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Chariots, mail coaches and wagons in the Arabic dialect of Qaṭrāyīth (“in Qatari”) in early Islamic eastern Arabia

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Abstract

This paper will present the evidence for two newly discovered words, *gawzag* and *shagar*, meaning “two-horse chariot/mail coach” and “wagon” respectively in the eastern Arabian dialect of Qaṭrāyīth (Syriac for “in Qatari”) of the seventh and eighth centuries CE. They reveal the continued local knowledge of wheeled transport in Arabia and possible use long after its supposed disappearance in the Near East between the fourth and sixth centuries according to Richard Bulliet’s well-known thesis in his seminal work *The Camel and the Wheel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). The fact that this vernacular maintained two specific words for two different modes of wheeled transport likely suggests a practical need for them in everyday communication among the inhabitants of the Beth Qaṭraye region (Syriac for “region of the Qataris” in north-eastern Arabia). Moreover, their use in an Arabic dialect reveals that native words were developed for wheeled vehicles in the local language spoken by the inhabitants of the area well before the adoption of *markabah* as a neologism to mean chariot in nineteenth-century Arabic, according to Michael Macdonald’s stimulating article “Wheels in a land of camels” (*Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 20/2, 2009). Thus, the various rock drawings of two-wheeled carts and chariots in northern Arabia may in fact not only have been known but also used nearby in eastern Arabia, rather than being inaccurate representations reflecting a distant awareness of the existence of chariots elsewhere such as in Mesopotamia and Egypt as had been previously thought. This is a literary, philological, and historical study that aims at presenting newly discovered vocabulary in context for further analysis by linguists and others.

Keywords: Arabia; Early Islam; Seventh-century eastern Arabia; Syriac Christianity; Early Arabic vernaculars

Beth Qaṭraye, Syriac for “region of the Qataris”, is a term found in Syriac literature referring to the region of north-eastern Arabia including today’s Qatar, Bahrain, and parts of the United Arab Emirates from the fourth to the ninth centuries CE. It was an important cultural, linguistic, and religious crossroads in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods, when it produced a number of important Syriac Christian authors who came from this region.

In the early Islamic period from the middle of the seventh century, Beth Qaṭraye produced a number of important Syriac authors.¹ Best known among them is the ascetic and mystical author Isaac of Nineveh, or Iṣḥaq Qaṭraya, who was born and lived for some time in Beth Qaṭraye, before Catholicos Giwargis took him to Beth Aramaye (Syriac for the

¹ Brock 1999.

southern Iraqi region). After a short-lived episcopate in Nineveh, he withdrew to an eremitic life in Beth Huzaye (al-Ahwaz province, Iran).² Another very important monastic author from this region is Dadishoʿ Qaṭraya.³ Among the various authors designated as Gabriel Qaṭraya in the sources, there is a biblical interpreter who was a teacher in Seleucia-Ctesiphon in the mid-seventh century, and a commentator on the liturgy who lived in the first half of the seventh century.⁴ His work on the liturgy was probably the main source for the short commentary attributed to Abraham Qaṭraya bar Lipeh.⁵ Another biblical interpreter frequently quoted in later sources is Aḥub Qaṭraya.⁶ Christians from Beth Qaṭraye also served as translators. For example, the Persian translator for the (undoubtedly Arabic-speaking) Lakhmid king al-Nuʿmān III (579–601) is said to have been a Christian from Beth Qaṭraye. Finally, an unnamed monk from Beth Qaṭraye is also credited with a preface and translation from Persian into Syriac of the *Law Book* by Shemʿon of Rev Ardashir.⁷

