



BRILL

INTELLECTUAL HISTORY
OF THE ISLAMICATE WORLD 7 (2019) 264–277

**Intellectual
History
of the
Islamicate
World**
brill.com/ihw

A Functional Approach to Garshunography

A Case Study of Syro-x and x-Syriac Writing Systems

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Abstract

It is argued here that functionalism lies at the heart of garshunographic writing systems (where one language is written in a script that is sociolinguistically associated with another language). Giving historical accounts of such systems that began as early as the eighth century, it will be demonstrated that garshunographic systems grew organically because of necessity and that they offered a certain degree of simplicity rather than complexity. While the paper discusses mostly Syriac-based systems, its arguments can probably be expanded to other garshunographic systems.

Keywords

Garshuni – garshunography – allography – writing systems

It has long been suggested that cultural identity may have been the cause for the emergence of Garshuni systems. (In the strictest sense of the term, ‘Garshuni’ refers to Arabic texts written in the Syriac script but the term’s semantics were drastically extended to other systems, sometimes ones that have little to do with Syriac—for which see below.) This paper argues for an alternative origin, one that is rooted in functional theory. At its most fundamental level, Garshuni—as a system—is nothing but a tool and as such it ought to be understood with respect to the function it performs. To achieve this, one must take into consideration the social contexts—plural, as there are many—under which each Garshuni system appeared. The cases presented below demonstrate that Garshuni systems exhibited a certain degree of purposiveness aim-

ing at a “notable degree of simplification”¹ for the intended audience. Thus, these systems may not have been the result of design and planning that is motivated by cultural identity, as assumed thus far, but rather a natural progressive development of a writing system for the simple purpose of fulfilling a need. All of this does not deny cultural identity a role in the life of Garshuni systems. But such a role is more likely to be a mere secondary development and not the primary cause of the emergence of these systems.

This paper consists of three parts. Part I approaches the inquiry at hand by outlining the various Garshuni systems in chronological order emphasizing the functional aspects of each system from a cultural perspective. Part II demonstrates how functionalism also lies at the heart of a reversal Garshuni system where the Syriac language is now written in other alphabets. It must be kept in mind that the term ‘Garshuni’ is not as ancient as the systems themselves are and is only known to us from the sixteenth century. The semantics of the term ‘Garshuni’ and its later adaptations is discussed in part III.

1 Syro-x Systems: Writing Languages in the Syriac Script

The use of the Syriac script to write languages other than Syriac is quite complex. The first language to make use of the Syriac script, or a close offshoot of it, is Christian Palestinian Aramaic (CPA). So close was the CPA script to the Syriac Estrangela script that scholars called the language “Palestinian Syriac” during the nineteenth and a good part of the twentieth century.² Early CPA texts are fragmentary and come to us in the form of inscriptions dated between the fifth and eighth century with complete manuscripts surviving only from the eleventh century.³ No one, however, thinks of CPA as a Garshuni system simply because Syriac and CPA are both Aramaic and there is no other *normative* way to write CPA. Rather, it can be considered an adaptation of the Syriac script with one additional grapheme, ܥ. The grapheme is a reversal of Syriac ܦ, ܦ.

1 Anderson, *A Functional Theory of Cognition*, p. viii.

2 For example, Lewis and Gibson, *The Palestinian Syriac Lectionary* and Schulthess, *Lexicon Syropalaestinum*.

3 The earlier texts appear in the following publications: Brock, “Fragments”; Desreumaux, “Une inscription araméenne melkite”; Desreumaux, *Codex Sinaiticus Zosimi Rescriptus*; Humbert and Desreumaux, *Fouilles de Khirbet es-Samra en Jordanie*; Müller-Kessler and Sokoloff, *A Corpus of Christian Palestinian Aramaic*; Puech, “Notes d'épigraphie”. Later texts: Lewis and Gibson, *The Palestinian Syriac Lectionary*; Black, *Rituale Melchitarum*; Black, *A Christian Palestinian Syriac Horologion*. Bibliography from Brock, “Christian Palestinian Aramaic,” pp. 96–97.

