

Christian Palestinian Aramaic Encoding

Unicode Technical Note

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I. Background

Christian Palestinian Aramaic (CPA), with its specific alphabet and writing, is no longer spoken today. But it is still considered to be a highly important linguistic ancestor. When the University of Bergen announced the start of the Erasmus+ Program *Surayt-Aramaic Online Project (2017-2020)*, it used this 6th century CE CPA inscription to illustrate the history of the living Surayt language:¹



Christian Palestinian Aramaic inscription from the Kayanos Church in Uyon Mosa. Inside the museum on Mount Nebo, Jordan. © DR; author: Humbert; image restored by Couson & Desreumaux.

Christian Palestinian Aramaic (CPA) is “the Palestinian Aramaic dialect of Judea and Sinai. This dialect was most prevalent between the fifth and eighth centuries, but it continued to serve as a liturgical language for the Christian Melkite community into the thirteenth century” (Müller-Kessler, 2016, 385). In its original form, it shares many characteristics with Jewish Palestinian Aramaic (JPA) and the classical period of Samaritan Aramaic (SA). During this period, the script has remained stable (Morgenstern, 2011, 628-629). It was used by Chalcedonian Christians, particularly in Roman and Byzantine Palestine and in Transjordanian Arabia. Earlier uses are attested, for example, in four passages by Eusebius in *Syriac Martyrs of Palestine* II.13² and *Church History* I.13.5, I.13.10 (ܠܥܝܪܐ ܠܥܝܪܐ) and I.13.20.³ In all instances, Syriac uses ‘rmy’, ܠܥܝܪܐ (Aramaic), to refer to an oral and written Christian language. Several CPA inscriptions have been found, particularly in Palestine and Jordan, which contain magical texts (Puech, 2001; Abudraham, 2017). In Edfou, southern Egypt, a wooden tablet with CPA underwritten text dating from around 600 was found (Rutschowskaya & Desreumaux, 1992; Desreumaux, 1996). It is currently in the Louvre Museum in Paris, and there is more CPA text to be deciphered on it. Several CPA texts and materials have not been edited, such as the CPA palimpsests at the Saint-Catherine Monastery (Egypt) or at the Cambridge Library (UK).

¹ See <https://www.uib.no/en/news/80246/saving-aramaic-language>; all hyperlinks have been last accessed on the 19.12.2023.

² This passage mentions translations done from Greek to Aramaic by the church reader Procopius of Scythopolis who died in 303 CE (signaled by Telfer, 1955, 35, note 43; see the Syriac edition by W. Cureton, 1861, p. 3).

³ Syriac edition by W. Wright and N. McLean, 1898, p. 52, 53 and 56. These passages mention archives and letters written in ܠܥܝܪܐ (Aramaic) found and read by Eusebius in Edessa.

Thanks to the patient and impressive work of scholars from the nineteenth century to the present day, numerous CPA texts have been published: for example, volumes of the Hebrew Bible in CPA (tenth to thirteenth centuries), or the New Testament (NT) in CPA (fifth to the eighth centuries), published by Müller-Kessler & Sokoloff in 1997 and 1998, or the *Codex Sinaiticus Zosimi Rescriptus* (Desreumaux, 1997). This material is of invaluable historical importance, providing a deeper understanding of the diverse ways in which ancient Christian communities spoke and wrote at the intersection of different languages and religious cultures. The study of the CPA is an interdisciplinary field, studied equally by scholars in Jewish and Christian studies, including developments in early Islamic studies (Pahlitzsch, 2019). CPA texts have also been found in the Cairo Genizah, including NT passages in this medieval Jewish library (see Sokoloff and Yahalom, 1979). Unfortunately, CPA texts are in danger of being lost to future generations of scholars, especially since there is a CPA font that is compatible with the highest publishing and Unicode standards. For example, the two NT volumes published in 1998 are out of print. Brill has expressed interest in a new online scholarly edition of the CPA NT volumes (CCPA IIA and CCPA IIB). The first step, however, is the creation of a CPA font compatible with Unicode guidelines. Alain J. Desreumaux is working on the edition of a new and important Sinai CPA palimpsest manuscript and two medieval Gospel lectionaries. Christa Müller-Kessler is working on a Cambridge Joshua manuscript. Laurent Capron is studying newly discovered manuscripts of the Fathers of the Desert. There is no doubt that the CPA dialect and its spread in late antiquity could be of interest to scholars in the fields of classical studies and multilingualism.