Newly published research collecting and analysing information on the pre-Islamic and early Islamic historical geography and toponyms of the Beth Qaṭraye region from the most important available Syriac sources as well as Arabic geographical works has revealed new vocabulary from the language of Beth Qaṭraye referred to as *Qaṭrāyīth* (“in Qatari”) used in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic period.⁸ A number of East-Syriac commentaries on the Peshitta Old Testament dating from the eighth and ninth centuries AD mention this enigmatic East-Arabian language. They also cite seventh-century Syriac authors originating from this region, such as Rabban Gabriel Qaṭraya and Aḥūb Qaṭraya who gloss biblical terms using *Qaṭrāyīth*. The literary and historical evidence of this newly discovered *Qaṭrāyīth* vocabulary, including the term for lot-casting, from two commentaries – the East-Syriac *Anonymous Commentary* (ninth century) and the older *Diyarbakır Commentary* (eighth century) – provides some evidence to suggest that *Qaṭrāyīth* may in fact be a local Arabic dialect or a language with significant Arabic components (e.g. broken plural and an a- definite article prefix), recorded therein using the Syriac script. Based on this new data of 50 words, it is also possible to demonstrate that the vernacular of *Qaṭrāyīth* appears, based on this sample, to consist mainly of Arabic vocabulary (40 out of the 50) as well as a few Syriac and Pahlavi loanwords, and maintains possible evidence of some Arabic and relatively fewer Syriac grammatical structures and lexical influences. As such, it constitutes the oldest evidence of Arabic from East Arabia, revealing a language that seems to be either a form of Arabic or significantly influenced by Arabic from that region. This literary and historical data now requires further analysis by linguists and others to confirm this hypothesis. Furthermore, *Qaṭrāyīth* vocabulary recorded using the Syriac script in these commentaries represents the earliest attestations of proto-Garshunographic development from the early Islamic period, dating back to the eighth century. As for authorship, based on internal and extra-textual evidence it can be argued that the anonymous author of the *Diyarbakır Commentary* and the unnamed editor of the *Anonymous Commentary* both originate from Beth Qaṭraye, suggesting that there may have been a Syriac school of exegesis originating from that region in this period, the School of Beth Qaṭraye, dating back to the seventh century at least, with high standards of

² For further biographical details see Kozah 2017: 459–62.

³ For a number of studies on Dadishoʿ Qaṭraya see Kozah et al. 2014. For a selection of his writings see Kozah et al. 2015: 155–253 and Kozah et al. 2016.

⁴ See Brock 2014.

⁵ For a full edition and translation see Kozah 2015a.

⁶ See Romeny 2014: 133–55.

⁷ For an edition and translation of the preface see Kozah 2015b.

⁸ See Kozah 2021.

learning, comparable in sophistication to the School of Nisibis.⁹ As such, *Qaṭrāyīth* contains the oldest evidence of Arabic from East Arabia. The historical, archaeological, and geographical studies undertaken so far have also revealed the cultural relations between this region and other areas around the Gulf, and how patterns of social predominance shifted over time, providing a better understanding not only of the dynamics of society within Beth Qaṭraye, but also the place of Beth Qaṭraye within the larger history of the Near East in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods.¹⁰

The source of this gathered *Qaṭrāyīth* vocabulary is a number of East-Syriac biblical commentaries and in particular the so-called East-Syriac *Anonymous Commentary (AC)*, a ninth-century work which in its most extended form covers both the Old and New Testaments.¹¹ The AC contains quotations from two seventh-century biblical commentators from Beth Qaṭraye mentioned above, Aḥub Qaṭraya and Rabban Gabriel Qaṭraya, the latter relied upon as an authority for both the Old and New Testaments, who is at times referred to as Gabriel Qaṭraya, or simply Gabriel or Rabban.¹² Rabban without further description is mentioned numerous times in the course of this commentary, in addition to “our Rabban”, suggesting a close relationship between him and its anonymous author.

Interestingly, in addition to citations from Aḥub and Gabriel Qaṭraya, the AC includes many glosses containing words in the vernacular language of *Qaṭrāyīth* spoken by *Qaṭraye* (Qataris) including the two newly discovered words, *gawzag* and *shagar*, meaning “two-horse chariot/mail coach” and “wagon” respectively. Perhaps the unnamed commentator or editor of the AC originated from Beth Qaṭraye and the “School” which he refers to throughout the text was one headed by Rabban Gabriel Qaṭraya himself in the Beth Aramaye region.¹³ The second possibility, related in part to the first, is that many of the readers of the AC were students from a school in Beth Qaṭraye¹⁴ who would therefore have benefitted from further elucidations and glosses in their own dialect of *Qaṭrāyīth*, a language also used by Aḥūb Qaṭraya and Gabriel Qaṭraya, two of the greatest Syriac exegetes of the seventh century who both hailed from Beth Qaṭraye as their demonym clearly indicates.

The Syriac term for chariot, *qarūkhā*, appears in the Peshitta Exodus 14:6,¹⁵ and is explained in the AC,¹⁶ where it is described as being of the type that is drawn by two

⁹ Kozah 2022.

¹⁰ See Al Thani et al. 2021.

