌ for [ā].
3. ◌◌ for [e].
4. ◌◌ for [ē].
5. ◌◌ for [ī].
6. ◌◌ for [o].
7. ◌◌ for [ū].

Note that before this time, a dot or double dot symbol had no meaning on its own: ◌◌ and ◌◌ do not mean anything when devoid of consonants. They have to be on a word to allow us to figure out their meaning. We may even need a larger context to understand what the dots mean. The only exceptions are the dots on د <d> and ر <r> and the suffix هـ <h> dot. The function of

these dots is known without any context, although the base graph is required.

Not so in the case of the vowel dots. Theoretically, one does not even need the base graph, although this never happens in real texts. The dots on their own, without a base graph, are indicative of the vowels they represent: ܐ̣ is [a], ܐ̣̄ is [ā], ܐ̣̆ is [e], and ܐ̣̇ is [ē]. You can put each one of them on a sheet of paper by itself and the reader will still know what they are. This was a major departure from all of the previous dots that required a consonantal context in order to make sense, (apart from *syāmē* of course which is unambiguous).



The fully dotted vocalization system persists until today. All Syriac grammars mislead the student to think that the dotted system is exclusive to east Syriac, while west Syriac only uses the ‘Greek’ vowels: ܐ̣̇ for [a], ܐ̣̇̄ for [o], ܐ̣̇̆ for [e], ܐ̣̇̆̄ for [i], and ܐ̣̇̇ for [ū]. While it is true that the ‘Greek’ vowels are exclusively west Syriac, the dotted system survives in *both* east and west Syriac on an equal footing. You can see it used extensively in twenty-first century manuscripts.

It is also true that the distinction between ܐ̣ and ܐ̣̇ is phonologically lost in west Syriac. Yet, west Syriac scribes religiously maintain the distinction between

these sounds in the orthography. When in doubt, modern west Syriac scribes go out of their way to consult the lexica of Audo and Manna,¹ two east Syriac lexicographers, to determine if a word with \aleph <w> takes a dot above or below.



Throughout this book we have encountered many dots, but all of them had a specific linguistic function that affected the *segmental* value of the word; i.e. how it is pronounced, which in turn affected the meaning of the word. The dots on \aleph <d> and \imath <r> turn these letters into independent segmental signs. The plural *syāmē* dot affects pronunciation and hence the meaning of the word; so does the ω <ḥ> suffix dot. The disambiguation dots guide the reader to choose the correct word and hence the sense changes. The *bgādkpāt* dots affect the sound and in many cases the meaning. All these dots have a linguistic function. The Syriac dot, however, was not content with all of these textual functions. It was willing to be used for paratextual purposes as well.

Punctuation Dots

Our first instinct when we think of a dot is its usage as a punctuation mark, the *period* or what is called in Britain the *full stop*. Indeed, Syriac scribes did use the dot as a period to break long phrases or to mark the end of a sentence as early as the fifth century.

Already by the time of the 411 manuscript, scribes used a single dot on or near the baseline to mark a pause in reading. Visually, this mark is similar to our modern *period* or *full stop*. It differed from it, however, in that it did not always mark the end of a full sentence or phrase systematically. (Pre-modern texts in virtually all languages did not mark punctuation consistently. English punctuation did not become standard and unified until the nineteenth century.)

Back to dots. Unlike our modern punctuation dots which are linear (i.e. they appear on the base line on their own), the single punctuation dot in Syriac can take various positions. Indeed, it can be on the line as indicated in the above example. But it can also be above or below the final letter of a word. This can cause confusion if the last letter is a ܚ <h>. Is it a dot for a feminine suffix or is it a punctuation dot? Usually the context can help, but quite often it is difficult to know the function of such dots—at least for me! We have seen a confusing example when we discussed the dots below ܚ <h> in Chapter 8. When providing examples for this book, I avoided many such dots because I myself was not sure of the function of the dot.



As time went by, a double-dot punctuation mark—similar to our colon <:> in shape but closer to our comma <,> in function—was used to mark even smaller phrases. We find this double dot in sixth century manuscripts.

The double-dot punctuation mark took various shapes: straight like our colon <:>, and oblique like <.:> and <.:>. The double-dot was sometimes exactly on the baseline, but sometimes above it or below it. It

varied from hand to hand and sometimes within the same manuscript.

Around the eighth century, the double-dot occasionally became a triple-dot <⋮> although this remains rare and mostly appears in late liturgical manuscripts. As time passed, the double- and triple-dot mark becomes more ornamental. In the case of the former, the bottom dot may be in black and the top dot in red. In the case of the triple-dot, the middle dot might be in red and the other two dots in black.¹

The end of a major section of a book was marked by a variety of signs: a four-dot mark like <❖ :: ❖> or a dotted cross like <✱>, or a little circle <o>, or even a sequence of such symbols. For instance, we see in a manuscript dated April 564 the sequence:²

❖ . ❖ .

at the end of a section. We also see the sequence³

• • • •

ending another section. Another manuscript, written before July 576, uses four consecutive dots,, to end a paragraph.⁴


The four dots were also used aesthetically with titles and rubrics. Here is an example of a title from a sixth century manuscript:⁵

❖ ωαλεσσου ρουαυ ❖

In this particular case, the two horizontal dots are in red and the two vertical ones in black.




Today, in English, punctuation marks include the question mark <?>. Syriac is in fact the first language in which the most ancient question mark appears, and this recently made international news.

On Friday, July 22, 2011 the London-based *Guardian* newspaper published a sensational article titled ‘Cambridge University believes to have found world’s first question mark’. It was reported that the question mark in question was in the form of a vertical double dot called *zawgā* ‘*elāyā* or  in Syriac. The Syriac scholar in question upon whose research the article was based is Dr. Chip Coakley.

The name of the double dot is descriptive: *zawgā* means ‘double’ or ‘pair’ and ‘*elāyā* means ‘upper’; i.e. the upper pair. It was given this name because the double dot was placed *above* the line as in the following example (Matthew 27:13):⁶



Do you not hear how they are testifying against you?

The vertical dots appear on the third word  <?nt>. Also note that the question ends with another pair of dots called *taḥtāyā* ‘lower dots’, usually oblique,

at the end of the phrase, .حلبب <ʿlyḵ.>. The two pairs work hand-in-hand. They are typically used with yes-or-no questions.

The *zawgā* *ʿelāyā* and *taḥtāyā* dots belong to another genre of dots, in fact the most complex of all known Syriac dots. Their purpose was to help read texts, especially biblical texts, correctly or at least with their own received tradition.

Reading Dots

The question mark pair we encountered in the previous chapter—*zawgā* ‘*elāyā* and *taḥtāyā*—are not an isolated case. They are two of a few dozen prosodic marks (also called accent marks). There was a dot to prolong reading a word; another to mark a short pause but with rising intonation. There was a dot to denote a demonstrative or an interjection; another to mark an interrogative. Some marks consisted of single dots, while others of double or triple dots. Some dots were placed above the lines, others below the line, while another sat on the line. Some dots were small, others large. J. B. Segal (1912–2003), a scholar who studied the dots extensively, expressed this complexity in his book *The Diacritical Point in Syriac*:¹

The reader of the average Syriac manuscript or book is confronted with a bewildering profusion of points.

They are large, of medium size and small, arranged singly or in twos and threes, placed above the word, below it, or upon the line... As the written language became more extensively used so these orthographic signs had become more frequent and varied.

As the saying goes, *too much of a good thing is bad*. The multitude of dot types, their position with respect to the line, and their size, combined with scribal errors in transmitting them from one exemplar manuscript to the next, resulted in a very confused state of affairs. Differences that developed later between the east and west Syriac traditions did not help to clarify matters. Already in the thirteenth century, the polymath Gregory Bar ʿEbroyo (d. 1286) wrote frustratingly,

The Malphānē said that the accent marks in the Holy Books are beyond human comprehension; they have been inspired by the Holy Spirit!

To get a taste of these dots, let's consider a few of them with some examples. As it is easier to give the examples fully vocalized, I shall switch now to the Serto script.

One such mark is called the *Mḥawyānā* 'demonstrator'. It consists of a dot above a word. As its name implies, it is placed above a demonstrative pronoun. For example, it is placed on

هَذَا هُوَ الَّذِي قُلْتُ أَنَّهُ آتٍ

This is the one about whom I said, “he is coming after me” (Jn 1:30)

The purpose of the dot is not simply to tell the reader that هَذَا <ḥnw> is a demonstrative pronoun. The reader probably already knows that. The purpose is to tell the reader to read the demonstrative pronoun with rising intonation and stress: “*This* is the one about whom I said...”.

