

Charles G. Häberl

The Neo-Mandaic Dialect of Khorramshahr

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Preface

This work is a description of a previously undocumented dialect of Neo-Mandaic, a Semitic language belonging to the Eastern subgroup of Aramaic dialects. This description is based upon newly collected texts, and constitutes the most thorough description of any dialect of Neo-Mandaic.

The data contained within are unique for numerous reasons. Neo-Mandaic, which represents the latest stage of the phonological and morphological development of Classical Mandaic, is the only surviving dialect of Aramaic directly descended from any of the attested dialects of Late Antiquity. While vernacular dialects of Aramaic do survive elsewhere in the Middle East, the other dialects thus far documented do not appear to be descended from any of the attested literary dialects. Furthermore, in most other dialects, the verbal system has been completely restructured; the synthetic forms characteristic of earlier dialects of Aramaic such as the suffix conjugation, the prefix conjugation, the imperative, and the entire system of derived stems have been replaced by new analytic forms. Neo-Mandaic preserves most of the original forms with the exception of the prefix-conjugation. Finally, as the modern reflex of Classical Mandaic, the liturgical language of the Mandaean religion, Neo-Mandaic deserves to be considered as both a living language of the modern Middle East and also the vehicle of one its greatest religious traditions, much like Hebrew, Arabic, and Persian. It is my belief that an increase in our understanding of the living language can only lead to a renewed appreciation of Mandaic as a classical language.

Unfortunately, contemporary attitudes towards Neo-Mandaic, both within the Mandaean community and outside it, range from the blithely indifferent to the hostile. The Mandaean Arabs describe it as a kind of 'mixed-up' or 'backwards' Arabic, and allophone Mandaean describe it as a kind of Persian or Arabic jargon,

overlain with a few Mandaic words. The scholar most responsible for our knowledge of the modern Mandaean community, Ethel S. Drower, described the vernacular language in pejorative terms throughout her career, and even Rudolf Macuch, the first scholar to document a Neo-Mandaic dialect, called its value into question, except in regard to its potential to illustrate aspects of the written language. Although I too embarked upon my study of the modern language with more than a few concerns, engendered by the educated opinions of scholars such as these, I have since observed the value of documenting Neo-Mandaic for its own right, not merely for the study of the classical language and other related Aramaic dialects, and it is my hope that my work will restore a sense of perspective regarding the language and demonstrate its value to both the scholarly and the Mandaean communities.

Mandaic is severely endangered today, and all signs indicate that it will become extinct with the current generation of speakers. As an account of an endangered language, this work also addresses one of the chief concerns of linguistics in the 21st century, namely the impending loss of the majority of the world's languages and the concomitant blow to both linguistic and cultural diversity that it represents. While it will not be possible to save all of the world's languages from extinction, we may still have an opportunity to document many of them before they disappear without a trace. This work is my own modest contribution to this task.

Like other first attempts at description, my efforts to write this grammar were confounded by the lack of an appropriate model. Despite the two collections of texts published by Macuch, which were furnished with sketch grammars, and the information on Neo-Mandaic contained within his *Handbook of Classical and Modern Mandaic*, many features of the grammar of Neo-Mandaic are documented for the first time herein. I have opted to follow the most current standards for language documentation, even though these standards have not been extensively applied to other languages of the Middle East. As the methodology of language documentation evolves, it is inevitable that field linguists will discover some practices that apply well to one language or language family do not necessarily apply as well to

another language or language family. It is my hope that I have successfully balanced these standards with the demands and reality of documenting an endangered Middle Eastern language like Neo-Mandaic.