ʿAs Syriac is rich in allography—each grapheme can have up to four allographs, initial, medial, final and standalone—the adapted CPA grapheme **ⲉ** inherited the allographical properties of its parent grapheme **Ⲁ**.¹

But Sogdian written in the Syriac script, where two alternative scripts were already available (the Sogdian and Manichean scripts), is an entirely different story.⁴ Cognitively, we think of it as a Garshuni system by analogy to Syro-Arabic Garshuni: the language is further than CPA from Syriac, but more importantly there were other ways to write Sogdian. Sogdian texts from the Turfan oasis in West China, written in the Syriac script, are dated to the eighth century. These texts exhibit a well-developed system of writing as three Syriac consonants were already extended to represent sounds not found in Syriac. ʿHere too, the new graphemes took on the allographic properties of their parent graphemes in terms of connectivity.¹ Syriac-speaking missionaries and their Sogdian collaborators were in need of a writing system in order to translate Biblical and liturgical texts from Syriac into Sogdian. We can imagine that the Syriac missionaries also needed to learn Sogdian and write down what they are learning. At the same time, they needed to teach the locals the Syriac language for liturgical and pedagogical purposes. Dealing with one script would simplify matters especially in Late Antiquity where literacy rates were quite low. Maybe the educated elite can be expected to master more than one script. But liturgy was for the ‘simple’ with low literacy standards even for the minor ranks of the clergy.⁵ Simply by adapting three Syriac letters for Sogdian sounds not found in Syriac, the Syriac script was sufficient for this purpose. The process is easier to understand from a functional perspective rather than by design and planning. It may have started with the missionaries jogging down some Sogdian in Syriac to learn the language of their hosts and then realized that they can translate texts using the same tool.

The tenth century brings us Persian texts written in the Syriac script.⁶ Missionary hands can be seen at work in a bilingual Syriac-Persian Psalter that survives. But other evidence shows that these Garshuni systems must have become more normative at least among the Christian communities. We have a pharmacological text written Syro-Persian. The Persian system adopted the three Sogdian consonants and added to them three others (a total of six). The functional aspects here are analogous to the case of the Sogdian system. Syro-Persian writing emerged as a necessary tool to fulfill a need.

4 See Yakubovich, “Sogdian,” pp. 382–383.

5 On the ‘simple’, Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East*.

6 See Sims-Williams “Syro-Sogdian and Persian.”

Both the Syro-Sogdian and Persian systems were further East from the heartland of Syriac Christianity. Further West, in Greek and Syriac bilingual environments, we encounter Greek written in the Syriac script. Isolated instances begin to emerge in the ninth century. Here, we do not encounter missionary activities; rather, a bilingual social sphere that gave rise to the writing system. Syriac-Greek bilingual monasteries and communities have been known for some time in Syria.⁷ Priests who served bilingual communities needed to perform the liturgy bilingually. Syriac priests who did not know much Greek could simply transliterate snippets of Greek texts into their own script. The following example is taken from the Anaphora of St. James, the main Anaphora in use in Syria, where the rubrics (and most of the manuscript) are in Syriac, but the actual prayer snippet is in Greek:

[Syriac language/Syriac script] The priest bows his head in front of the altar, prays the prayer of the bowing of the head, and he says at its conclusion: [Greek language/Syriac script] και πλήρωσον τὰ στόμα ἡμῶν αἰνέσεως και τὰ χεῖλη ἀγαλλιόσεως και τὰς καρδιάς χαράς και εὐφροσύνης.⁸

The Anaphora contains silent and audible prayers. The silent prayers are always given in Syriac as the faithful need not hear them. But the audible parts are given in Greek (using the Syriac script). With this tool at hand, any priest with minimal or no knowledge of Greek can perform the liturgy. Writing the Greek part in the Greek script would have limited the audience, and maybe market, of this manuscript. The emergence of Syro-Greek writing is clearly not a result of cultural identity, but rather a functional necessity.