¹¹ Of these manuscripts the oldest and most comprehensive, covering both the Old and New Testaments, is MS (olim) Diyarbakır 22. I am grateful to Lucas Van Rompay for kindly sharing his own digitized images (which I use in writing this article) of this lost manuscript, based on photoprints printed from a microfilm made in the 1950s, when the manuscript was in Mosul. The original microfilm (with a pagination of the microfilmed folios whereby MS folio 2 recto = microfilm page 3) has recently been digitized by the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library and is available on their website, renamed under shelfmark PI Mosul-Diyarbakır 13 (<https://www.vhmdl.org/readingRoom/view/502945>). The other manuscripts of the AC, which contain only the Old Testament part or even only the Pentateuch section are: MS Mosul 1; MS Kirkuk 8; MS St. Petersburg (olim Diettrich 2); MS Vat. Syr. 502; MS Vat. Syr. 578; MS Birmingham, Mingana 553; MS Louvain, CSCO Syr. 13; MS Chaldean Archdiocese of Irbil (ACE) 21.

¹² Not to be confused with the liturgical commentator Gabriel Qaṭraya bar Lipeh (also sixth/seventh century); see Brock 2011: 171.

¹³ We know that Gabriel Qaṭraya was associated, at least for some time, with the School of Seleucia. Perhaps this school, active from the sixth century onwards, served as a point of connection between the Nisibene tradition and the southern provinces; see Reinink 2013: 115–31.

¹⁴ Brock 2014: 165–6.

¹⁵ Exodus 14:6 = ܩܪܘܚܐ ܩܪܘܚܐ ܩܪܘܚܐ ܩܪܘܚܐ ܩܪܘܚܐ: “He made ready his chariots, and took his people with him”.

¹⁶ MS Diyarbakır 22 f. 30^r; Vat. Sir. 578 f. 14^r.

likelihood that this unidentified gloss is in the *Qaṭṛāyīth* of the anonymous eighth-century author and his readers from Beth Qaṭraye is further supported by the fact that *shaḡar* seems to be derived from the Arabic, the overwhelming pattern with *Qaṭṛāyīth* vocabulary.

A few small insights may also be gleaned from the newly discovered *Qaṭṛāyīth* vocabulary relating to the materials and tools that may have been used to produce the above chariots and carts. Two species of tree are mentioned in this local vernacular, both of whose wood is well suited for the construction of such wheeled vehicles, in part or in whole. First, the robust and rot-resistant cypress or juniper, *brūthā* in Syriac, is given in both the Peshitta 2 Samuel 6:5 and in the AC of MS Diyarbakır 22, where it is explained as being the ancestor (lit. father) of the cedar, mentioned immediately before it in the same verse, then *brūthā* is glossed using the *Qaṭṛāyīth* construct phrase *abū rish*.⁴¹

The cypress is its ancestor. In *Qaṭṛāyīth* it is *abū rish*.⁴²

That *abū rish* is evidently an Arabic construct phrase, with the sense of “feathered”, thereby also implying that the tree is tall and graceful, is further corroborated by the lack of a Pahlavi gloss and any possible Pahlavi comparable semantic equivalents. Arabic dialects from Eastern Arabia continue to use the term *abū* in everyday parlance to refer to an abundance of or source of something. It is also evidenced in numerous toponyms in the region. If, therefore, the *Qaṭṛāyīth* phrase is Arabic recorded using the Syriac script, and not in fact Syriac, then the construct *abū rish* (literally “father of feathers”) can be analysed as fully Arabic. Despite the fact that *rish* is written without a *yūdh* it is phonetically almost the same as Arabic *rīsh*, and as an Arabic construct phrase *abū rish* would, therefore, mean “feathered”, or “resembling feathers”. This would, therefore, be an appropriate epithet for a tall, thin, and graceful tree such as the cypress or juniper.

A less likely reading of *rish* would be that it is the Syriac form of the noun *rīsh*, written without a *yūdh*, meaning head, top, tip, or summit.⁴³ Thus the construct phrase, *abū rish*, or “very tall” (literally “father of the top/head”), may be a *Qaṭṛāyīth* local name for this species of tree which is tall and, perhaps also, with a pointed top. If this reading is correct then the *Qaṭṛāyīth* construct is a rare Syro-Arabic find where the first part is an Arabic noun while the second part is Syriac. The Syriac construct rules would then appear to be applied in this case given that *rish* is in the absolute form.