There is another mark called the *Mdamrānā* ‘amazement’. It consists of two dots, like our colon, above a word to express wonderment, surprise, or dismay. It appears in the phrase

أَنصَلَ يَهْدَى

How did the mighty fell! (2 Sam. 1:19)

Here too, the position above the word أَنصَلَ <ʔyknʔ> is to indicate rising intonation. It is somewhat equivalent to our exclamation mark (!).

Another double-dot mark above the line is the *Rāḥṭā* ‘runner’. Unlike the previous mark where the two dots were vertical, like a colon, this mark has the dots in a horizontal position. It is placed between two words that are supposed to be read together without a pause—as if one is running as the mark’s name suggests. An example is found in this phrase:

مُحَمَّدٌ يَا مُنْتَهَى الْعَالَمِينَ. فَتَسْبِّحُوهُ فَكُلُّهُنَّ
أُمَّةً

‘Praise the Lord, all you nations.
Praise him, all peoples.’ (Ps. 116/117:1)

Here, $\text{حَلِكُو} \dots \text{عَتَمًا}$ <klkwn^ˆˆm^ˆ> should be read together *without* any pause. The same applies to $\text{كَلْحَمَّ} \dots \text{عَتَمًا}$ <klhyn^ˆˆmwt^ˆ> (the dots on <m̄> are the *syāmē* plural marker). The dots have nothing to do with intonation.

Yet another double-dot mark which looks exactly like *Rāhtā* is found in early manuscripts to indicate a vocative. It occurs a few times in the text of the New Testament; e.g. in Jn 9:38 we read:

هُوَ قَدْ آمَنَ بِرَبِّي. وَأَنَا مُنْتَهَى الْعَالَمِينَ. فَتَسْبِّحُوهُ فَكُلُّهُنَّ
He then said, “I believe, my lord.” And he fell down and worshiped him.

Let’s now take a look at some dots below the line. The *Mṣalyānā* ‘of prayer’ (sometimes called *Meṭkaṣṣpānā* ‘supplicating’) consisting of two dots below the line. It is used with phrases of prayer as in

كَلِّئَا نَا مُنْتَهَى الْعَالَمِينَ.

‘I beseech you Lord’

Unlike the dots above the line, those under the line usually indicated falling intonation. (Some scholars have

suggested that these dots were used for musical chants but it is difficult to establish that.²⁾



There were some dots that had nothing to do with intonation or how to read (or chant) a text. They were simply informational, really paratextual. One such mark is the *Mḥaydānā* ‘uniting’. What did it unite?

Someone wanted the reader to know when *two* words in the Syriac biblical text correspond to *one* Greek word. For example, ܠܢܝܠܕܐ [lā ilidā] ‘not begotten’ is one word in Greek, *agennetos*. In fact, it is one word in English too, *unbegotten*. To *unite* the two Syriac words, the scribes put a dot at the end of ܠܢܝܠܕܐ and another at the beginning of ܠܢܝܠܕܐ resulting in

ܠܢܝܠܕܐ <1² ylyd²> ‘unbegotten’.

Some of these dots were very important in interpreting texts. Recall the two pairs of dots used in yes-or-no questions from the previous chapter. Bar ‘Ebrāyā, commenting on 1 Cor. 11:13, explains:³

Anyone reading

ܠܢܝܠܕܐ ܠܢܝܠܕܐ ܠܢܝܠܕܐ ܠܢܝܠܕܐ

unless he notices the *tāksā* dots on ܠܢܝܠܕܐ [2nd word] and the *taḥtāyā* dots on ܠܢܝܠܕܐ [last word], will not know whether the blessed Apostle permits a woman to pray with her head uncovered, or forbids her.

(Bar ‘Ebrāyā calls *zawgā* ‘*elāyā* by the name *tāksā*.) Indeed, devoid of dots, one can read the verse as “It is appropriate for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered,” or equally as “Is it appropriate for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?” The dots make a huge difference.

One has to be careful with reading dots. As most of them occur at the end of a word, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish them from the punctuation dots mentioned in Chapter 13. Consider, for instance,

ﻻ ﻳﻬﻨﻮﻥ <^llyhyn > [ˈlayhēn] ‘upon them’

Is the dot under , <y> part of a reading dot or part of the punctuation dots <.:>? In many cases, scholars who edit texts simply collapse such dots and consider them punctuation dots. When giving examples from manuscripts, I have avoided dots at the end of a word unless I was quite sure what their function was. I skipped many a dot because I was not sure.

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, there are over forty dot types in this category. There is a rich prescriptive grammatical tradition concerning these dots, but one has to look at the grammatical tradition critically as it does not always agree with—or understand for that matter—the manuscript tradition.

The Net of Dots

A class of Malphānē known as the Maqryānē were in charge of teaching the correct reading and pronunciation of Syriac. We know of one such Maqryānā who taught at the School of Nisibis at the end of the fifth century or the early sixth century. His name is Joseph Huzaya or Joseph of Huzistan (now in southwestern Iran).¹

Joseph is said to be the inventor of nine punctuation or accent dots (see Chapters 13 and 14) although we cannot be certain of this. We are however certain that he was involved in establishing a Syriac grammatical tradition. Later grammarians tell us that Joseph also authored a book on homographs which must have systematized the usage of the homograph dot we encountered in Chapter 3. Alas, none of his grammatical works survive. We know of another grammarian named Thom-

as the Deacon who authored a list of accent dots as well during the seventh century.

The most celebrated of all Syriac grammarians is Jacob of Edessa. He died in the year 708. Jacob was probably the first to write a systematic grammar of the language as well as a letter on Syriac orthography. Jacob was not terribly happy with the scribes of his time. He once said:²

I prohibit all those who copy the books which I have translated or composed from changing, in their own will, anything, either in the writing or in the dotting.

This remark is significant for two reasons. First, it tells us that scribes did make changes to texts. Jacob must have been very particular about dotting and he did not want the scribes to change dots. Second, it indicates that Jacob thought of “writing” and “dotting” as separate tasks or tiers. The manuscripts obviously contain the writing, but the dotting was another layer, another task worth mentioning.

During the eighth and ninth century, another grammarian named David bar Pawlos (son of Paul) wrote a treatise on the dots, as well as a short grammar and a poem on the alphabet.³ The ninth century was very important for Syriac. Since the fourth century, Syriac scholars had translated and expanded upon the sci-

ences of the Greeks, from philosophy to medicine, astronomy and mathematics to alchemy. During the Arab Abbasid period, Syriac scholars were instrumental in bringing all this knowledge to Arabic before it arrived through Arabic to Europe via Spain. The dots were an integral part of the translation activities as without them texts would have been ambiguous. The dots, then, had a role in the history of transmitting human civilization. The most famous of all translators was the Syriac scholar Ḥunayn bar Isḥaq (809–873). More than 111 works, mostly medical, are attributed to Ḥunayn. In addition to those, he wrote several works on grammar and lexicography. Most important for our purposes are two works: *The Book of the Dots* and *The Book of Similar Words*. The latter uses the homograph dots extensively.⁴

The fuller grammars that have survived belong to later times. All of these grammars devote a section to the dots which indicates how important they are to the writing system. The grammars also indicate that pupils were tutored in dots. One of these grammarians is Elias of Tirhan who died in 1049.⁵ In addition to writing a grammar, he wrote three treatises on dots. Another grammarian of the period is Elias bar Shināyā (975–1046). Another, Joseph bar Malkūn, who flourished during the latter parts of the twelfth century or early parts

of the thirteenth, wrote a metrical treatise on dots and named it ܢܩܘܘܘܢ ܢܗܝܫܘܫܝܘܬܐ, *The Net of Dots*.⁶

We see that many of our grammarians wrote special works on the dots. This in itself demonstrates that dotting was a complex system and a subject worthy to be studied. Our grammarians did not write special books on specific disciplines within grammar. But they did write independent works on dots. If there were Syriac universities today, all students would probably have to attend Syriac Dottology 101!

Scribes had to be trained in the art of dotting, but despite all the training, scribes sometimes made mistakes. Sometimes they thought that they could improve on a text and changed the dotting. It is for this reason that it is difficult in many cases to know what the purpose of a certain dot was. Scribes also made mistakes in the consonantal text. In some cases, they made the correction themselves. In other cases, later readers would make the correction. However, our scribes did not have the correction fluid that we have today. How did they correct mistakes after the ink had dried?

Oops Dots

One of the most ancient of Semitic dots is the one used in the Hebrew Bible (another is the Aramaic word separation dot mentioned earlier). We know about the Hebrew Bible dot from second century AD Rabbis which means that this dot must date earlier. We are told in the Talmud (Avot of Rabbi Natan):¹

If Elijah [the prophet] should come and say to me, “why did you write [these doubtful words] in this manner?” I will answer him: “I have already dotted them.” But if he should say, “You have written them correctly,” I shall remove the dots from them.