It is not until the twelfth century until we see the first instances of Arabic written in the Syriac script, what we now call Garshuni in the strictest sense though the term was unknown at the time—at least we have no record of it. The earliest case of Arabic Garshuni is a historical note dated 1154 found in the famous Rabbula Gospel manuscript.⁹ Having said that, representing Arabic utterances has earlier antecedents. The Syro-Persian system described above, which dates back to at least the tenth century, contains a high degree of Arabic loan words. Syro-Persian scribes adapted an existing dotting tool to represent Arabic sounds not found in Syriac. Six Syriac phonemes had double sounds:

7 Brock, "Greek and Syriac in Late Antique Syria"; Taylor, "Bilingualism and Diglossia."

8 Sauget, "Vestiges d'une célébration Gréco-Syriaque," pp. 311–312.

9 Ceccheli, Furlani, Salmi, *The Rabbula Gospels*. For a discussion, see Van Rompay, "Rabbula Gospels."

each of these phonemes had two allophones, a plosive and a fricative. As early as the sixth century, Syriac scribes denoted the plosive allophone with a supralinear dot and the fricative allophone with a sublinear dot. But each of these allophones was a phoneme in its own right in Arabic. The existing, albeit optional, dotting system was useful to represent Arabic sounds. This extension was carried over in Syro-Arabic Garshuni.

By the time we begin to receive complete Syro-Arabic Garshuni manuscripts during the second millennium, the Arabic script had already been established as the normative script for Arabic. Why would Syriac Christians *switch* to the Syriac script?

One must first question if Syro-Arabic existed during the first millennium. A clear answer cannot be provided due to the lack of material evidence. Syriac-Arabic interaction, however, was very common. Both the Church of the East and the Syriac Orthodox Church had followings amongst the Arabic-speaking tribes as early as the fifth century and mostly during the sixth.¹⁰ This contact was common in settled areas such as al-Ḥira, Kufa and Najran, to name a few. Arabic-speaking pupils at Deir al-Iskūl, an Arabic-speaking monastery under the domain of Syriac Christianity, may have used the Syriac script to write at least notes. Syriac speakers who needed to learn Arabic to communicate with Christian Arabs also needed a way to write Arabic. I have already pointed out that many Arabic loan-words in Persian already appear in Syro-Persian Garshuni writings of the first millennium. If indeed Syro-Arabic did exist in the first millennium—and again, we have no material evidence—then its emergence was clearly an organic development and not by design.

If, however, we submit that Garshuni is a second millennium phenomenon, there is still a problem with the argument that a *switch* from the Arabic to the Syriac script took place. Apart from the Syriac Christian Arabic-speaking tribes, the remainder of Syriac Christianity was still Aramaic speaking by the beginnings of the second millennium. As the Aramaic speakers became more and more familiar with Arabic and turned into bilinguals, they may have adapted their script to write Arabic directly in a natural process. The ease of the Syriac script when compared with the Arabic script could have been another factor. Apart from one dotted grapheme, there is a one-to-one mapping between Syriac graphs and consonantal sounds. This is not the case with Arabic. As Syriac-speaking Christians became Arabized, it would have been natural for them to use their script to represent another Semitic language that had similar sounds. Both systems were consonateries and it would not be difficult to employ the

¹⁰ On the Christian Arabs, see Trimmingham, *Christianity*.

Syriac script instead of the Arabic one. In fact, it is not farfetched that many literate Syriac Christians who by now were Arabic speaking knew Arabic only through Garshuni. This brings to mind the schooling of the Maronites in Mount Lebanon as late as the turn of the twentieth century. Village children were first taught Syriac followed by Arabic in Garshuni form. It was at a later stage that pupils learned the Arabic script. Students who did not make it to higher levels of education ended up reading Arabic only via Garshuni.¹¹ (A similar case among the Syriac Orthodox existed at the turn of the century where some only knew Ottoman via Garshuni). The lack of material evidence should not preclude us from considering these possibilities.

The case of Syro-Arabic Garshuni writing may have given rise to Ottoman and Kurdish to be written in Syriac. Ottoman and Kurdish texts are known from the seventeenth century onward and continue to the early twentieth century.¹² (I have family items written in Ottoman Garshuni.)

While this paper argues against cultural identity being the main motivator for the rise of Syro-x Garshuni systems, Garshuni systems themselves became a tool in the emphasis of cultural identity during the early twentieth century with the rise of ethnic culturalism and nationalism. By now, modern schooling became normative and the Syriac Christian pupils were taught Arabic and Turkish in their respective normative scripts. Using the Syriac script for these languages will entail a *switch* for these pupils. With the rise of nationalism, the Syriac script itself becomes a very important identity marker. We begin to see publications—especially newspapers—published in Syro-Ottoman and Syro-Arabic while Patriarchs and bishops continue to communicate with their flock mostly in Garshuni form as they have done for some centuries before. (Anecdotal, when I was a teenager in a Syriac Orthodox environment in Bethlehem, the reading of scripture during liturgical services in Arabic was only permitted from Garshuni editions, even though the editions were published by Catholic entities. I recall taking class notes in high (secondary) school—be in for mathematics, physics, biology, history, etc.—in garshunographic form, though alas I got rid of all of these documents when I immigrated to the United States in 1983.)