At present, scholars are doing the best they can with the lack of a CPA font that is compatible with the Unicode guidelines. The *Editio Critica Maior of the Gospel of Mark* (2021) has chosen to transcribe CPA words in Syriac – as scholars have done since the nineteenth century or later (Land, 1875; Lewis, 1897; Lewis & Gibson, 1899; Müller-Kessler, 2023). Emile Puech transcribed CPA in Hebrew letters (Puech, 2001), while Christa Müller-Kessler transliterated it in a 2014 article, as did Mark Geller in Clivaz’s SNSF MARK16 online project (2023)⁴, or Alain Desreumaux in a 2023 article. We would like to thank the public open repository Nakala of CNRS (Huma-Num, France), which alerted us to the absence of an ISO 639-3 code for CPA at the end of 2022. The [ISO 639-3 list](#) includes ten different types of Aramaic, but no Christian Palestinian Aramaic. The ISO 639-3 codes combining c/p/a are all already assigned, and we have reserved the code ‘axp’ for Christian Palestinian Aramaic.⁵

In 1998, CPA was briefly mentioned in the Unicode application file for Syriac [ISO/IEC 10646, L2/98-0508](#), by Paul Nelson, George Anton Kiraz, and Sargon Hasso, who considered CPA to be a “non-Syriac language that employs Syriac type styles” (5). Based on this file, we have prepared this Unicode Technical Note to present how to adapt the Unicode Syriac characters for CPA, with its own script and its own ISO 639-9 code. We propose a list of 40 CPA characters, including all necessary punctuation marks. After careful consideration and discussions with the Unicode Script Ad Hoc Group, there is no need to create new Unicode characters for CPA, which can be based on the Syriac script and use some Unicode punctuation marks and symbols.

⁴ <https://mr-mark16.sib.swiss/manuscript/CSRPC>.

⁵ We have chosen ‘axp’ because the Greek letter χ , ancestor of ‘x’, is transcribed as *ch* in several modern languages, and is included in the word “Christian”. The code follows the French order of name of the CPA: “araméen christo-palestinien”. The new ISO 639-9 codes are scheduled to be confirmed and implemented in the current year of 2024.

II. Script Name (see Section I)

The most important user group of CPA is the scholarly community in all relevant fields. The name “Christian Palestinian Aramaic” (CPA) is well established in the scholarly community, as shown in Section I. French-speaking scholars use the name “araméen christo-palestinien” (see, for example, Capron 2020). As explained in Section I, CPA is close to “Jewish Palestinian Aramaic (JPA) and the classical period of Samaritan Aramaic (SA)” (Morgenstern, 2011, 628) and designated as ܐܪܡܝܝܬܐ (Aramaic) in the Syriac language itself (Syriac Eusebius, *Mart. Pal.* II.1 and *Church History* I.13.5, I.13.10 and I.13.20). It has its own letters, words, its grammar (Müller-Kessler, 1992), and dictionary (Sokoloff, 2014).

III. Structure

- Like other Semitic languages, CPA is written from right to left.
- Aramaic letter names have been chosen in the character repertoire (Table 1).
- N°1-24: CPA has an alphabet of 23 letters.
 - CPA has one own letter, borrowed from Greek, Pi, which already exists in the Syriac Unicode script (U+0727).
 - We have added a medieval Daleth (n°4) to allow writing medieval texts.
 - As in Syriac the graphism of the final Kaph and final Nun changes at the end of a word (n° 12 and 15).
- N°25-34: CPA has several types of punctuation (Kokowzoff, 1906), including two types of overdots (U+0307 and U+0308) and eight punctuation marks (U+0701, U+0703, U+2056, U+205D, U+2E30, U+2055, U+0700, U+070D).
 - The CPA dot above a letter (n° 25) can have several meanings, including feminine, depending on the manuscript.
 - The various punctuation marks all indicate a stop and vary from time to time; we have included the medieval CPA stop (n° 30), CPA circle (n° 31) and CPA star (n° 32).
- N°35-40: Four critical edition marks and two characters to force or prevent ligatures are needed, all of which are already available. The system of ligatures can be based on that one of the Syriac script (see Table 2).

