

P.F. Fumagalli, 13 April 2023, h 9AM - 11AM

Vernacular Aramaic as a basic instrument for the Talmudic Culture in the 3th-5th Century

The Aramaic languages have a very long history in ancient, middle and late periods, starting from the 2nd millennium BC, until the few people speaking today a eastern Aramaic in Ma'alula, between Syria and Lebanon. Concerning the Syriac, in India in 1954 started a publication of the quarterly *Voice of the East* in English, Classical Syriac and modern Aramaic. As Heleen Murre-Van Der Berg affirmed "The Aramaic language – whether in the classical Syriac form of the Peshitta, liturgy and religious literature, or in its vernacular form that today is called *Sureth* ("Syriac"), *swadaya* ("vernacular"), or *Assyrian* in English – always has been a central element of the religious community. And it played an important role also in scientific and social life even ten centuries ago, when – as Yoram Erder is writing, in Omayyad period "much of ancient Greek literature had been translated into Arabic not directly from the original language, but from translations of this literature into Syriac, the language of the Eastern Christianity before the Muslim conquest". Here we will focus, however, on the Talmudic period in Babylon, Sura, Pumbedita, in 3th-5th century A.C.

In more ancient times, under the domination of subsequent empires – Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian – the so-called "Imperial Aramaic" became instrumental to international communication from the 8th to the 1st century BC in a large middle East area, from Egypt to Persia. The Jews, **deported in Babylon in years 597-585 BC, adopted a middle eastern Aramaic and started an oral and written interpretation of the Bible – the *Targum* – both in Imperial Aramaic (*Targum Onqelos*) and in popular/vernacular Aramaic (*Palestinian/Yerushalmi*, *Pseudo Jonathan*, *Neophyti Targums*) as well. Among the late forms of Eastern Aramaic we can distinguish the Syriac, the Mandaic, the Babylonian, this last reflected in the *Gemara* – i.e. **the Register of the oral Commentaries to the Mishnah, called *Babylonian Talmud*** – written in the 3rd-5th century in the Academies of Sura, Pumbadita, Babylon. Very few manuscripts of the Talmud survived the Christian persecution during Middle Age until the XVII century, but the **Bomberg edition in years 1519-23 in Venice** became the reference source for all the following editions. The Aramaic *Gemara* in the Talmud, thanks to the fundamental studies of Nathan of Rome, Yitzhaq Alfassi, and Rabbi Shelomoh ben Yitzhaq (Rashi, 11th century), until the talmudic studies in our days, is up today the greatest source for the intellectual, ethical and spiritual renewal not only of the Jewish people, but also for Christian believers and for non-believers as well. It could be compared, not without some caution, to other fundamental texts in other cultures, such as Church's Fathers' writings, the *Comedia* of Dante, the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas, or the huge field of Arabic studies on the *Shari'a*. Dialogue within the Jewish thinkers, and with arts and sciences in general, may be seen, ex. gr., in the text of *Baba Bathra* 74b-75a as related to the final page in the illuminated manuscript B 32 inf. in the Ambrosiana Library, dated 1236 ca. (see Plate annexed).**

Modern translations of Talmud:

- <https://korenpub.com/products/steinsaltz-talmud-bavli-29-volume-small-set?variant=39566337015886¤cy=USD>
(Modern Hebrew Translation of the Talmud, by A. Steinsaltz, 1965-2010)
- <http://ancientworldonline.blogspot.com/2012/01/online-soncino-babylonian-talmud.html>
(Talmud, Original Text and English translation by I. Epstein, London 1983-1990)
- <https://www.talmud.it> (Talmud, Original Text and Italian translation, vols. 1-8; 2017-2022, in progress)
- On the Ambrosian Ms. B 32 inf. see: P.F. Fumagalli, *“Nuovo Rinascimento” o “Nuovi Umanesimi” in Asia?*, in *Arte e letteratura nelle società in Asia: aspetti tradizionali e “Renaissance Orientale” – Art and literature in Asian societies*, G. Boccali - M. Angelillo (Edd.), Biblioteca Ambrosiana - Bulzoni Editore, Roma (Asiatica Ambrosiana 8), 2016, pp. 267-286.
- On the Syriac vernacular see the nr. 10 issue of *“Orientalia Ambrosiana”*, edited by the Ambrosiana Academy of Milan – Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana: in particular the article of Heleen Murre-Van Der Berg.