These biblical dots were used with doubtful words. The scribes did not want to alter the doubtful text. They simply dotted it.

Syriac scribes used the dots to correct mistakes. Correction dots are already attested in fifth and sixth centu-

ry manuscripts. In many cases, it is difficult to say if the correction was made by the original scribe or by a later hand. For example, we see the following phrase in the manuscript containing the story of St. Simeon, that the saint grew:²

٢١١١١ ٢١١١١ ٢١١١١
 < bšwm² wbq̄wm² wbašlūt² >
 [bšawmā wabqawmā wbašlūtā]
 ‘in fasting and in stature and in prayer’

The correction dots consist of two pairs of triple dots used on two consecutive words to mark transposition. The correction in this case seems to have been made by a second hand. The text is grammatically correct but the phrase will flow better if the text reads

٢١١١١ ٢١١١١ ٢١١١١
 ‘in fasting and in prayer and in stature’

as fasting and prayer are closer to each other semantically. Perhaps the reader had access to a second copy and changed the text, or maybe he thought of making the change himself.

Another example appears in a manuscript containing the third epistle of Severus of Antioch to Julian, Bishop of Halicarnassus, as well as Julian’s reply. In Julian’s reply we read the phrase:³

٢١١١١ ٢١١١١ ٢١١١١
 < yšpt ltr^ᶜýt^ᶜ d^ᶜñhrḥ >
 [yešpet ltar^ᶜitā d^ᶜanhrāh]

The middle phrase is out of place and must have been added by the scribe in error. The scribe, or more likely a later hand in this case, dotted it to mark it as deleted. While the triple dots indicates transposition, the sequence of single dots indicates deletion.

The scope of the correction dots could extend as far as an entire verse. For instance, the east-Syriac ‘Masora’ uses them to distinguish entire verses that have been placed out of order.⁶ At the other end of the spectrum, the correction involves a single letter. Consider for example the following word from Luke 21:24 as it appears in the fifth century Sinaiticus manuscript of the Old Syriac Gospels:

ܕܗܘܪܒܐ <dḥwrb²>

Our first instinct is to read it [dḥorbā] ‘of the desert’ where the dot over ḥ <w> is for the vowel [o]. The verse, however, reads:

ܕܗܘܪܒܐ ܕܗܘܪܒܐ ܕܗܘܪܒܐ

‘And they will fall by the edge of the sword’

The dot here is a correction dot to indicate that the ḥ <w> ought to be deleted. The word is

ܕܗܘܪܒܐ <dḥrb²> [dḥarbā] ‘sword’.

The scribe simply made a mistake. We can understand how he made the mistake. Earlier, in verse 20 of the same chapter, we have the word

ܗܘܪܒܐ <ḥwrb²> [ḥurbā] ‘destruction’.

Note that the α <w> in this word, acting as *matres lectionis*, stands for the vowel [ū] not [o]. A guru in Syriac would have realized that the dot on $\dot{\alpha}$ <w̄> could not have been for [ḥūrbā]. But how many gurus are out there? I personally had to look it up. (At any rate, the vocalization dot that distinguishes $\dot{\alpha}$ <w̄> [o] from α <w> [ū] had not been invented when the Sinaiticus manuscript was written.)

The correction dots, especially the transposition triple dot, persists until the modern day. One finds it in very late manuscripts as in the following example:

ܡܫܬܢܝܢ < mštn̄yn >

for

ܡܫܬܢܝܢ < mštn̄yn > [meštan̄in]
‘they acted cunningly’

Note that the transposition dots appear in this case under the line.

Throughout the book, we have seen the dot being used for many linguistic purposes as well as paratextual purposes. So far, we encountered the dot used exclusively for the Syriac language. The Syriac script, however, was used not only to write Syriac, but also to write a wide variety of other languages. Syriac scribes were so fond of their dots that they began to export it when writing other languages using the Syriac script.

Garshunography Dots

The Syriac script was used to write many languages, even when these languages had scripts that were more sociolinguistically associated with them than Syriac. This type of writing, where one uses a script associated with one language to write a text from another language, is called *garshunography*.¹

Let's say you want to write English in the Syriac script. First, you try to find a mapping for the consonants: *b* can be written as ܒ , *d* as ܕ <d>, *m* as ܡ <m> etc. But soon, you will find difficulties. There are English sounds that are represented by two letters such as the sound [θ], represented by *th* as in *thin*. Do you want to represent it in Syriac by the corresponding letters ܛܐ <th> or by the corresponding sound ܛ <ṯ> by borrowing the *bgādkpāt* dot (introduced in Chapter 10)? To make sure that your readers can distinguish

between *thin* and *tin*, you write the former ܛܢ <tn> and the latter ܛܢ <tn>.

The sound [ð] is also represented in English by *th* as in *that*. You can either *transliterate* and use ܛܗ <th> or *transcribe* and use ܢ <ð> borrowing the *bgādkpāt* dot again. Transliteration is a direct mapping of one writing system into another, letter by letter. Transcription is the mapping of the *sounds* of one language into the *letters* of another.

Now you come across *x* which has the two sounds [ks]. There is no corresponding letter in Syriac so you cannot transliterate even if you wanted to. You decide to use the letters ܟܣ <ks>. In fact, Syriac Malphānē before you had already used ܟܣ <ks> to represent Greek *ksi* ξ in loan words like ܟܣܐܢܐ <ʔksʔ> [ʔeksā] ‘order’ for Greek τάξις.

You also come across the letter *c* which is sometimes [k] and sometimes [s]. So you decide to go with the sounds ܟ <k> in words like *cross* ܟܪܘܣܐ <krws> (or ܩ <q>, ܩܪܘܣܐ <qrws>) and ܣ <s> in words like *circle* ܣܪܟܠܐ <srkl>.

Before you, Malphānē used the *bgādkpāt* dots in garsonographic writing extensively. For example, they used ܢ <ð> for Arabic ڤ [d] and ܢ <ð> for Arabic ڤ [ð]. There are other sounds in Arabic that do not have a

counterpart in Syriac, not even a *bgādkpāt* counterpart. Two such sounds used dots: ܬ̣ <ṭ> (the dot under *t* is a transcription dot) for Arabic ط and ܣ̣ <ṣ> (the dot under *s* is a transcription dot) for Arabic ض. Why were these choices made? If you look at the Arabic letters—even if you don’t know Arabic, you will see that they have dots themselves. The Arabic letter ط is the same as the one for ط [ṭ] but with a dot. Similarly, the letter ض is the same as the one for ص [ṣ] but with a dot. It looks like a transcription system was used including transcribing the dot. In the case of ܬ̣ <ṭ>, the dot ended up in the middle of the letter. Writing Arabic in the Syriac script is called Syro-Arabic garshunography.²

Other languages were also written in the Syriac script. Armenian also has some sounds not found in Syriac. Sounds found in dotted *bgādkpāt* letters were used. So one finds: ܒ̣ <ḅ> represented Armenian վ [v], ܓ̣ <ḡ> represented Armenian ղ [ḡ], and so on. As in the case of Arabic, the dot was also used with Syriac letters that usually do not take it: ܝ̣ <ḏ> represented Armenian ծ [dz] and ܘ̣ <ḥ> represented Armenian ց [ts^h] and ܠ̣ [ts^h]. There were still sounds not covered by using a simple dot.

A triple dot sign was used with other letters to cover those: 𐎧 for Armenian ք [p^h], 𐎡 <š̄> for Armenian ձ [ts^h], 𐎢 <š̄> and 𐎣 for Armenian ժ [ʒ], 𐎤 [tʰ] and 𐎥 [tʰ] and so on.³ Usually, a close sound is found in Syriac, and the dots extend that sound. If a single dot was already used, a triple dot was then adopted instead. It seems that a double dot was avoided as it would cause confusion with the *syāmē* plural marker. Syro-Kurdish and Syro-Turkish garshunography also used the triple dot on ܝ <š̄> for [j] amongst other extensions.⁴

Dots also appear in Syro-Greek garshunography. A fragment from the Anaphora of St. James, dated between the 9th and the 11th centuries and preserved at the Damascus Museum, used dots on 𐌲 <ʔ> to mark Greek vowels: α was represented by 𐌲 <ʔ̇>, ε and αι were represented by 𐌲 <ʔ̇>. Here is an example:⁵

𐌲𐌳𐌰𐌹 𐌲𐌳𐌰𐌹 𐌲𐌳𐌰𐌹 𐌲𐌳𐌰𐌹 𐌲𐌳𐌰𐌹 𐌲𐌳𐌰𐌹 𐌲𐌳𐌰𐌹
 𐌲𐌳𐌰𐌹 𐌲𐌳𐌰𐌹 𐌲𐌳𐌰𐌹 𐌲𐌳𐌰𐌹 𐌲𐌳𐌰𐌹 𐌲𐌳𐌰𐌹 𐌲𐌳𐌰𐌹
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‘The priest bows his head in front of the altar, prays the prayer of the bowing of the head, and he says at its conclusion: καὶ πλήρωσον τὰ στόμα ἡμῶν αἰνέσεως καὶ τὰ χεῖλη ἀγαλλιάσεως καὶ τὰς καρδιάς χαρᾶς καὶ εὐφροσύνης.