The ideologues of the early twentieth century who were publishing newspapers in Garshuni were fighting an uphill battle. The wider Syriac public was becoming less and less familiar with the Syriac script. Now, the communities using Syriac in their liturgy were in desperate for an alternative, reversal tool.

¹¹ Daryān, “aṣl lafḍat karṣūnī”.

¹² On Syro-Ottoman, see Trigona-Harany, “Syro-Ottoman”. On Syro-Kurdish, see Pennacchetti, “Un manoscritto curdo in karshuni”.

2 x-Syriac Systems: Expressing Syriac in Other Scripts

By the late nineteenth century, we begin to see small waves of Syriac Orthodox immigrants approaching the New World. We know of communities in Worcester Massachusetts who arrived mostly from Kharput, in New Jersey and New York coming from Diyarbakır, in Central Falls, Rhode Island, coming from Midyat, and in Quebec, Canada, from Mardin. There were also Assyrian and Chaldean immigrant communities in other parts of the country. These Syriac Orthodox were the communities who primarily published in Arabic and Turkish, but in Garshuni form. It was these same communities that were fighting the uphill battle for the *preservation* of the Syriac script.

Things began to shift by the 1940s when these communities began to realize that their kids can no longer follow the Syriac liturgy during Sunday services. Fr. Peter Barsoum of Worcester, MA, put together a liturgy book and transcribed all the Syriac text in English letters. In fact, the Syriac script does not appear anywhere in the book. We can see the change in script culture in his preface:

Our mother tongue, the Assyrian—Aramaic—or Syriac, is being taught each week in our Sunday Schools here in America. However, it has been very difficult for our children to learn our language, our prayers, and our Assyrian hymns quickly ... I have found that it is much easier for our boys and girls to learn church prayers, hymns, liturgy and rituals, when English characters are used instead of our alphabet. At the same time, however, we must do our utmost to teach our mother language to our children.¹³

A few years later, the Rhode Island community followed suit. Fr. Doumato was a new priest there and after serving for two years, he realized that the children who did not know the Syriac script now form the men and women of his parish. He put together a similar liturgy book and explained:

I have found that the majority of our church-members, men, women and children, with the exception of the elderly people, do not understand what is being said in the conduct of the Mass, for they are ignorant of our beloved Syriac (Aramaic) language ... When I saw that it is not possible for us to divorce ourselves from our mother tongue, I have ventured with the help of some cultured friends to arrange a book containing the

13 Barsoum, *Assyrian Apostolic Church Prayer*, p. xv.

rituals of the holy Mass in English as well as rendering the original Syriac tongue in English letters.¹⁴

This status quo continues today. Similar books are now abundant not only in the American diaspora but also in Europe, South America and Australia. The phenomenon even travelled back to the Middle East and by the 1990s we begin to see liturgical books in Syriac published in the Arabic script when a decade earlier—at least in Jerusalem and Bethlehem—one was not permitted to read the Scripture in Arabic from an Arabic-script edition. For the first time, the community had to reverse the role of its script. All of this was motivated by functional necessity. Many refer to such systems as ‘Garshuni’.

3 Semantics of the Lexeme ‘garshuni’ in Modern Times

We first come across the term Garshuni in the sixteenth century in a European context. The Maronite scholar Georges Amira, who wrote one of the first grammars of Syriac in Europe, referred to the phenomenon as *de usu litterarum Chaldaicarum in scribendum lingua Arabica* “the use of the Chaldaic [i.e. Syriac] letters to write Arabic” without giving it a name. It was the Syriac Orthodox scholar Moses of Mardin who first introduced the term *Garshuni* as “Arabic language in Chaldaic writing.”¹⁵ Obviously, the term was in current usage in the Middle East by then. We have scribes who copied, in the Syriac script, texts from Arabic-script exemplars and indicated in their colophons that they “translated” (*tarjama*) the texts from Arabic into Garshuni. Several scholars attempted to find an etymology for the lexeme, but no one succeeded. The term is clearly an ethno-lexeme known only to Syriac-using communities in the context of writing. The lexeme also means ‘gibberish’ in some Christian dialects of the Levant, Syria and Palestine, but all these communities have or had a connection with Syriac culture.