IV. Character Repertoire

We have built with *Forme.ch* a new CPA font that meets the best standards expected for digital scientific editing. The letters have been drawn and designed by Alain J. Desreumaux (CNRS, Paris, FR) and Tim Meylan (Professor of Typography, HEVS, Sierre, CH); the font engineering and mastering has been done by Alphabet Type (Berlin, DE). This font project has been conceived and lead by Claire Clivaz (SIB, Lausanne, CH), in partnership with Jérémy Formaz (*Forme.ch*, Sion, CH). The font CPA Desreumaux–Meylan (abbreviated CPA-DM) is available in license OFL on Github: <https://github.com/sib-swiss/dh-cpa>, with a CPA KeymanWeb developed by Silvano Aldà (IT, SIB, CH), <https://etalk.sib.swiss/cpa>, in MIT license.

Table 1. Character Repertoire

	Generic	Unicode	Function	Name in CPA font	Example ⁶
1	Ⲁ	U + 0710	ʾ	CPA ALAPH	Ⲁⲟⲙⲟ
2	Ⲃ	U + 0712	B	CPA BETH	Ⲃⲛⲃⲟⲗ
3	Ⲅ	U + 0713	G	CPA GAMAL	Ⲅⲃⲟⲗ
4	Ⲇ	U + 0715	D (medieval)	CPA DALATH-M	Ⲇⲛⲃⲟⲗ
5	Ⲉ	U + 0716	D	CPA DALATH	Ⲉⲛⲃⲟⲗ
6	Ⲋ	U + 0717	H	CPA HE	Ⲋⲟⲙⲟ
7	Ⲍ	U + 0718	W	CPA WAW	Ⲍⲟⲙⲟ
8	Ⲏ	U + 0719	Z	CPA ZAIN	Ⲏⲓⲟⲙ
9	Ⲑ	U + 071A	Ḥ	CPA HETH	Ⲑⲗⲓⲛ
10	Ⲓ	U + 071B	Ṭ	CPA TETH	Ⲓⲛⲃⲟⲗ
11	Ⲕ	U + 071D	I	CPA YUDH	Ⲕⲛⲃⲟⲗ
12	Ⲗ Ⲙ	U + 071F	K K (final)	CPA KAPH	Ⲗⲗⲟⲗ Ⲙⲃ
13	Ⲛ	U + 0720	L	CPA LAMADH	Ⲛⲟⲗ
14	Ⲝ	U + 0721	M	CPA MIM	Ⲝⲗⲟⲗ
15	Ⲟ Ⲡ	U + 0722	N N (final)	CPA NUN	Ⲟⲗⲟⲗ Ⲡⲃⲟ
16	Ⲣ	U + 0723	S	CPA SEMKATH	Ⲣⲗⲟⲗ
17	Ⲥ	U + 0725	^c (guttural sound)	CPA AYIN	Ⲥⲟⲗ
18	Ⲧ	U + 0726	P or Ph	CPA PE	Ⲧⲗⲟⲗ
19	Ⲩ	U + 0727	P	CPA PI	Ⲩⲗⲟⲗ
20	Ⲫ	U + 0728	Ṣ	CPA SADHE	Ⲫⲗⲟⲗ

⁶ Examples come from Capron 2010, <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02552366>.