The Syriac dot has had a very long history that has lasted well over 1600 years, even if we only count from the time the Syriac dot first appears in a manuscript, i.e. the year 411. Indeed, the Syriac dot is still alive and kicking.

Dots Today

Almost all of the examples mentioned in the book were taken from early manuscripts, as early as the fifth and sixth century. This is because we were trying to answer many questions about the origins of the Syriac dots. This does not mean that Syriac stopped using dots after the early period. On the contrary, Syriac dots continued and increased in usage with time. Twenty-first century manuscripts are still produced with dots all over the place.

Three types of dots are obligatory today: the dots of ܰ <d> and ܰܰ <r>, the plural *syāmē* double dot, and the dot on the feminine ܰܰ <ḥ> suffix. No one would ever think to write a text without them.¹ Omitting any of them would be considered an orthographic mistake on equal footing as misspelling an English word. These are written by modern scribes in the same first pass as

proper noun is pronounced with [ū] in west Syriac! Punctuation, or reading dots, are also found: a sublinear dot after **ܡܘܠܐ**, two sublinear dots after **ܡܘܠܐ** and a single linear dot after **ܡܘܠܐ**. All in all, the above example consists of:

- 34 consonantal base graphs
- 18 dotted symbols (e.g. ܘܘ for [a] is one symbol)
- 25 individual dots
- 4 Greek vowels

That is, a total of 56 graphs: only 61% are base graphs, while 32% are dotted graphs, and 7% are Greek vowels. I cannot think of any language where dots constitute that high a percentage of the total writing. The above phrase is not even fully pointed.

Let's look at another verse from the Mosul edition of the Bible, published in the east Syriac script (Genesis 30:1):²

ܦܘܣܝܝܐ ܕܝܣܝܐ ܕܟܢܐ ܡܠܟܝܐ ܕܠܝܘܒܐ ܡܝܝܝܢܝܐ ܡܝܝܝܢܝܐ: ܘܝܘܠܝܝܐ
ܠܠܝܘܒܐ: ܐܝܒ ܠܒ ܩܘܠܝܐ: ܘܝܐ ܕܐ ܩܘܠܝܐ ܐܝܢܐ.

Rachel saw that she was not bearing children to Jacob. She became jealous of her sister and said to Jacob, “Give me children. If not, I will die.”

Here are the statistics for this verse:

- 60 consonantal base graphs
- 40 dotted symbols

74 individual dots

That is, a total of 110 graphs: 54% are letter graphs and 36% are dotted symbols. The number of individual dots exceeds the number of base graphs. The Mosul Bible does not even mark all *bgādkpāt* letters. The dots are mostly for vowels. But we see the two sublinear dots under **ا** <ṭ> that mark the feminine perfect form. We also see the active partiple dot on **ا** **تَلَدَّ** and **مَعْنَى**.

Dotting in modern manuscripts is not limited to Biblical texts. Here is an example from a manuscript of Bar ‘Ebroyo’s *Ethicon* on overindulgence copied in 1985:

فِيهَا ضَمٌّ لِمَا رَهَقَ تَمَلُّا: حَلَلَا مَوَاوِلَا وَمَجَلَا
فِيهَا لَمَّا لِبَرِّحَا كَصُنَا.

Lust of copulation was planted in nature for the benefit of bodily succession.

Let’s stay focused on dots! Here too, we see that the dotted vowels are used in conjunction with the ‘Greek’ vowels. We see the homograph dot on **ض** <ṣ> and

ض <ḵynʔ> [kyānā] ‘nature’.

The latter does not have a homograph. The dot here is for the vowel [ā] by analogy with words like **لَا** <ṣlātʔ> [ṣlātā] (for which see Chapter 3).



The only dots that are no longer used today are the reading dots introduced in Chapter 14 (although a few

are retained in modern lectionaries, but hardly anyone today from the Syriac-using communities recognizes their function). Scribes lost touch with them centuries ago. All other dot types are familiar to modern scribes.

During the summer, I interviewed Dayroyo Shim‘ūn Can of St. Mark’s Monastery. I asked him many questions about the dots he produces in his own hand which gave me an insight into the mind of at least one scribe. Dayroyo Shim‘ūn is one of a few surviving scribes. Until the late 1980s and early 1990s, book production was still based on the work of scribes who would produce a master copy which would then be sent to the printer. The examples from this chapter (apart from the Mosul Bible example) were taken from such modern manuscripts. With the advent of personal computing, first the Alaph Beth Syriac fonts from the late 1990s and now with the Meltho fonts, Syriac manuscript production has dramatically dwindled and with this the dot has become an endangered graph. We have digital font designers to thank for this!

Epilogue

I hope that this book has given you a better understanding of the Syriac dot. I also hope it demonstrated that the Syriac dot is worth studying and paying attention to. If you are a young scholar and one day will end up editing a text for publication, I do sincerely hope that you provide data on how the manuscripts of your text used the dots.

Throughout the book, I posed many questions about the origin and function of the dots. I tried to answer them to the best of my ability and with the limited resources that we have, especially for the first four centuries of the Christian Era when the dots were invented.

A lot of the hypotheses presented throughout the book depend on whether the dots in early manuscripts are original or were added by a second hand. Some hypotheses may make better sense if we assume that in-

deed the dots were added later on. It is impossible, however, to determine this with the naked eye.

Can technology help?

I am neither an imaging expert nor a chemist, though my wife Christine is the latter. I understand from her that the chemical structure of an ink made by one scribe will differ from one made in a later period by another scribe. Applying XRF spectrometry might tell us if the chemical structure of ink differs from that of the surrounding dots. If so, it could mean that two inks created separately were used. This technology is not destructive. Images are taken of the manuscript using different spectra. The images are then analyzed. Hyperspectral imaging has been successfully used in forensics. There are even techniques that are used for ink mismatch detection to determine forgeries. It looks like this might be something that is worth trying. The process is, however, very costly and one needs to find funding agencies interested to answer questions about the Syriac dot!

I do realize that I have pushed the envelope with some of my hypotheses. I did so because I feel that we need to ask hard questions. I might be wrong of course. Don't take what I say for granted!

Finally, I hope that you have enjoyed reading these pages as much as I have enjoyed writing them. Did you.

❖ 𐤃𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤃𐤁𐤁 ❖

Ah! The four dots on the theograph 𐤃𐤁𐤁 <yh̄> for Yahweh: the three dots on top designate the Trinity and the dot on the bottom designates the One God.

Appendix 1: Script Guide

The following table gives a mapping between Estrangelā and the other Syriac scripts as well as the Aramaic script known as Square Hebrew.

Estrangelā	Sertā	E. Syriac	Sq. Hebrew	Name	Phoneme
Ⲁ	ܐ	ܐ	א	Ālap	ʔ
Ⲃ	ܒ	ܒ	ב	Bēth	b
Ⲅ	ܓ	ܓ	ג	Gāmal	g
Ⲇ	ܕ	ܕ	ד	Dālaṭ	d
Ⲉ	ܗ	ܗ	ה	Hē	h
Ⲋ	ܘ	ܘ	ו	Waw	w
Ⲍ	ܙ	ܙ	ז	Zayn	z
Ⲏ	ܚ	ܚ	ח	Hēt̄	ħ (IPA [ħ])
Ⲑ	ܛ	ܛ	ט	Tēt̄	t̄
Ⲓ	ܝ	ܝ	י	Yūd	y
Ⲕ	ܟ	ܟ	כ	Kāp	k
Ⲗ	ܠ	ܠ	ל	Lāmad	l
Ⲙ	ܡ	ܡ	מ	Mīm	m
Ⲛ	ܢ	ܢ	נ	Nūn	n

Estrangelā	Seriā	E. Syriac	Sq. Hebrew	Name	Phoneme
Ⲑ	Ⲕ	ⲛ	Ⲫ	Semkaṭ	s
ⲑ	ⲕ	ⲏ	ⲫ	ṣē	ʃ
Ⲓ	Ⲍ	Ⲑ	Ⲭ	Pē	p
ⲓ	Ⲏ	ⲑ	ⲭ	Ṣādē	ʒ
Ⲕ	ⲏ	Ⲓ	Ⲯ	Qop	q
ⲕ	Ⲑ	ⲓ	ⲯ	Riš	r
Ⲍ	ⲑ	Ⲕ	Ⲱ	Ṣin	ʃ (IPA [ʃ])
ⲍ	Ⲓ	ⲕ	ⲱ	Taw	t

أَمْسَخَ ٥٥٥٥ رَحًا: فَتَقَلَّمَا: وَخَطَا لَفَحْتُمْ، لِحْتَبْتُمَا أَسْ
 وَقَسَّصْتُمْ: ٥٥٥٥ رَحًا ٥٥٥٥ لَفَحْتُمْ تَصَدَّعُوا.