The term was later expanded by analogy to speak of other languages written in the Syriac script. Users and scholars talk of Malayalam Garshuni, Ottoman Garshuni, Armenian Garshuni and Kurdish Garshuni for Syro-Malayalam, Syro-Ottoman, Syro-Armenian and Syro-Kurdish, respectively.¹⁶ While for sure no one in the first millennium spoke of Syro-Sogdian, Syro-Persian and Syro-Greek

14 Doumato, *Service of the Divine Mass*.

15 Moukarzel, “Le Garshuni,” pp. 108–109.

16 For all these systems, see Kiraz, *Tūrāṣ Mamllā*, vol. 1, chs. 11 & 12.

as ‘Garshuni’ *per se*, the lexeme is extended by analogy, at least in modern scholarship, to cover all Syro-x writing systems.

Neither Fr. Barsoum nor Fr. Doumato make mention of the term ‘Garshuni’ in their Anglo-Syriac publications and we do not know if the term was informally used in this context. But today, Syriac-using Christians do use the term ‘Garshuni’ to denote Syriac written in the Latin script as well as Syriac written in the Arabic script. It is easy to see how the new system inherited the lexeme ‘Garshuni’ by generalization. The term now denotes not only writing a language in the Syriac script, but writing Syriac in other scripts. Syriac has moved from being the target script to the source language, but Syriac is still there. The following anecdotal data gives some examples:

1. I was visiting my dentist (and cousin) Virginia Saliba and while waiting, I was working on an Ottoman-Garshuni document.

“Are you working on Syriac, George?” she asked (in Arabic).

“No,” I answered, “Turkish.”

“But you are reading Syriac,” she said.

“It is actually Turkish, but written in the Syriac script,” I explained.

“يعني چر شوني—you mean ‘Garshuni,’” she concluded.

2. I received a text from Muhanad Gorgees, a Chaldean imaging expert at Princeton’s Firestone Library:

“هل عندكم علم أين يمكن أن أجد الكتاب المقدس بالكلداني كرشوني”—Do you know where I can obtain a Holy Bible in Chaldean Garshuni?” he asked.

“Do you mean Arabic in Caldani script or Caldani in the Arabic script?” I asked in English.

“Caldani in Arabic script,” he answered.

This dialog demonstrates how the term ‘Garshuni’ has become ambiguous when a sufficient context is lacking. In this case, I did not know if Syriac (‘Caldani’ in the dialogue) was meant to be the source language or the target script.

3. I received an email from Fr. Imad al-Banna of Michigan asking me if I have “the liturgy book which has the Arabic and Garshuni.” Here, by ‘Garshuni’ he meant the Syriac text written in the Arabic script.
4. Ziad Awar posted on Facebook (Dec 3, 2010) “Today, Assyrians use the word ‘garshuni’ when referring to a spoken language written using some-

thing other than its corresponding script; i.e. spoken Assyrian written in the Latin script.”

5. At a Princeton workshop *Recovering the Role of Christians in the History of the Middle East* (May 7, 2016), while Bedross Der Matossian was delivering a talk on Armeno-Ottoman, the Princeton Professor Jack Tannous (himself from a Middle Eastern background that uses the term Garshuni) turned to me and whispered “Garshuni”!
6. Broula Barnohro Oussi of Stockholm University (of Syriac origin) delivered a paper at the symposium *The Future of Syriac Studies and the Legacy of Sebastian P. Brock* (June 14, 2018) where she referred to a text given in Țuroyo (in Syriac characters) and in Arabic transliteration as “published in Syriac and Garshuni Arabic.” Here, *Garshuni Arabic* is not Syro-Arabic, but rather Arabo-Țuroyo.
7. Christopher Karim wrote me a text message on Oct 27, 2018 asking, “I was wondering, do u have a pdf file or a word doc of the Beth Gazo Syriac with garshouni or just Syriac by itself.” Here, “garshouni” means English transliteration. What is striking about this example is that the subject is a teenager who had already acquired this lexeme.

