

Surāya is Asurāya from Ashurāya, meaning Assyrian

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When analyzing a culture or linguistic group, applying the grammatical, phonetics, or semantic structures of a foreign language to define native terms leads to confusion and historical distortion. Just as native terms must be understood through the lens of the indigenous language of a group, the linguistic reality of the Assyrian people provides a clear example of the contradictions between how a group of people defines itself internally versus how it has been named by foreign populations throughout history.

The historical transition of the self-designation of the indigenous Assyrian people of the native region of “Māt Aššur” or English Assyria,¹ who later were the foundation of the Eastern Syriac-speaking Christians, is deeply rooted in linguistics. When the Assyrian population of Upper Mesopotamia converted to Christianity between the first and fourth centuries, they adopted the Eastern Aramaic dialect of Edessa (Urhay), known as Syriac as their liturgical and literary language. They identified themselves in their native tongue as *Surāye*. Because of the historical evolution of the word, the native terms *Surāya* is etymologically and historically identical to *Assurāya* [Ashurāya] meaning Assyrian, demonstrating that the modern self-designation of the Assyrians has remained unbroken for several millennia.²

The exonym or the foreign word “Assyrian” causes some confusion to certain non-native Assyrians, because it is not an endonym or native term. Ancient Assyrians did not refer to themselves under this foreign term “Assyrians,” which could not be found on any official document, tablet, monument, letter, or anything. The ancient Assyrians identified themselves as Aššurāye (Ashurāye).

When an Assyrian today asks a male fellow Assyrian in the native language, what is your ethnic background. The answer is “ܠܗܡܝܢ” (*Surāyā*), which means Assyrian. When an Egyptian asks a male Egyptian in the native Arabic language, who are you, the answer is immediately in the native Arabic language, “أنا مصري” (ana Masri), meaning “I am Egyptian.” The answer is not “*ana Egyptian*.”³ This is not confined to the Assyrians or Egyptians, a Greek would answer “Ellinas” (I am Greek) and an Armenian would say “Hay” (I am Armenian).

¹ Parpola, Simo and Michael Porter. “The Helsinki Atlas of the Near East in the Neo-Assyrian Period.” The CASCO BAY Assyriological Institute: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project. Finland, 2001, p. 21.

² Rollinger, Robert. “The Terms Assyria and Syria Again.” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 65, No. 4. University of Chicago Press, 2006, pp. 283-287.

³ I mentioned a male Assyrian and Egyptian, because names and verbs for male and female are different in the Syriac and Arabic languages.

Surāya in the native Assyrian language derived from *Asurāya* and this *Asurāya* is the Akkadian Aššurāya (*Ashurāya*).

Historical records indicate that around 1000 and 600 BC, increased phonetic fronting and backing of sibilants; graphic interchange between certain “š” (sh) and “s” series signs became noticeable in administrative and literary texts. However, we could state that it was between 600 BC and AD 400, Imperial Aramaic replaced Akkadian as the lingua franca of Mesopotamia,⁴ the native Semitic sibilants underwent structural shifts under Aramaic superstrate influence, leading to frequent shifts where the Assyrian historical “š” (sh) sounds merged with, or were realized as, “s” in various regional sub-dialects. This phenomenon extensively documented in the Semitic language family (Akkadian and Assyrian dialects) as a phonetic and orthographic evolution. Moscati writes that in Middle and New Assyrian original “š” often appear as “s.” He then states that the Hebrew transcriptions of Assyrian names confirm this fact.⁵

So now we know that the “š” (sh) evolved in time to the softer “s” and Aššuraya (*Ashurāya*) transformed to *Asurāya*.

However, in their daily speech, Assyrians do not use *Asurāya*, but simply *Surāya*, by dropping the initial “A”. This process is called apharesis by linguists. Professor of Assyriology Simo Parpola has shown that in late seventh century BC, Aramaic documents from Assyria the name Aššur (pronounced Assur and generally written ʾsr) could also appear as “Sur” (written sr).⁶ Meaning, the term was used with an “A” and without it. Parpola also argued that the indigenous designations *Sūrāya* and *Sūryōyo* ultimately derive from the Neo-Assyrian form *Sūrāyu*, which in turn is a variant of Aššūrāyu or Assyrian.⁷ In his book “Qaryaneh Jobyeh” (Selected Readings) published in 1906, Mar Tuma Audo, the Chaldean Catholic Church Archbishop of Urmia, on page 168 stated, “We in fact call ourselves generally “Surāyeh” and not Suryāyeh as some learned among us say. And it is obvious that “Surāya” is derived from “Atourāya” (Athourāya) as the “A” was dropped and the “T” (th) softened to an “S” as it has been customary in many places. For example, in Sina and Seert they pronounce the softened “T” as “S” and they say “meesa” instead of “meeta” (meetha) and “Alahosa” instead of “Alahota” (Alahotha) . Even in Urmia they say “Asas al-Bait” instead of “athath al-Bait” and “Ausman” instead of “Autman”.