[رَحًا] sg R1 ; [فَتَقَلَّمَا] sg R1 ; [رَحًا] sg R1

كَاثِرًا كَثُرَ كَثْرًا كَثُرَ كَثْرًا كَثُرَ كَثْرًا كَثُرَ كَثْرًا كَثُرَ كَثْرًا (6:4)

كَاثِرًا كَثُرَ كَثْرًا كَثُرَ كَثْرًا كَثُرَ كَثْرًا كَثُرَ كَثْرًا كَثُرَ كَثْرًا
 كَثُرَ كَثْرًا كَثُرَ كَثْرًا كَثُرَ كَثْرًا كَثُرَ كَثْرًا كَثُرَ كَثْرًا
 كَثُرَ كَثْرًا كَثُرَ كَثْرًا كَثُرَ كَثْرًا كَثُرَ كَثْرًا كَثُرَ كَثْرًا
 ٥٥٥٥: مُمًا مُمُوًّا نَدَا ٥٥٥٥: ٥٥٥٥: مُمًا مُمُوًّا
 وَفَتَقَلَّمَا: مَصْفًا لَمَسُوًّا وَوَهَا: مَصْفًا مَصْفًا وَوَهَا:
 مُمًا مُمُوًّا مَبَا ٥٥٥٥: مُمًا مُمُوًّا.

[وَفَتَقَلَّمَا] sg R1 ; [مُمًا مُمُوًّا] sg R1 R2 ; [مُمًا مُمُوًّا] sg R1 R2

مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا (6:5)

مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا
 مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا
 مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا
 مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا
 مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا
 مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا
 مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا

[مَصْفًا مَصْفًا] sg R1 R2 ; [مَصْفًا مَصْفًا] sg R1 R2

مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا (6:7)

مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا
 مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا
 مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا
 مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا
 مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا مَصْفًا

وَأَمَّا فَصَّوْهُ فَحَبَّوْهُ جُنُودًا سِوَا سِبَا: وَأَوَّلًا لَأَوْتُوْهُ وَتَمْتَمُ: وَأَمَّا فَصَّوْهُ فَحَبَّوْهُ سِبَا: وَأَوَّلًا حَبَّوْهُ: وَأَمَّا فَصَّوْهُ فَحَبَّوْهُ مَعَ كَلِّوْهُ حَبَّوْهُ.

[لَأَوْتُوْهُ] sg R1 | pl. R2 sg R2^c

6:10) وَأَمَّا فَصَّوْهُ فَحَبَّوْهُ سِبَا: وَأَوَّلًا لَأَوْتُوْهُ وَتَمْتَمُ: وَأَمَّا فَصَّوْهُ فَحَبَّوْهُ مَعَ كَلِّوْهُ حَبَّوْهُ سِبَا: وَأَوَّلًا حَبَّوْهُ: وَأَمَّا فَصَّوْهُ فَحَبَّوْهُ مَعَ كَلِّوْهُ حَبَّوْهُ.

[لَأَوْتُوْهُ] sg R1 ; [حَبَّوْهُ] pl R2

6:11) وَأَمَّا فَصَّوْهُ فَحَبَّوْهُ سِبَا: وَأَوَّلًا لَأَوْتُوْهُ وَتَمْتَمُ: وَأَمَّا فَصَّوْهُ فَحَبَّوْهُ مَعَ كَلِّوْهُ حَبَّوْهُ سِبَا: وَأَوَّلًا حَبَّوْهُ: وَأَمَّا فَصَّوْهُ فَحَبَّوْهُ مَعَ كَلِّوْهُ حَبَّوْهُ.

[حَبَّوْهُ] skipped (could not read) R1 R2

6:12) وَأَمَّا فَصَّوْهُ فَحَبَّوْهُ سِبَا: وَأَوَّلًا لَأَوْتُوْهُ وَتَمْتَمُ: وَأَمَّا فَصَّوْهُ فَحَبَّوْهُ مَعَ كَلِّوْهُ حَبَّوْهُ سِبَا: وَأَوَّلًا حَبَّوْهُ: وَأَمَّا فَصَّوْهُ فَحَبَّوْهُ مَعَ كَلِّوْهُ حَبَّوْهُ.

وَأَمَّا فَصَّوْهُ فَحَبَّوْهُ سِبَا: وَأَوَّلًا لَأَوْتُوْهُ وَتَمْتَمُ: وَأَمَّا فَصَّوْهُ فَحَبَّوْهُ مَعَ كَلِّوْهُ حَبَّوْهُ سِبَا: وَأَوَّلًا حَبَّوْهُ: وَأَمَّا فَصَّوْهُ فَحَبَّوْهُ مَعَ كَلِّوْهُ حَبَّوْهُ.

[وَأَمَّا] sg R1 R2 ; [وَأَمَّا] R1 R2 | [وَأَمَّا] R1 R2 | [وَأَمَّا] sg R1 | pl. R1^c (when reached)

(7:7)

 وَأَمَّا قَالُوا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا

 وَأَمَّا قَالُوا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا

 وَأَمَّا قَالُوا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا

 وَأَمَّا قَالُوا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا

[وَأَمَّا] sg R1 ; [وَأَمَّا] sg R1 | pl R1^c

(8:8)

 وَأَمَّا قَالُوا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا

 وَأَمَّا قَالُوا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا

 وَأَمَّا قَالُوا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا

 وَأَمَّا قَالُوا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا

[وَأَمَّا] sg R2 ; [وَأَمَّا] R1 | sg R2

(8:11)

 وَأَمَّا قَالُوا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا

 وَأَمَّا قَالُوا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا

 وَأَمَّا قَالُوا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا

 وَأَمَّا قَالُوا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ لَهُمْ شَرْيْقَانَا

אֲנָא]¹ sg R1 R2‡ ; אֲנָא]¹,² sg R1 R2 ; אֲנָא]² sg R1 R2

אֲנָא רִכּוּלָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא (10:2)
 אֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא
 אֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא
 אֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא
 אֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא

אֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא
 אֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא
 אֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא
 אֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא
 אֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא

אֲנָא] sg R1 R2 ; אֲנָא] sg R1 R2

אֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא (10:3)
 אֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא
 אֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא
 אֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא
 אֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא

אֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא
 אֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא
 אֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא
 אֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא
 אֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא דְאֲנָא

אֲנָא] R1 ; אֲנָא] R2 ; אֲנָא] R2

‡ In all fairness, the text did not have the feminine suffix *u* and *syāme* on אֲנָא expected by west Syriac readers.

Appendix 3: Chronology of Events

The following events are limited to those mentioned in this book. Events assigned to a century are estimates and one needs to allow for a margin of error. Unless otherwise indicated, events listed under a particular century are not given in a chronological order.