One minor deviation from these standards is the unfortunate fact that nearly all of the information contained in this grammar has been collected from one individual, Nasser Sobbi of Flushing, New York. This was necessitated by the small size of the Mandaean community in the United States and the even smaller number of Mandaeans who speak Neo-Mandaic in their daily life. While his wife Shukrieh, who is also a fluent speaker of Mandaic, was willing to communicate in Mandaic with me, and often contributed vocabulary during the rare moments when Sobbi himself was at a loss for words, she was not comfortable with being taped. Sobbi's brother Dakhil Shoostary also speaks Mandaic fluently, but his work schedule prevented him from meeting with us during the times that I was visiting with Sobbi and his family. I did speak with him over the phone on several occasions during this period, and also communicated with Abdolkarim Moradi of Syosset, NY, who also speaks Neo-Mandaic fluently. Moradi was thrilled that I had taken an interest in his language and encouraged me (in Mandaic) to continue my studies, but was also unable to meet with us. In the future I hope to collect information from these two individuals to complement that which I have already collected from Sobbi. Fortunately, for the time being, scholars interested in Neo-Mandaic dialectology may avail themselves of the two text collections published by Macuch from his two informants.

During my early recording sessions in 2003, I made use of a Sony MZ-R30 Portable MiniDisc Recorder equipped with a noise-canceling microphone to record my sessions with Sobbi. I was unhappy with the quality of the recordings that were thus produced and found it difficult to reproduce them or convert them to other formats. I decided to adopt the Moving Pictures Experts Group Audio Layer 3 (MP3) format, as recordings in this format preserve most of their original fidelity at one tenth of their original size, making samples of the texts I had collected more portable and more easily reproduced. I purchased a Macintosh iBook laptop computer and recorded subsequent sessions with

SoundStudio 2.2.4, a freeware audio recording and editing tool developed by Felt Tip software. I then converted the resulting (uncompressed) data in Audio Interchange File Format (AIFF) generated by SoundStudio into MP3 format with iTunes, a proprietary digital media player application developed by Apple Computer. Although the MP3 files are much smaller in size, making them more easy to store and distribute, the compression involved in their conversion compromises the data, rendering them useless for phonological analysis. For this reason, I have retained the original uncompressed files and have arranged to have them archived at the Semitisches Tonarchiv of Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg (<http://www.semarch.uni-hd.de/index.php4>).

In addition to the Swadesh list (Table 5) and the ten texts which can be found in the text collection, I have also collected a number of other texts which I hope to publish separately. With the aid of these texts, and the data gathered by Drower and Macuch, in addition to the samples of Neo-Mandaic found in Nicholas Siouffi and Jacques de Morgan (see §1.5), I intend to produce a complete reference grammar of Neo-Mandaic. Such a reference grammar would necessarily require a more comparative and diachronic approach than the present work, the focus of which is primarily descriptive and synchronic, and thus restricted primarily to the phonology, inflectional paradigms, and morphosyntax of one particular dialect as derived from the texts in the accompanying text collection.

After a general introduction to the language, its speakers, and the history of scholarship, the phonology is described in the second section. The third section is dedicated to the noun phrase, the fourth to the pronouns, and the fifth chapter to the verb phrase. Section six concludes the discussion of the grammar some general observations about the language. Most of the examples in these chapters are culled from a collection of ten texts (five long texts, and five shorter ones), which are included in the second volume; the text of origin for examples drawn from the text collection is cited after each example.²

2 Some of the data, such as paradigms, isolated vocabulary items, and a few examples of morphosyntactic constructions in context, were drawn from other sources such as the ones mentioned above.

The final portion of the grammar is a lexicon, which is followed by a brief bibliography.

A Note on Transcription

For ease of reference and comparison, most of the words given in this grammar have been transcribed according to the conventions generally used for their language of origin. All Neo-Mandaic words, including loan words, follow the phonemic transcription system outlined in Tables 7 and 9. Classical Mandaic proper nouns that are still in common use (such as the titles of religious texts) are likewise transcribed according to this system. Other Classical Mandaic words are printed in **bold type**, according to the conventions adopted by Drower and Macuch in their dictionary, to distinguish them from Neo-Mandaic.

In several places throughout the grammar (but primarily in section 2), the International Phonetic Alphabet is employed to illustrate the phonology of Neo-Mandaic. Phonemic transcriptions are enclosed within /slashes/; phonetic transcriptions are enclosed within [brackets]. On rare occasions (e.g. in the Persian words derived from Arabic), a transcription reflecting the orthographic representation of a given phoneme or word will be indicated within <angle brackets>.