Furthermore, according to Robert Payne Smith, Asor includes Asora, Asoraya, Asoraya [Asurāya]. It also means Assyrii, which was occasionally used during Greek classical period meaning Assyria.⁸

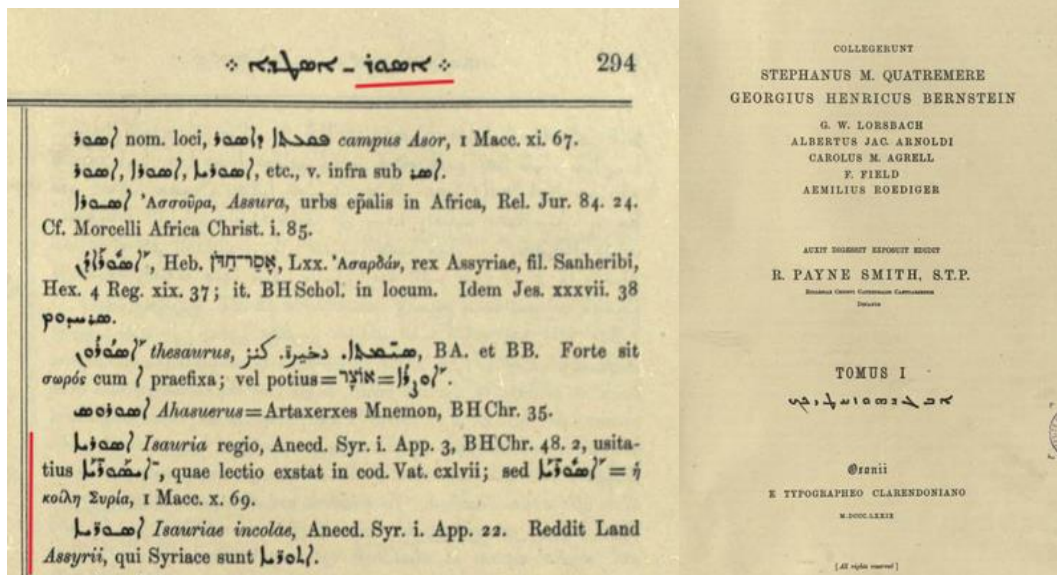
⁴ I must clarify that while cuneiform script was replaced by Aramaic alphabet in the Assyrian Empire official communications around the mid-eighth century, the Assyrian Akkadian spoken language did not lose its status.

⁵ Moscati, Sabatino. “An Introduction to the Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages: Phonology and Morphology.” Edited by Sabatino Moscati. Third Printing. Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1980, p. 35.

⁶ Parpola, Simo. “National and Ethnic Identity,” pp. 16 f. with n. 55.

⁷ Parpola, Simo. “Assyrian Identity in Ancient Times and Today.” Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2004.

⁸ Smith, Robert Payne. “Thesaurus Syriacus: Syriac-Latin dictionary.” Tomus I. E. Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1879, page 294.