The second species of tree found in *Qaṭṛāyīth* is the tamarisk, another hardwood species which can be used for carpentry. The Syriac term for a shrub, *sīhā*, is given in both the Peshitta Genesis 21:15 and in the DC and AC, where it is glossed citing Rabban Gabriel Qaṭraya who states that the shrub referred to in this verse is in fact the *bīnā*, or tamarisk in Syriac, using the unidentified semantic equivalent *asl/atal* to clarify it to his readers.⁴⁴

However, Rabban states that it (*sīhā*) is the tamarisk, that is to say: *asl/atal*, which provides good shade despite not bearing fruit.⁴⁵

Since the anonymous author directly cites Rabban Gabriel Qaṭraya, who also generally glosses using his native *Qaṭṛāyīth*, there is evidence here to suggest that *asl/atal* is from this author’s own Arabic vernacular from Eastern Arabia and that of his readers, particularly given the absence of any Pahlavi semantic equivalent or gloss. It is particularly

⁴¹ MS Diyarbakır 22 f. 95^r l. 15.

⁴² Diyarbakır 22 f. 95^r l. 14–15: ܘܢܫܘܬܐܢܐ ܕܩܝܣܝܢܐܐ ܕܩܢܝܢܐܐ ܕܩܝܣܝܢܐܐ.

⁴³ Payne-Smith 1903: 539.

⁴⁴ MS Diyarbakır 22 f. 18^r l. 26.

⁴⁵ Diyarbakır 22 f. 18^r l. 25–6:

ܘܢܫܘܬܐܢܐ ܕܩܝܣܝܢܐܐ ܕܩܢܝܢܐܐ ܕܩܝܣܝܢܐܐ ܕܩܝܣܝܢܐܐ ܕܩܝܣܝܢܐܐ.

relevant that Henanisho⁶ bar Seroshway, cited in the Lexicon of Bar Bahlul, clearly relies on Rabban Gabriel Qaṭraya's gloss here, but conflates the definitions of both *binā* and *siḥā* as meaning tamarisk.⁴⁶ Furthermore, bar Seroshway records Rabban's *Qaṭrāyīth* into Arabic as *asl/athl* (not *atal* as witnessed in the AC), following the DC, thereby proposing in *athl* an Arabic derivation of the term.⁴⁷ If this is indeed a *Qaṭrāyīth* noun meaning tamarisk, then it appears to be derived, as bar Seroshway implies, from the Arabic *athl* used to signify the tamarisk.

Further extra-textual supporting evidence that this *Qaṭrāyīth* noun is derived from the Arabic of the Arabian Peninsula is found in Letter 2 of the Syriac Himyarite letters,⁴⁸ where it appears recorded in the Syriac script as ܐܬܪܐܬܐ, corresponding to Arabic *athala*, "a tamarisk". The final /a/ vowel of the Arabic noun has been written not by the phonetic but by the graphical equivalent of the *tā'* *marbūta* /t/ ending, which is characteristic of later Garshūnī and suggests that the dating of the Syriac Himyarite letters may be no earlier than the eighth century (the period in which the DC was composed). If, furthermore, this *Qaṭrāyīth* gloss is Arabic recorded using the Syriac script, and not in fact Syriac, then the noun *asl/atal* would be the local Arabic vernacular pronunciation of the Classical Arabic *athl*, where the dental stop /t/ in the *Qaṭrāyīth atal* or the alveolar fricative /s/ in *asl* found in the DC, both suggest a degree of Syriac influence on the pronunciation, or an Arabic where the /t/ or /s/ pronunciation rather than the inter-dental fricative /th/ features. *Qaṭrāyīth*, spoken in the region from at least the seventh century, may then have been a dialect in which the interdental fricatives of Classical Arabic were realized as dentals or even sibilants pointing to a sedentary urban dialect of the type that existed in the period after the Islamic conquests, somewhat like the Shiite dialect of present-day Bahrain.⁴⁹ Alternatively, the letter *taw* in *atal* may simply be indicating the Classical Arabic inter-dental fricative /th/, as it can do in later Garshūnī, in which case the *Qaṭrāyīth* lexeme would be pronounced exactly the same as the Classical Arabic *athl*, differing perhaps only in the possible addition of a short /a/ vowel. The likelihood, then, that this unidentified gloss derives from Rabban Gabriel Qaṭraya's own *Qaṭrāyīth* from Eastern Arabia and that of the DC readers is further supported by the fact that *asl / atal* appears to come from the Arabic, as with the majority of the newly discovered *Qaṭrāyīth* vocabulary.

In terms of tools which may have been used to construct these chariots and carts, the *Qaṭrāyīth* vocabulary at our disposal presents us with the word for "saw" or *aṣīr*, clearly indispensable for such a task, if indeed it took place in Beth Qaṭraye, in addition to its key use for the shipbuilding activities that undoubtedly did take place there. The Syriac term for saw, *ṭūrnūs*,⁵⁰ is given in both the Peshitta 1 Kings 7:9 and in the AC of MS Diyarbakır 22 where it is glossed using the *Qaṭrāyīth* semantic equivalent *aṣīr*.

