

## Vowel Names in West Syriac and East Syriac

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When learning Classical Syriac, it can sometimes be difficult to make sense of the names that are used for vowels in Classical Syriac. Part of the reason has to do with the fact that the names of vowels are pronounced somewhat differently in West Syriac compared to East Syriac. Another reason has to do with the fact that the names of some vowels in West Syriac are different from their names in East Syriac. But the primary reason has to do with the fact that some vowels in East Syriac have more than one name.

The purpose of this post is to compare the names of the vowels that are used in West Syriac and East Syriac and to clear up some of the confusion that can come because of the differing names that are used.

We can begin with the names of the vowels that are identical in West Syriac and East Syriac:<sup>1</sup>

West Syriac		East Syriac	
pt̄ōḥō' (ⲡⲧⲟⲥⲟ)	a	pt̄āḥā' (ⲡⲧⲁⲥⲁ)	a
zqōpō' (ⲪⲚⲟⲡⲟ)	ō	zqāpā' (ⲪⲚⲁⲡⲁ)	ā
ḥbōšō' (ⲬⲃⲟⲨⲟ)	ī	ḥbāšā' (ⲬⲃⲁⲨⲁ)	ī

As we can see in the chart, there are only three vowels in West Syriac and East Syriac that have identical names for the same vowels. The differences in the names of these vowels as well as the difference in pronunciation between the zqōpō' (ⲪⲚⲟⲡⲟ) and the zqāpā' (ⲪⲚⲁⲡⲁ) can be explained by the fact that the long *a* (ā) in Classical Syriac shifted to a long *o* (ō) in West Syriac (cf. Nöldeke §44). Once this shift in pronunciation is recognized, it is easy to recognize that the names of these vowels correspond with each other perfectly.

In some cases, however, the names of the vowels in West Syriac are simply different from the names that are used in East Syriac:<sup>2</sup>

West Syriac		East Syriac	
rbōšō' (ⲠⲃⲟⲨⲟ)	e	zlāmā' pšîqā' (ⲪⲬⲁⲙⲁ' ⲡⲨⲓⲚⲁ)	e
		zlāmā' qašyā' (ⲪⲬⲁⲙⲁ' ⲚⲁⲨⲓⲙⲁ)	ē
'šōšō' (ⲨⲟⲨⲟ)	u	rwāḥā' (Ⲡⲱⲥⲁ)	ō
		rbāšā' (ⲠⲃⲁⲨⲁ)	ū

Several points should be noted here. First, the rbōšō' in West Syriac corresponds to two separate vowels in East Syriac: the zlāmā' pšîqā' and the zlāmā' qašyā'. Second, the 'šōšō' in West Syriac corresponds to two separate vowels in East Syriac: the rwāḥā' and the rbāšā'. Third, the rbōšō' in

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Nöldeke §§ 8-9; Muraoka §4; Mingana §§14-33; Sokoloff (under each name); Payne Smith (under each name).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Nöldeke §§ 8-9; Muraoka §4; Mingana §§14-33; Sokoloff (under each name); Payne Smith (under each name).

West Syriac has the same name as the *rbāšā*’ in West Syriac but represent different vowel sounds (e vs. ū). Finally, as was noted earlier, the names of the corresponding vowels are simply different from each other.

It should also be noted that some vowels used in East Syriac have more than one name. These alternative names correspond more closely with their equivalents in West Syriac:<sup>3</sup>

West Syriac		East Syriac	
rbōšō’ (ⲟ)	e	zlāmā’ pšīqā’ (ⲟ)	e
		= rbāšā’ ’arrīkā’ (ⲟ)	
		zlāmā’ qašyā’ (ⲟ)	ē
		= rbāšā’ qašya’ (ⲟ)	
		= rbāšā’ karyā’ (ⲟ)	
‘šōšō’ (ⲟ)	u	rwāḥā’ (ⲟ)	ō
		= ‘šāšā’ rwīḥā’ (ⲟ)	
		rbāšā’ (ⲟ)	ū
		= ‘šāšā’ ’allīšā’ (ⲟ)	

Note that the word ’arrīkā’ means “short,” the word qašyā’ means “hard,” the word karyā’ means “short,” the word rwīḥā’ means “wide,” and the word ’allīšā’ means “narrow” or “short in pronunciation”.<sup>4</sup> The reason why the East Syriac vowels have alternative names is because these vowel points were also sometimes used by West Syriac writers (e.g. Bar Hebraeus).<sup>5</sup> The transliterations for the alternative names have ā instead of ō simply for the sake of convention (i.e. when using the Estrangela script or the East Syriac script, the transliterations for East Syriac are used). However, these names would have been pronounced using the long ō. This explains why the alternative names correspond more closely with the names that are used in West Syriac.

So what names should you memorize when you are learning Classical Syriac? In an ideal world, it would be best to memorize all of the names. However, as you begin to study Classical Syriac, it is best to keep things as simple as possible. My recommendation is that if you are learning Classical Syriac using the West Syriac script, you should use the names that are used in West Syriac. However, if you are learning Classical Syriac using either the East Syriac script or the Estrangela script, you should use the names of the vowels that are used in East Syriac.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Nöldeke §§ 8-9; Muraoka §4; Mingana §§14-33; Sokoloff (under each name); Payne Smith (under each name).

<sup>4</sup> Note that Muraoka has a typo and spells it ‘allīšā’. In Syriac it is spelled ܐܠܠܝܫܐ.

<sup>5</sup> See especially Mingana §24.