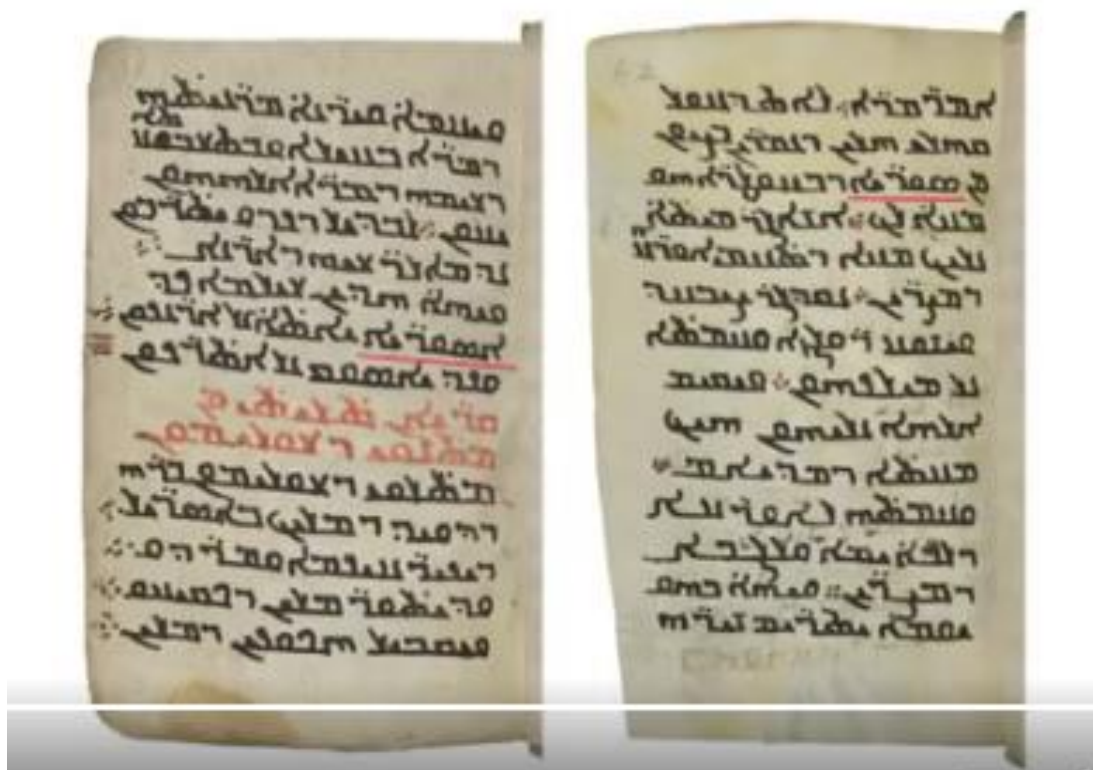
The dropping of the initial “A” is common in Assyrian (Syria) language. Consider the following examples:

1. “ܢܫܐ” Nasha means a person. It is actually written “ܢܫܐ” Anasha.
2. “ܙܠܐ” Zala means to go. It is actually written “ܙܠܐ” Azala.
3. “ܟܠܝܐ” Kharaya means the last. It is actually written “ܟܠܝܐ” Akhraya.
4. “ܟܠܬܐ” Khalta means food. It is actually written “ܟܠܬܐ” Akhalta.
5. “ܡܪܐ” Mara means to say. It is actually written “ܡܪܐ” Amara.
6. “ܫܝܩܐ” Syaqa means to do up or ascend. It is actually written “ܫܝܩܐ” Asyaqa.
7. “ܫܝܪܐ” Syara means to bind or join. It is actually written “ܫܝܪܐ” Asyara.
8. “ܪܙܢܐܝܐ” Razanaya means sacramental. It is actually written “ܪܙܢܐܝܐ” Arazanaya.
9. “ܬܝܐ” Taya means coming. It is actually written “ܬܝܐ” Ataya.
10. “ܓܪܝܗ” Gareh means roof or terrace. It is actually written “ܓܪܝܗ” or Agareh.
11. “ܫܬܐ” Shata means fever. It is written “ܫܬܐ” Ashata.
12. “ܟܠܝܐ” Khrena means the other. It is written “ܟܠܝܐ” Akhrena.

In Westminster College, Cambridge exists an eleventh century CPA (Christian Palestinian Aramaic) scripture manuscript which has syntactical constructions based on Greek. In chapters five and ten we find both Surāya and Asurāya used interchangeably.⁹

⁹ Lewis, Agnes Smith. “A Palestinian Syriac Lectionary.” Cambridge University Press. 2015. Accessed August 18, 2026.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_Palestinian_Aramaic#/media/File:Palestinian_Syriac_lectionary_by_M._D._Gibson.png



Thus, Ashurāya and Surāya are endonym words and Assyrian is the exonym English word for Ashurāya, *Asurāya* and *Surāya*.