The saw in *Qaṭrāyīth* is *aṣīr*⁵¹

Given that no Pahlavi gloss is given, nor is there a Pahlavi semantic equivalent that resembles the *Qaṭrāyīth* term for saw, one is left with the possibility that the Arabic *ma'āshīr*, or "saws", may ultimately be the source of *aṣīr*,⁵² although no clear semantic path is immediately apparent.

In a fascinating article entitled "Wheels in a land of camels: another look at the chariot in Arabia",⁵³ Michael Macdonald concludes at the very outset that the existence of rock

⁴⁶ Duval 1901: 1340.

⁴⁷ Duval 1901: 384.

⁴⁸ L2 xxii.3. See Shahīd 1971: 90.

⁴⁹ Holes 1983: 36.

⁵⁰ Sokoloff 2009: 522; Costaz 1963: 125. The term also has the sense of a lathe chisel (Payne-Smith 1903: 170).

⁵¹ Diyarbakır 22 f. 104^r l. 33: ܐܘܨܝܪܐ ܕܥܘܨܝܪܐ ܕܥܘܨܝܪܐ

⁵² Ar. مؤشّر pl. مآشير *mi'shār* pl. *ma'āshīr* saw, instrument with which wood is divided (Lane 1863: 62); saw (Hava 1915: 9).

⁵³ Macdonald 2009.

drawings of carts and chariots in the north of the Peninsula “is not proof that they were used in the areas where the drawings are found”, given that the terrain in the Arabian Peninsula is mostly unsuitable for the use of wheeled vehicles.⁵⁴ Seemingly alluding to Richard Bulliet’s argument in his well-known book *The Camel and the Wheel* that wheeled vehicles disappeared from the Middle East “after the third and before the seventh century A.D.”,⁵⁵ Macdonald appears to support this position by proposing that the existence of cart and chariot rock drawings in Arabia is not the result of their actual use there but based on knowledge acquired by the artists who produced them who “might have travelled to Egypt or Mesopotamia and seen wall paintings or reliefs of chariots”.⁵⁶ Furthermore, given the occurrence of *mrkbt* in the inscription by *b’hl*, the artist of one of the chariot rock drawings he is describing, Macdonald argues that the artist probably “took the word for ‘chariot’ (*mrkbt*) from the same source as his image of the chariot and his awareness of ‘foreign’ artistic conventions”, concluding that it is most likely a loanword from the Aramaic *markabtā*, meaning “chariot”, which was “widely used in Mesopotamia and the Levant by at least the mid-first millennium BC, while ... even in Egypt a North-West Semitic loanword for ‘chariot’ (*merkobt*) had been in use since the second millennium”.⁵⁷

Clearly, what applies to northern Arabia in terms of it being unlikely that a native word would exist for cart or chariot in the languages spoken by the nomadic inhabitants of a region of sand and basalt desert⁵⁸ and where such forms of wheeled transport were unlikely to develop was not the case in Beth Qaṭraye. Indeed, the fact that *Qaṭrāyīth* maintained two specific words for two different modes of wheeled transport, *gawzaq* for chariot and *shaqar* for cart/wagon, likely suggests a practical need for these names in everyday communication or their preservation in communal memory from an earlier generation among the inhabitants of the Beth Qaṭraye region. Could this be because chariots and carts were still being used in the seventh/eighth centuries, or had been within recent memory? Moreover, their use in an Arabic dialect reveals that native words were in fact developed for wheeled vehicles in the local language spoken by the inhabitants of the area well before the adoption of *markabah* as a neologism to mean chariot in nineteenth-century Arabic. This, according to Macdonald’s stimulating article, came about through Jewish and Christian translations of the Hebrew and Syriac Bible into Arabic by foreign missionary societies.⁵⁹ Thus, the various rock drawings of two-wheeled carts and chariots in northern Arabia may in fact not only have been known but also actually used at some point between the fourth and seventh/eighth centuries in eastern Arabia, and rather than being inaccurate representations reflecting a distant awareness of the existence of chariots elsewhere, such as in Mesopotamia and Egypt, they may in fact be depictions of wheeled vehicles from a neighbouring locality within the Arabian peninsula itself.

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⁵⁴ Macdonald 2009: 156.

⁵⁵ Bulliet 1990: 22.

⁵⁶ Macdonald 2009: 190.

⁵⁷ Macdonald 2009: 188.

⁵⁸ Macdonald 2009: 188.

⁵⁹ Macdonald 2009: footnote 73, 97.

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