21	Ⲓ	U + 0729	Q	CPA QOF	Ⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ
22	ⲓ	U + 072A	R	CPA RESH	ⲓⲛⲓ
23	ⲥ	U + 072B	Š	CPA SHIN	Ⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ
24	ⲛ	U + 072C	T	CPA TAW	ⲛⲓⲛⲓ
25	◌̇	U + 0307	Dot over a letter (diverse meanings)	CPA SUPRALINEAR DOT	ⲓ̇ⲛⲓ
26	◌̈	U + 0308	Doble dot over a letter (plural)	CPA SEYAME	Ⲛⲓ̈ⲛⲓ̈ⲛⲓ̈ⲛⲓ̈
27	⋅	U + 0701	Punctuation, half stop	CPA SUPRALINEAR PERIOD	ⲓ̇ⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ
28	⋮	U + 0703	Punctuation, half or final stop	CPA SUK PASUQ	ⲓ̇ⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ
29	⋮̇	U + 2056	Punctuation, half or final stop	CPA STOP	ⲓ̇ⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ
30	⋮̈	U + 205D	Punctuation, half or final stop (medieval)	CPA STOP-M	ⲓ̈ⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ
31	◦	U + 2E30	Punctuation, half or final stop (medieval)	CPA CIRCLE	◦
32	⋆	U + 2055	Punctuation, end of title, final stop (medieval)	CPA STAR	⋆
33	⋈	U + 0700	Punctuation, end of paragraph	CPA END OF PARAGRAPH	⋈
34	⋆̈	U + 070D	Punctuation, end of paragraph	CPA HARKLEAN ASTERISCUS	⋆̈
35	⌈	U+ 200C	Block a positional form	CPA ZERO WIDTH NON- JOINER	ⲓ̇ⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ
36	⌋	U+ 200D	Trigger a positional form	CPA ZERO WIDTH JOINER	ⲓ̇ⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ
37	⌋	U + 005D	Editing conjecture (open)	CPA RIGHT SQUARE BRACKET	ⲓ̇ⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ
38	⌈	U + 005B	Editing conjecture (close)	CPA LEFT SQUARE BRACKET	ⲓ̇ⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ
39	⌈̇	U+ 2E23	Uncertain letter (open)	CPA TOP RIGHT HALF BRACKET	ⲓ̇ⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ
40	⌈̇	U+ 2E22	Uncertain letter (close)	CPA TOP LEFT HALF BRACKET	ⲓ̇ⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ

V. Properties

V.1 General Category and Other Properties: see existing descriptions.

V.2 Ligatures

A CPA font can use the ligature system of the Syriac Classical script. We join below a complete table with the ligatures needed.

Table 2. Ligatures

	Autonomous	Final	Median	Initial
1	Ⲁ	Ⲁⲗ	ⲀⲗⲀ	Ⲁⲗ
2	Ⲃ	ⲂⲀ	ⲂⲀⲗ	ⲂⲀ
3	Ⲅ	ⲄⲀ	ⲄⲀⲗ	ⲄⲀ
4	Ⲇ	ⲆⲀ	ⲆⲀⲗ	ⲆⲀ
5	Ⲉ	ⲈⲀ	ⲈⲀⲗ	ⲈⲀ
6	Ⲋ	ⲊⲀⲗ	ⲊⲀⲗⲀ	ⲊⲀⲗ
7	Ⲍ	ⲌⲀⲗ	ⲌⲀⲗⲀ	ⲌⲀⲗ
8	Ⲏ	ⲎⲀ	ⲎⲀⲗ	ⲎⲀ
9	Ⲑ	ⲐⲀ	ⲐⲀⲗ	ⲐⲀ
10	Ⲓ	ⲒⲀ	ⲒⲀⲗ	ⲒⲀ
11	Ⲕ	ⲔⲀ	ⲔⲀⲗ	ⲔⲀ
12	Ⲗ	ⲖⲀ	ⲖⲀⲗ	ⲖⲀ
13	Ⲙ	ⲘⲀ	ⲘⲀⲗ	ⲘⲀ
14	Ⲛ	ⲚⲀⲗ	ⲚⲀⲗⲀ	ⲚⲀⲗ
15	Ⲝ	ⲜⲀ	ⲜⲀⲗ	ⲜⲀ
16	Ⲟ	ⲞⲀⲗ	ⲞⲀⲗⲀ	ⲞⲀⲗ
17	Ⲡ	ⲠⲀ	ⲠⲀⲗ	ⲠⲀ
18	Ⲣ	ⲢⲀ	ⲢⲀⲗ	ⲢⲀ
19	Ⲥ	ⲤⲀ	ⲤⲀⲗ	ⲤⲀ
20	Ⲧ	ⲦⲀ	ⲦⲀⲗ	ⲦⲀ
21	Ⲩ	ⲨⲀ	ⲨⲀⲗ	ⲨⲀ
22	Ⲋ	ⲊⲀ	ⲊⲀⲗ	ⲊⲀ
23	Ⲍ	ⲌⲀ	ⲌⲀⲗ	ⲌⲀ
24	Ⲏ	ⲎⲀ	ⲎⲀⲗ	ⲎⲀ