Another native word that evolved from Ashur is Athur. The linguistic shift from the name Ashur (or *Aššur*) to Athur (or *Athura*) is a phonetic evolution that occurred primarily during the transition from the Old Persian into the Achaemenid period, which was heavily influenced by Aramaic phonology. In ancient Assyrian, the name of the national god, city, and empire was pronounced and written with a central sibilant (š or šš). However, when the Achaemenid Persians conquered the Neo-Assyrian Empire's former heartlands, they administered the province using Imperial Aramaic as the *lingua franca*. In Aramaic, the š or šš frequently underwent dentalization when interacting with surrounding dialects and Persian administrative transcription, leading to the substitution of the 'sh' sound with a 'th' or 't' sound, which led to the use of forms such as *Athura* or *Athur*. In the Behistun Inscription of Darius I (c. 520 BC), written in Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian, the region of Assyria is explicitly referred to in the Old Persian sections as *Āthura*, while the Elamite version uses *A-ḫu-ra* and the Babylonian uses *Aššur*.^{10 11}

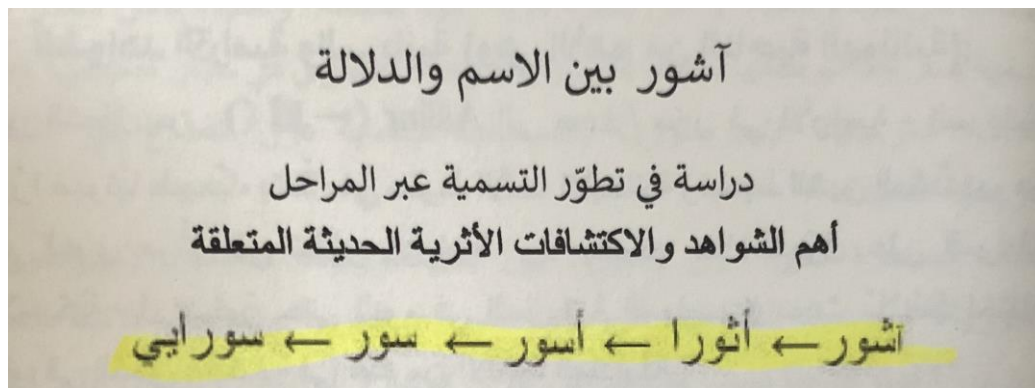
¹⁰ Olmstead, A. T. "Darius and His Behistun Inscription." *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Oct., 1938). The University of Chicago Press. Accessed August 18, 2026 https://archive.org/stream/DariusAndHisBehistunInscription/Olmstead19380DariusAndHisBehistunInscription_djvu.txt

¹¹ Rawlinson, H. C. "The Persian Cuneiform Inscription at Behistun, Decyphered and Translated; With a Memoir on Persian Cuneiform Inscriptions in General, and on That of Behistun in Particular." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*. 1848. Accessed August 18, 2026 <https://archive.org/details/jstor-25581217/page/n5/mode/2up>

COL. II.

1	I	Thātīya	Dārāyawuṣh	K'hshāyathīya	postea	Nat'itabira	ha
		Dicit	Darius	rex :		Natitabirus	
2	da	kamamābīsh	asāraibīsh	abīgā	Bābīr'mm	ashiya	
	eum	fidelibus	equitibus	ad	Babylonem	fugie-	
3	wa	pasīwa	adam	Bābīr'mm	ashīyāram	āha	utā
	fest :	postea	ego	Babylonem	progrediebā,	et	Bā
4	bir'mm	agarbāyām	utā	awām	Nat'itabīr'mm	agarbāy'mm	pasīwa
	bylonem	capiebam,	et	eum	Natitabīr'mm	capiebam,	postea
5	m	Nat'itabīr'mm	adam	Bābīr'mm	awājhanam	II . Thātīya	Dār(a)yawuṣh
	um	Natitabīr'mm	ego	Babylone	occidebam.	Dicit	Darius
6	shāyathīya	yātī	adam	Bābīr'mm	āham	imā	dabydwa
	rex :	dum	ego	Babylone	eram,	hū (sunt) provincie	tyā
							hachāma
							ha
7	mītrīya	abawa	Pārsa	Uwajha	Māda	Athurā	Armenīa
	belā	fiebant :	Persis	Susian	Media	Assyria	Armenia
							Parthwa
							Marghush
							Tha
8	taghū-h	Saka	III . Thātīya	Dār(a)yawuṣh	K'hshāyathīya	I	martiya
	tagydn,	Sacia	Dicit	Darius	rex :	homo	Martius
							no-
9	ma	Chiekh'hrāsh	putra	Khuganākā	nāma	wardanm	Pārsiya
	minutus,	Sisicris	filius,	Kuganaca	nominatum	oppidum	Persidis
							eo loco
							habitat :