The transcription system adopted for examples from Arabic and Persian is also outlined in Tables 1 and 2. Transcriptions of Arabic vowels reflect the phonemic distinction between quantitatively long and short vowels, a : ā, i : ī, and u : ū. This distinction is not characteristic of Persian, which distinguishes between lax and tense vowels, a : ā, e : i, and o : u. The transcription of vowels in Persian words (including Persian words of Arabic origin) reflects this distinction rather than the quantitative distinction of Arabic. Likewise, as the transcription of Persian words (including those derived from Arabic) represents phonemic distinctions rather than orthographic ones, the consonants <h> and <ḥ> will always be represented as /h/, <s>, <ṣ> and <ṭ> will always be represented as /s/, and <z>, <ẓ>, <ḏ>, and <ḏ> will always be represented as /z/, regardless of their orthographic representation. The citation form for verbs in Neo-Mandaic within the text consists of the three principal parts (i.e. the

perfective stem, the imperative stem, and the active participle), e.g. *əhaḅ* ~ *əhoḅ* (*āheḅ*) ‘to give.’ Within tables and the lexicon, verbs are cited and arranged according to their consonantal root, e.g. ²*h-b* ‘to give.’ The citation form for Persian verbs is the infinitive, e.g. *dādan* ‘to give.’

Whenever the original form of a loan word is offered, the transcription generally represents the standard form of the language of origin (e.g. Modern Standard Arabic) rather than the specific dialect that yielded the word (e.g. the colloquial dialect of Khorramshahr). Exceptions are made for purely colloquial words with no equivalents in the standard language. While this has the effect of obscuring the precise origin of these loan words, it reflects the current state of knowledge on the Arabic of Khorramshahr, which is limited.

Commonly known proper names and other familiar words are cited according to their conventional English-language form without any diacritics. Hence, the name of the capital of the Ninawa governorate in northern Iraq is given as ‘Mosul,’ not *al-Mawṣil*. The names of contemporary Mandaean are also reproduced in their conventional English-language forms without diacritics, e.g. ‘Nasser Sobbi’ instead of ‘Nāṣir Šubbī.’

Interlinear Morpheme-by-Morpheme Glosses

Samples of Neo-Mandaic are given a line-by-line analysis with interlinear glosses, utilizing a slightly modified version of the Leipzig Rules,³ followed by a free translation. I opted to use the Leipzig Rules because they reflect current notational conventions in glossing morphosyntax and because they have the most currency among linguists. Each example is left-aligned, vertically, word for word, with the gloss beneath it.

3 C. Lehmann, "Directions for interlinear morphemic translations." *Folia Linguistica* 16 (1983): 193-224; more recently W. Croft, *Typology and Universals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. xix-xxv.

Example:

- (0.1) *anā* *agar* *gən-it* *āt* *guš* *əbud-∅*
 I if sleep.PFV-1SG you ear do.IMP.F-SG
 When I fall asleep, keep a lookout. (IV.46)

Segmentable morphemes are separated by a hyphen. On occasion, an expected morpheme may not be overt (e.g. the number of *əbud* above), in which case it is indicated by *∅*. Obviously, one morpheme in the object language may correspond to several in the gloss language, in which case they are separated in the gloss language by periods, with the exception of person and number. Clitic boundaries are indicated by an equal sign, in both the example and the gloss.

Example:

- (0.2) *šerš=an* *m=awwāl* *ālm* *həw-at*
 religion=1PL from=first world be.PFV-3SG.F
 Our religion has existed from the first epoch of time. (I.8)

In the examples above, each distinct morpheme is indicated by an abbreviated grammatical category label. In addition to the standard ones most commonly used among linguists, I have also adopted a few extra category labels to represent those features of Neo-Mandaic not generally found in other languages (a full list of category labels follows). Wherever possible, I have attempted to keep the gloss as simple as possible, by restricting the category labels to reflect only the distinctions present in the language itself. Furthermore, the morphosyntactic glosses should not be mistaken for a direct translation, which is given in the line that follows them. It is often the case that more than one English word is required to express a single Neo-Mandaic word in different contexts; this is particularly true with regard to the prepositions. In such instances, I have assigned the most common English gloss to the Neo-Mandaic word without regard to context.