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To write in Greek or to write in Syriac: Dynamics of languages in North Syria in Late Antiquity

Françoise Briquel Chatonnet

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Shaping Letters, Shaping Communities

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Shaping Letters, Shaping Communities

*Multilingualism and Linguistic Practice in the Late
Antique Near East and Egypt*

Edited by

Yuliya Minets
Paweł Nowakowski



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To Write in Greek or to Write in Syriac

The Dynamics of Languages in North Syria in Late Antiquity

Françoise Briquel Chatonnet

The multicultural nature of today's world has given rise to new interest in the contact between languages, bilingualism, and even multilingualism. The idea of the coexistence of several languages in the same state, or at least the same political community, has repercussions for the political world because it touches on issues such as education, administration, public representation, and many others.

This current question is not new to the Near East, where multiple languages have always coexisted, and where there has often been a mismatch or distortion between spoken and written languages. One may think, for example, of the Levant, where for a long time people wrote in Babylonian Akkadian while speaking West Semitic languages. This distortion can lead to a situation in which one does not know in which language a message is written that one can read and understand, due to the nature of ancient non-phonetic writing systems: a 'sumerogram'¹ could be read in Sumerian, but also in Akkadian, Ugaritic, Hittite, depending on the context. The language of political power, which was the language spoken by the elites, and the language of culture could be different, not to mention the popular language.

In North Syria, Aramaic is attested as a written language from the ninth century BCE by inscriptions that can be roughly dated according to echoes in the Bible² or in Assyrian sources. Its diffusion through Assyrian mass deportation widened its geographical area of use, developing the language into an

1 A sumerogram is the use of a Sumerian cuneiform character or group of characters as an ideogram or logogram, rather than a syllabogram, in the graphic representation of a language other than Sumerian, such as Akkadian or Hittite.

2 E.g., inscriptions by Hazael (recently Maria Giulia Amadasi Guzzo, "Ancora 'Per il nostro signor Hazael': genere e cronologia relativa delle cosiddette 'Booty Inscriptions,'" in *A Oriente del Delta. Scritti sull'Egitto ed il Vicino Oriente antico in onore di Gabriella Scandone Matthiae*, ed. Agnese Vacca, Sara Pizzimenti, Maria-Gabriella Micale, Contributi e materiali di archeologia Orientale 18 [Rome: Scienze e Lettere, 2018], 1–17) or Zakkur, the stela from Tel Dan, the inscription on the statue of Tell Fekheriyeh. For all these texts see: Dirk Schwiderski, *Die*