- 3rd cent. B.C. Aristophanes of Byzantium uses the dot to indicate a pause in reading (ch. 1).
- A.D. 6 First dated Syriac inscription (ch. 1)
- 2nd cent.
- Rabbinic sources report dots in the Hebrew Bible to mark doubtful readings (ch. 1).
 - Most of the Old Testament is translated into Syriac.
 - The Old Syriac Gospels appear.
 - *Odes of Solomon* composed (or 3rd century).
 - Aramaic inscription from Garni, Armenia, marks ܘ with a dot (but not ܢ; see Plate V).
- 154–222 Bardaisan and his pupil Philip (ch. 1)

- 160 Palmyrene inscription from Dura
Europos marks ܝ with a dot (but not
ܟ) (ch. 1).
- 3rd cent.
 - *Acts of Thomas* composed (ch. 1).
 - *Sentences of Menander* composed.
- 240–243 Earliest Syriac parchments without
dots (see Plate IV) (ch. 1).
- 4th cent.
 - *Letter of Mara* composed (ch. 1).
 - Story of Ahikar translated into Syriac.
 - *Demonstrations of Aphrahat* composed.
 - *Book of Steps* composed (or early 5th century)
 - *Syāme* dots invented (ch. 2).
 - Dot on ܝ invented (ch. 1).
 - Dot on ܟ invented (probably after that of ܝ).
 - Supralinear disambiguation dot invented (ch. 3).
 - Sublinear disambiguation dot invented (probably after the supralinear dot).
 - Dot on the suffix ܟ is invented but is not used regularly (ch. 8).
 - Pause (punctuation) dots in-

- vented (or picked up from the Alexandrian system) (ch. 13).
- End of section/paragraph four dots, ❖, invented (ch. 13).
- 356 Nabataean inscription marks ʾ with a dot (but not ʿ; see Plate V) (ch. 1).
- 373 St. Ephrem dies having produced much literature (ch. 1).
- 5th cent.
- Joseph Huzaya invents the nine punctuation or accent dots (ch. 13–15) and authors a book on homographs.
 - Correction dots appear but maybe by later hands.
- 411 First dated Syriac MS and first dated literary codex in any language.
- ʿ and ʾ are *mostly* dotted (ch. 1) but position of dot is not fixed on the base glyph ʿ (ch. 7).
 - *Syāme* plural dots (ch. 2).
 - Single homograph dot appears, though the supralinear dot is far more frequent (ch. 3).
- 473 Apr. MS of the life of St. Simeon
- A few instances of ʿ and ʾ

- appear as undotted ʾ (ch. 1).
- Overdotting of ʾ as ʾ̇.
 - Dot on feminine suffix ʾ is still irregular (ch. 8).
- 6th cent.
- Silent dot invented (ch. 6).
 - Dots for *bgādkpāt* letters invented (ch. 10).
 - Two dots appear in a single word as in ضحى (ch. 11).
 - The vowel ʾ̇ is invented (ch. 12).
 - Double dot punctuation/pause marks, : (sometimes slanted), invented (ch. 13).
- 522 Dec. MS containing ʾ̇ under masculine suffixes (ch. 8).
- 528 Apr. MS of Severus of Antioch against Julian:
- *Syāme* appear on masculine and feminine verbs (ch. 2).
- 548 July MS of the Gospels:
- *Syāme* on feminine verbs is irregular (ch. 2).
 - Dot on ʾ̇ ʾ̇ ‘sign’.
- 550/551 MS with the following features:
- Overdotting of ʾ as ʾ̇ (ch. 1).
- pre 576 July Note in an informal hand using dots

	(ch. 5).
7 th cent.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal hand on a papyrus using dots (ch. 5). • Thomas the Deacon authors a book on accent dots (ch. 15).
8 th cent.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • David bar Pawlos authors a treatise on the dots. • Dot on 3rd fem. verbs on top of 𐤀 (ch 9). • The vowel ֹ is invented (ch. 12). • The vowels ֶ and ֻ are invented. • Triple-dot invented ֿ (ch. 13). • By end of century, fully dotted vocalization system is in use.
708	Grammarians Jacob of Edessa dies.
873	Ḥunayn bar Ishāq dies having authored two books on dots.
10 th cent.	Garshunography dots appear (ch. 17).
928/9	MS having dots of 𐤀 and 𐤁 far from the base glyph 𐤀 (ch. 5).
11 th cent.	Dots for <i>bgādkpāt</i> appear in red in west Syriac MSS.
1046	Grammarians Elias bar Shināyā dies

	(ch 15).
1059	Grammarian Elias of Tirhan dies (ch. 15).
12 th cent.	Grammarian Joseph bar Malkūn dies (ch. 15).
13 th cent.	MS colophon indicating a reader added dots to the MS (ch 5).
1286	Grammarian Bar ‘Ebroyo dies. By his time readers could not comprehend most of the reading dots (ch. 14).
Today	Dots are alive (apart from most reading dots)!

Appendix 4: Manuscripts Consulted

BL Add. 12,150	411 November
BL Add. 14,610	550/1
BL Add. 14,687	13 th century (colophon)
BL Add. 17,200	7 th century
Vat Syr 1	928/9
Vat Syr 12	6 th century
Vat Syr 104	564 August
Vat Syr 111	522 December
Vat Syr 137	564 April
Vat Syr 138	581 July
Vat Syr 140	528 April
Vat Syr 142	576 July
Vat Syr 143	563 August
Vat Syr 160	473 April

While not cited, all of the MSS in Hatch's *Album* were also consulted as well as MS Sinai Syriac NF M27N.

Plates

Old Syriac Inscription 1

Old Syriac Inscription 2

Old Syriac Mosaic

Old Syriac Parchment

Aramaic & Nabataean inscriptions (with dot for <r>)

The 411 Codex

Codex Sinaiticus

Codex Curetonianus

Some from Hatch that are cited



Plate I. Old Syriac inscription (Cs3), unknown date; Urfa Museum.
Photograph by John F. Healey.

ܩܠܘܢ ܕܥܠܡܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ
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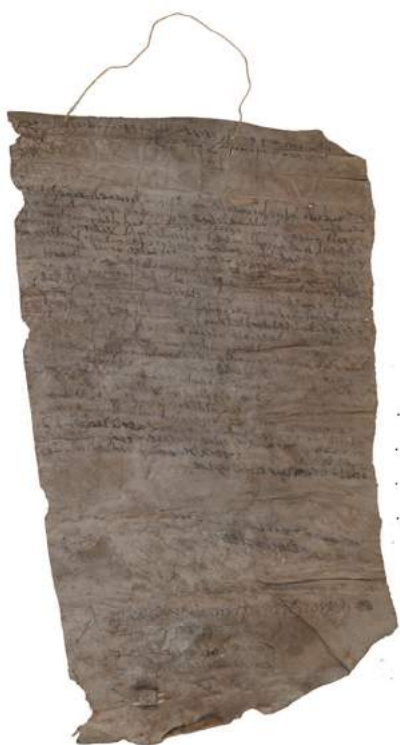
Plate II. Old Syriac inscription (As1), probably first half of the 3rd century; Urfa citadel, inscribed on the eastern free-standing pillar, facing the city. Photograph by John F. Healey.

ܠܘܘܬܐܢ ܠܘܠ
 ܘܒ [ܠܘܘܬ]ܐ
 ܘܒ [ܘܠ...ܘܠ]ܐ
 ܠܘܠ ܠܘܠܐܢ
 ܠܘܠ ܠܘܠܐܢ ܠܘܠܐܢ
 ܠܘܠ ܠܘܠܐܢ
 ܠܘܠ [ܠܘܠܐܢ]ܐܢ
 ܠܘܠ [ܠܘܠܐܢ]ܐܢ



Plate III. Old Syriac mosaic, A.D. 194; Orpheus Taming Wild Animals; Dallas Museum of Art. Photograph by John F. Healey.

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סמסא רמא פפא ב
פפא בובא ל ב
עממלא סמא ל
מבא מלוא, פמ
מ וסא סבא



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...ܕܥܡܝܬܐ ܕܥܡܝܬܐ ܕܥܡܝܬܐ ܕܥܡܝܬܐ

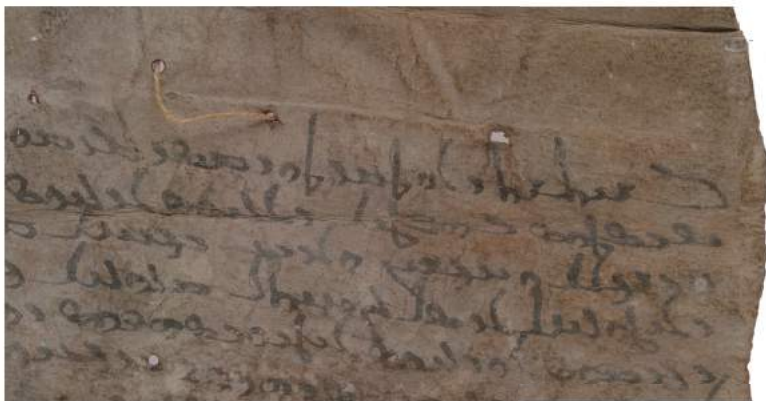


Plate IV. Old Syriac parchment (P. Dura 28), 9 May 243; sale of a female slave. Photograph by Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