V.3 Line Breaking Information

- Do the major languages using the script separate words using U+0020 SPACE or some other character? Using U+0020 SPACE.
- Can line breaks occur before a spacing character? Yes.
- If line breaks are usually only allowed as word boundaries, is there a special mode (“hyphenation”) that allows for line breaks within words at specific positions with the insertion of a marker that this mode was used? No.
- Can line breaks occur within numbers? Yes.
- No line breaks before half stop, full stop, or paragraph separator, or before closing parenthesis or brackets.

VI. Collation

The expected sorting order of the characters in the script, as shown in Table 1, in the numerical order, and in the list of general category properties.

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VIII. Acknowledgements

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IX. Examples

Each proposed character has been illustrated in the table in Section IV, with a word taken from a 2020 article by Laurent Capron. We have combined the examples with the French translation of folio 1r^a in the “Life of Abraham of Qidun” (ms. 12746, Taylor-Schechter Collection, Capron 2010, 234).⁷

1	Et il semblait	יְלֹא[וּ] מְרַמֵּו	1
2	l’avoir transpercée	מִן[דֵּא] יְדַמַּר	2
3	et il se mit à crier	מִלְּמַתּוּ יִצְוֹ	3
4	d’une voix forte	מִבְּיָד מְלִמֵּת	4
5	et dit:	: יֵאֵר יְתַמְרֹו	5
6	« Hâtez-vous,	וְעַבְדֵּיכֶם	6
7	mes amis,	מִתְּמִי	7
8	hâtez-vous,	וְעַבְדֵּיכֶם	8
9	entrez vite	יְלֹא וְלֵבֵי	9
10	et étranglez-le».	: מִדֵּא וְיִמְרֹו	10
11	Le bienheureux	מִן יְתַמְרֹו	11
12	lui dit alors:	: מִדֵּוּל מִיְּבֹוּ	12
13	« Toutes les nations	מִלְּמַתּוּ לֵוֵא	13
14	m’ont encerclé,	לֵדֵא וְלֵמֵ	14
15	et par le nom du Seigneur,	מִן יְתַמְרֹו מִמִּלְּמַתּוּ	15
16	je les ai pourchassées».	: וְעַבְדֵּי דִּמְרֵי	16

As an example of an English CPA translation, we provide below five lines of a CPA amulet edited and translated in a 2017 article by Ohad Abudraham (99):

1	[in the n]ame of [the angel] <i>Shamshie</i> [l]	[מִן יְתַמְרֹו לֵדֵא מִמִּלְּמַתּוּ מִיְּבֹוּ	1
2	[and in the name of] the great angel <i>‘Eliel</i>	מִן יְתַמְרֹו לֵדֵא מִמִּלְּמַתּוּ מִיְּבֹוּ	2
3	[] that the lions destroyed/lurked	יְסַבְּבֵי מִדֵּוּל יְתַמְרֹו יְסַבְּבֵי	3
4	[] who sits on the waves [of]	[מִן] מִיְּבֹוּ לֵדֵא מִמִּלְּמַתּוּ	4
5	[the sea and in] the [name of the] ang[el] <i>‘Anael</i>	[מִן] מִיְּבֹוּ לֵדֵא מִמִּלְּמַתּוּ מִיְּבֹוּ	5

⁷ Alignment by Claire Clivaz.