We must understand that English was completely foreign to Assyrians until around the early nineteenth century as the missionaries began to arrive to historic Assyria region in northern Mesopotamia. So how do people expect the Assyrians, and their immediate neighbors, to use this foreign English term “Assyrian” (derived from Greek and Roman sources) to describe themselves. Therefore, when searching for references about Assyrians, one must first search for native records about Ashurāya, Athurāya, Surāya or Suroyo depending on the geographic location and time period, and the plural form Surāye. Next, one needs to search for records from the Assyrians’ immediate neighbors, i.e. the Arabs (used Ashuri or Athuri), Persians (used Ashuri and Asori), and Turks (used Asurlar) and Armenians (used Asori)¹² and finally seek records from distant groups.¹³



Courtesy of Eshu Marcus, “The Church of the East: Between Ecclesiastical Identity and National Identity.”

¹² Al-Jeloo, Nicholas. “Syrian, Aramean or Assyrian? Reflections on the Armenian word ‘Asori’.” Guest lecture at Yerevan State University (Armenia). 2025. Accessed July 28, 2026
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFPyHF_BxRw

¹³ Marcus, Eshu. “The Church of the East: Between Ecclesiastical Identity and National Identity.” In Arabic. Lulu. 2026.

The confusion caused by the western historians and theologians has caused additional nuisance for the Assyrian people and history. For example, early Christian historians frequently used the term “Syrian” to refer to the Assyrians. These historians made the mistake when they used corrupted English translation for the Greek terms when referring to the region and its people, a practice that persisted in Western historiography for centuries. This practice persisted despite several accounts that settled the issue. In the classical period, the Greek terms *Syria* and *Assyria* were used interchangeably.¹⁴ This was famously noted by the fifth century BC Greek historian Herodotus in his *Histories*: “These [Assyrians] are called by Greeks Syrians, but the foreigners called them Assyrians.”¹⁵

In ancient Greek literature, the terminology evolved alongside political boundaries and ethnic designations. Classical authors such as Herodotus, Xenophon, and Strabo frequently discussed the region and its populations, though they occasionally used the terms *Assyrii* and *Syrii* interchangeably, particularly in the post-Achaemenid period. However, the direct Hellenic linguistic equivalent for the geographic and ethnic continuity of the ancient Assyrians remained Ἀσσύριοι (*Assyrioi*). This classical designation forms the etymological root for modern European terms, including the English “Assyrian,” linking the classical Hellenic descriptions of the ancient Near East directly to modern historical lexicons.¹⁶ This linguistic equation was officially confirmed in 1997 with the discovery of the Çineköy inscription, a bilingual Luwian-Phoenician monument dating to the eighth-century BC uncovered in the vicinity of Adana, modern Türkiye. The inscription proves monumentally that the Greek word *Syria* is a direct derivative of the Akkadian *Assurayu* (Assyria), where the initial “A-” was dropped in Western Anatolian and Greek pronunciation.^{17 18}

The problem around the term Syrian was compounded with the 1941 creation of the new Arab Muslim country Syria, where now its citizens became known as Syrians as well. This now Arab Muslim person became mixed up with a Syriac-speaking Christian. At any rate, the topic of this paper was to show that Surāya and Ashurāya, from which evolved Aturāya and Athurāya, were native words, while Assyrian was a non-native term.

I found the below accidentally. It reflects on the etymological evolution of the term Surāya. I hope it makes all the above easier to digest.

¹⁴ Frye, Richard. “Assyria and Syria: Synonyms.” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Oct., 1992), pp. 281-285.

¹⁵ Herodotus. “The Histories.” Translated by A. D. Godley. Vol I, Books I & II. Harvard University Press. London, William Heinemann Ltd. First printed 1920.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Aprim, Fred. “The Çineköy Inscriptions: Proving Syria is Derived From Assyria.” Published December 2022. <https://www.fredaprim.com/pdfs/2022/The%20Chinkoy%20Inscription.pdf>

¹⁸ “Çineköy inscription: Bilingual inscription from Anatolia in 8th century BC.” Accessed August 13, 2026. https://reference.org/facts/cinekoy_inscription/gLRLQock