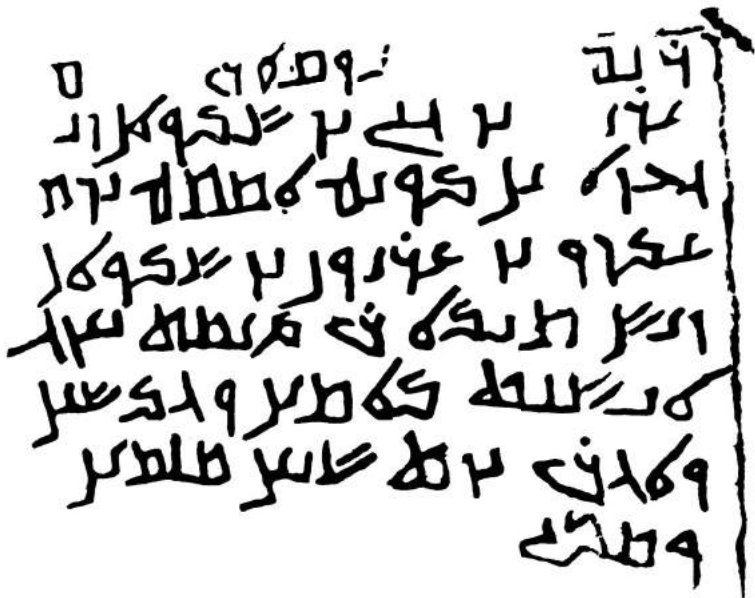
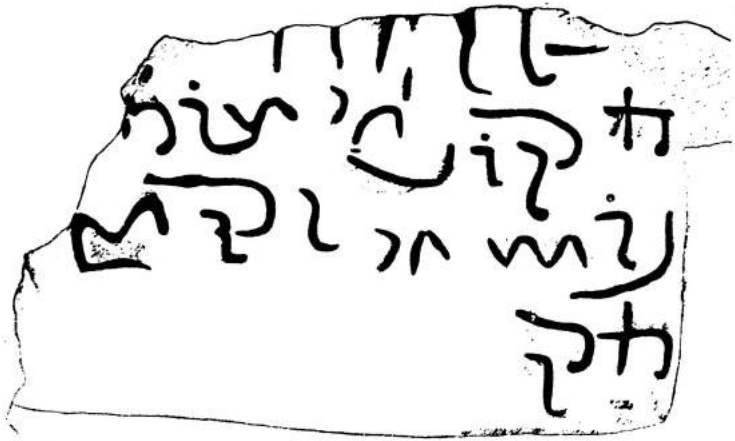


Plate V. Inscriptions with dots on <r>. Top: Second-century (A.D.) inscription from Garni, Armenia. Bottom: Nabataean inscription dated 356.
Source: J. Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet* (1982), Figs. 124 & 145. Reproduced with permission from The Magnes Press.

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Plate VI. MS BL Add. 12,150, A.D. 411.
From Hatch, *Album* (Plate I).

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Handwritten text in Syriac script, arranged in approximately 20 lines. The script is cursive and dense. The text is written on a rectangular piece of parchment or paper, which is slightly aged and has some discoloration. The lines are roughly horizontal but follow the natural curve of the writing. The characters are dark, likely ink, and the background is a light, off-white color. The text appears to be a continuous passage, possibly a liturgical or legal document, given the formal nature of the script and the presence of line numbers on the right side.

Plate VIII. Vat. Syr. 104, A.D. 564. From Hatch, *Album* (Plate V).

Appendix 5: Comments on Plates

Plates I & II demonstrate the dotless ܐ. The text is typed in the Syriac script on these plates with the dots restored whenever possible. The same applies to **Plate III**, a mosaic, which more clearly shows the dotless ܐ. In addition, the mosaic shows the absence of *syāme* in the word ܐܘܠܘܢ (line 5). **Plate IV** shows Syriac in another medium, parchment. Here too no dots appear in the text. The first part of the first few lines are shown at the bottom of the plate. The Syriac text gives those portions only. Notice the cursive nature of the script. **Plate V** illustrates the dot of ܝ <r> in Aramaic and Nabataean.

Plates VI–VIII give samples of literary Syriac from early manuscripts. Readers may try to determine the function of the dots as an exercise and then use the following key to check the results.

Plate VI (A.D. 411)

Notice that the first ܐ of ܘܚܒܘܟܝ (line 19) is dotless. Also notice how far the dot of ܝ is in ܘܚܒܘܟܝܢ (line 24). The plural double dot *syāme* appears a few times (lines 8–9, 15, 18, 20, 30). It tends to be closer to the begin-

ning of the word. It is already collapsed with the dot of *i* <r> in a lines 6 and 8.

The homograph dot appears in a number of places: the active participles **خَدِي** (lines 7 and 17) and **حَدِي** (line 29), **هَنُون** [hānūn] (lines 11, 19, 21) to differentiate it from [henūn], and **هَنِين** [hānen] (line 28) to differentiate it from [henen].

Although it might be difficult to see, we have an instance of **آتَة** [ʔāte] in the last line of column 1. There is also a sublinear dot on **هَنُون** [henūn] in column 2, line 17. There are sublinear dots on the perfect verbs **بَيَّأ** and **بَيَّس** in the third line from the bottom of column 2. A sublinear dot appears on **بَيْشَا** [bīšā] (col. 3, last line) to differentiate it from [bāyšā]. The feminine suffix dot appears on **حَدِي** in column 3, line 14.

The punctuation dot (ch. 13) appears in lines 3, 7, 10, 13–15, 18, 20 and 34. Notice that the pause dot in line 15 is sublinear. It may have indicated a shorter pause. I cannot make out the dot on **س** (line 23) which could be a sublinear dot on **س** (line 24); it is probably some sort of a pause dot.

A sequence of circles indicates the end of a section in line 3 of column 3.

Plate VII (A.D. 473)

There is a dotless **ا** in **حبر** (line 20). The plural *syāme* dots appear a few times, even on numbers (e.g. **حصة** which also illustrates how the dots collapse with **ي**, line 5).

The homograph dot appears on **و** (line 1) and **و** (line 13), but there are many verbs without any dots.

The feminine dot is missing on **م** (line 2) but it appears a few times in column 2 (e.g. lines 7–8).

The punctuation or pause dot appears in a few places (lines 2, 6, 9, 12, 13, 15–18, 20, 22–23). Supralinear pause dots appear after **ن** (col. 2, line 2) and on **ن** (col. 2, line 4).

Plate VIII (A.D. 564)

This manuscript has a number of interesting punctuation/pause dots. In addition to the single dot, there is the double dot : in lines 7, 10–11, 14–15 and 22. The double pause dot also kerns in a number of places as in **ن** (line 12), **ن** (line 17), **ن** (line 18). The single dot also kerns in **ن** (line 5).

The homograph dot appears on a number of perfect verbs: **ن** (line 4) and **ن** (lines 8 & 16, opposite the active participle **ن** in line 13). It indicates a Pa^{ce}l on **ن** (line 12). It also appears on **ن** [ḥbālā]

(opposite [ḥablā], lines 8 and 10), وَالِيتَا [wālitā] (line 11) to indicate the [ā] vowel, and بَادِه [ʿbādeh] (line 22, opposite [ʿabdeh]).

There are four dots on حَبَلِي (line 8). The one in the middle of the word is the homograph dot mentioned above. The dots under ح and after it are probably a pause double dot as the ones listed above. I cannot make out the dot above ح though.

Notes

CHAPTER 1

¹ Until modern times, the standard dating in Syriac has been that of the Seleucid era (Anno Graecorum, abbreviated AG). The era begins with the return of Seleucus I Nicator to Babylon in 311 BC. Hence, to compute the Gregorian corresponding date, one simply subtracts 311. However, the Seleucid year begins in the autumn and ends in the summer. Therefore, if a month is known, then one subtracts 312 between October and December, but subtracts 311 between January and September. If the month is unknown, then one subtracts 311 and 312 and gives the alternate dates separated by ‘/’; e.g. October 1500 AG = 1500 – 311 = 1188 AD; January 1500 AG = 1189 AD; 1500 AD = 1188/9 AD.

² On Phoenician inscriptions, see Peckham, *The Development of the Late Phoenician Scripts*. On Aramaic inscriptions, see Naveh, *The Development of the Aramaic Script*.

³ Naveh, *The Development of the Aramaic Script* 19.

⁴ *The Bishop’s Bible* (1568).

⁵ Naveh, ‘Word Division in West Semitic Writing’.

⁶ Liberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* 44.

⁷ Turner, *Philology*.

⁸ On the earliest Arabic inscriptions with dots, see Ghabban.

⁹ Crystal, *Spell It Out*.

¹⁰ On paratexts, see Genette.

¹¹ ܘܢ MS Vat Syr 160 fol. 68^r col. 1 ln. 20; ܘܢܘܢܘܢ fol. 8^v col. 2 ln 16.

¹² MS Vat Syr 160 fol. 23^v col. 1 ln. 5 and col. 2 ln 13, respectively.

¹³ MS BL Add. 14,610 fol. 40^v col. 2 ln 3 and ln 19, respectively.