But the extension of the term ‘Garshuni’ by generalization does not stop here as the following two anecdotes demonstrate:

1. In a 2015 online article titled “The Untold Story of Palestinians who Learned Hebrew,” an exemplar is given from the textbook تعلم العبرية دون معلم تأليف سليمان بوزا كلو—*Learn Hebrew Without a Teacher* (Haifa, no date¹⁷). The exemplar, shown in the image below, gives three columns: Hebrew text (right), Arabic transliteration (middle), Arabic translation (left). The page was given to three Syriac priests, all of whom knew Arabic, but not Hebrew thought they recognized the Hebrew script. There were asked to identify the right column, and everyone correctly identified it as Hebrew. Then they were asked to identify the left column, and everyone correctly identified it as Arabic. When asked to identify the middle column, the answers varied:
 - a. Fr. John Koke: عبري بالچرشوني ‘Hebrew in Garshuni’.
 - b. Fr. Anton Sabha: چرشوني للعبري ‘Garshuni for Hebrew’.
 - c. Fr. Joseph Chamoun: چرشوني ‘Garshuni’.

Clearly, everyone identified the middle column as Garshuni, but some needed to qualify it as Garshuni pertaining to Hebrew.

17 The catalog of the National Library in Jerusalem gives the date as “1940?”. Thanks to Dominique Sirgy of Yale for providing this data.

عربي	عبرי	עברית
عشرون ولداً و ٢٠ بنتاً	עשרים ילד עשרים ילדה	עשרים ילד: עשרים ילדה
ثلاثون - ثلاثون -	« شلشيم » « شلشيم »	« שלשים » « שלשים »
اربعون - خمسون -	« أرباعيم » « خمسين »	« ארבעים » « חמשים »
ستون - سبعون -	« ششيم » « ششيم »	« ששים » « שבעים »
ثمانون - تسعون -	« ثمانون » « تسعين »	« שמונים » « תשעים »
مائة ولد مائتا بنت	מאה ילד מאילימ	מאה " מאתיים
ثلاث مئة ولد	شلش מאות ילד	שלש מאות ילד

FIGURE 1 Learn Hebrew Without a Teacher (Haifa, no date).

2. On October 4, 2018, at an informal gathering in Uppsala prior to the conference *Neo-Aramaic Languages Through Space and Time*, Charles Häberl of Rutgers University mentioned that Nicolas Siouffi (1829–1901), in his *Études sur les Soubbas ou Sebéens* (Paris, 1880), printed the Mandaic phrases in the Mandaic script alongside Latin transcriptions. Immediately, Estiphan Panoussi, an Assyro-Chaldean Neo-Aramaic speaker from Iran who taught various Middle Eastern languages at academic institutions, responded with “oh, in Garshuni.” As in the above Arabo-Hebrew case, Syriac here is neither the source language nor the target script. We see that the term ‘Garshuni’ was used by Panoussi to denote scholarly Latin transcriptions of Mandaic.

If given any Judeo-Arabic document, our subjects would probably identify it as Hebrew. But if told that the text is actually Arabic, they will identify it as Garshuni. We see here how the term ‘Garshuni’, at its most fundamental level, denotes in our modern times a text written in a non-normative script without Syriac being involved at all, though the subjects are Syriac-using which makes the lexeme an ethno-lexeme.

It was this generalization that motivated me to propose the term *garshunography* as a writing-systems technical term to denote a language written in its non-normative script as opposed to the terms *transliteration*, *transcription* and

allography.¹⁸ Unlike these three terms, all of which already have other technical meanings in the field of writing systems, the term *garshunography* is unambiguous and its speakers no longer confine its usage to Syriac. (I have intentionally used the term *allography* with its existing technical meaning from writing systems earlier and placed such usage in ' ' to demonstrate the ambiguities that can arise.)

4 Conclusion

This paper attempted to argue for a functional origin for garshunographic systems instead of attributing the rise of such systems to cultural identity factors. Rather, once in existence, garshunographic systems become a tool for marking cultural identity but only at the turn of the twentieth century. Necessity is strong enough to explain the wide spreading of a particular phenomenon, but systems that are put in place by design and ideals, unless forced by a State or a similar strong power, hardly receive widespread acceptance. Necessity gave birth to Syro-x Garshuni systems and necessity gave birth to x-Syriac Garshuni systems.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported in part by the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton.

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¹⁸ Kiraz, "Garshunography," pp. 65–73.

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