¹⁴ For the Aramaic inscription from Garni, see Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet* 140, Fig. 124; for the Palmyrene inscription, see Cantineau 26; for the Nabataean inscription, see Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet* 159, Fig. 145.

¹⁵ Brock, *A Brief Outline*.

CHAPTER 2

¹ New International Version.

² There was a phonological double [m] in early Syriac which still exists in east Syriac. I have omitted the doubling in this particular example in order not to confuse it with the orthographic doubling in the plural form.

³ Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon*.

⁴ Nöldeke §22.D.

⁵ On the ancient Aramaic numerical system, see Rödiger; Duval 14–15, Segal, ‘Some Syriac Inscriptions’; Ifrah 279–81, 332–40.

⁶ MS Vat Syr 160 fol. 20^r col. 2 ln. 26; fol. 20^v col. 1 ln. 14.

⁷ MS Vat Syr 160 fol. 4^v col. 1 ln. 19.

⁸ MS BL Add. 12,150 fol. 53^r.

⁹ Drijvers & Healey.

¹⁰ MS Vat Syr 140 fol. 4^r col. 1 lines 8–15.

¹¹ MS Vat Syr 12 fol. 93. Translation by Childers.

¹² Butts, ‘The Use of *Syāme*’.

CHAPTER 3

¹ Kiraz, *Orthography* §114.

² Thanks to James W. Bennett for assisting in obtaining this data from the SEDRA database (sedra.bethmardutho.org).

³ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/news>.

⁴ MS BL Add. 12,150 fol. 52^v. The ‘epistles’ are in the Syriac represented by the Greek loan word ܥܡܘܬܐ (masculine), not the Syriac word ܥܡܘܬܐ which explains why the pronouns used are masculine.

⁵ MS BL Add. 12,150 fol. 52^v–53^r.

CHAPTER 4

¹ Jacob of Edessa, ‘The Correction of Speech’ in Segal, *The Diacritical Point* 38–39.

CHAPTER 5

¹ In Kenoro Kthobonoyo, the word ܐܠ /leh/ is over used for personal pronouns of all sorts of number, gender, and person.

² Estrangelo Antioch font, part of the Meltho fonts available at www.bethmardutho.org. It is based on MS 12/21 of the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchal Library, Damascus, dated A.D. 1041/2.

³ One can of course make a reverse argument: that the homograph dots took the idea of thick/thin vowels from an already established tradition of the <d> (which causes a vowel to be thin) and <r> (which causes a vowel to be thick) dots. (Thanks to Aaron Butts for pointing out the reverse argument.)

⁴ MS Vat Syr 1 fol. 111 lines 12, 17, 20.

⁵ Budge, *By Nile and Tigris* II, p. 72; Kiraz, *Orthography* §478 ff.

⁶ MS BL Add. 14,687 fol. 201^r. I am grateful to Liv Ingeborg Lied who pointed out this colophon.

⁷ MS Vat Syr 142 f. 124^r.

⁸ Brock, ‘A Syriac Letter on Papyrus’; Brashear, ‘Syriaca’.

CHAPTER 6

¹ On the Mhagyānē and Maqryānē, see Adam Becker, *The Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom*.

² MS Vat Syr 160 fol. 3^r col. 1 ln 24.

³ MS Vat Syr 140 fol. 2^r col. 3 ln 26.

⁴ MS Vat Syr 12 fol. 6^r col. 2 ln 13.

⁵ On the *serṭūnā*, see George A. Kiraz, *Orthography* §204.

⁶ MS Vat Syr 140 fol. 3^v col. 2 ln. 31.

CHAPTER 7

¹ Ceriani, *Translatio Syra Pescitto Veteris Testamenti* 407.

CHAPTER 8

¹ MS Vat Syr 111 fol. 24^r col. 1 ln. 28 ܩܘܘܝܘܢ; col. 2 ln. 15 ܩܘܘܝܘܢ; fol. 25^r col. 3 ln. 38 ܩܘܘܝܘܢ.

² The only exceptions which omit the dot on ܩܘܘܝܘܢ that I am aware of are the 3-volume *Patrologia Syriaca* and the Kings volume of the Leiden Peshitta edition. The former omits the dot on the grounds that it is redundant when the text is vocalized. The SEDRA database of the Syriac New Testament (Version 3.0) marked the dot using morphological fields and instructed programmers on how to place the dot when extracting the text. Many, alas, ignored the instructions and one now finds electronic texts of the Syriac NT online without the dot.

³ MS Vat Syr 160 f. 14^r col. 1 ln. 9–23.

CHAPTER 9

¹ MS Vat Syr 160 fol. 7^r col. 2 ln. 22; fol. 11^r col. 2 ln. 11; fol. 21^r col. 1 ln. 1.

² MS Vat Syr 140 fol. 2^r col. 2 ln. 21 dated April 528; MS Vat Syr 104 fol. 9^r ln. 16 dated August 564; MS Vat Syr 138 fol. 117^r col. 1 ln. 29 dated July 581.

³ MS Vat. Syr 160 fol. 5^r col. 1 ln. 4.

⁴ MS Vat Syr 140 fol. 1^v col. 1 ln. 13.

CHAPTER 10

¹ Rosenthal p. 13.

² Schmierer 1.2.

³ Translation from Richard Taylor for *The Antioch Bible* (forthcoming).

⁴ The word *mashlmānutho* ‘tradition’ does not appear exactly in the titles of these works; rather, it is used by Syriac writers to refer to various traditions (e.g. the Qarqaptā Tradition). I use it here as a replacement of ‘masora’ which does not apply to Syriac. For a discussion, see Loopstra, *Patristic Selections*.

CHAPTER 11

¹ MS Vat Syr 160 fol. 4^v col. 2 ln. 10 and ln. 21, respectively.

² MS Vat Syr 12 fol. 4^v col. 2 ln. 5.

³ MS Vat Syr 137 fol. 19^r col. 2 ln. 1.

⁴ MS Vat Syr 12 fol. 98^v col. 1 ln. 9; fol. 159^v col. 1 ln. 18.

⁵ For example, Vat. Syr 152 fol. 196^r, ln. 19.

⁶ MS Vat Syr 142 fol. 124^r ln. 2 (purchase note); Vat Syr 111 fol. 24^r col. 1 ln. 37.

CHAPTER 12

¹ Audo, *Simtā d-lešānā suryāyā*; Manna, *Kitāb*.

CHAPTER 13

¹ Loopstra, ‘Reading the Bible with the Taḥtāyā da-Tlātā’ (forthcoming).

² MS Vat Syr 104 fol. 2^v ln. 13.

³ MS Vat Syr 104 fol. 3^v ln. 10.

⁴ MS Vat Syr 142 fol. 3^r, col. 3 ln. 25.

⁵ MS Vat Syr 140 fol. 7^v, col. 3 ln. 6.

⁶ Coakley, ‘An Early Syriac Question Mark’.

CHAPTER 14

¹ Segal, *The Diacritical Point* 1.

² Wellesz, ‘Early Christian Music’.

³ Bar ‘Ebroyo, *Book of Rays* iv.6.1 p. 244.

CHAPTER 15

¹ Van Rompay, ‘Yawsep Huzaya’.

² Jacob of Edessa, *On Orthography* ⲙ.

³ Brock, ‘Dawid bar Pawlos’.

⁴ On Ḥunayn, see Butts, ‘Ḥunayn b. Iṣḥaq’.

⁵ Teule, ‘Eliya I of Ṭirhan’.

⁶ Van Rompay, ‘Isho‘yahb bar Malkun’.

CHAPTER 16

¹ Liberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* 44.

² MS Vat Syr 160 fol. 8^r col. 2 lines 13–14.

³ MS Vat Syr 140 fol. 2^v col. 2 ln. 17.

⁴ MS BL Add. 17,200 of 7th century, edited by R. Hespel in the CSCO 244/Syr 104, 1964, p.6.

⁵ MS Vat Syr 143 fol. 4^v lines 9–10. A seventh century version has been published (*Patralogia Orientalis* 22, p. 282).

⁶ Loopstra, *An East Syrian Manuscript of the Syriac ‘Masora’*.

CHAPTER 17

¹ Kiraz, ‘Garshunography’.

² Kiraz, *Orthography* §586 ff.

³ Takahashi, ‘Syro-Armenian’.

⁴ Trigona-Harany, ‘Syro-Ottoman’.

⁵ Sauget, ‘Vestiges d’une celebration Gréco-Syriaque del l’Anaphore de Saint Jacques’.

CHAPTER 18

¹ For exceptions, see n. 2 under Chapter 8 above.

² Translated by Craig Morrison for *The Antioch Bible* (forthcoming).

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