THE LANGUAGES OF DIYARBAKIR AND ITS ENVIRONS DURING THE ROMAN EMPIRE: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study is to investigate the languages spoken in Diyarbakir and its environs during the Roman Empire within a historical perspective, highlighting the region's linguistic diversity due to its strategic position, trade routes, and importance as a regional centre. This research employs a historical analysis method and follows a qualitative research design. It focuses on primary sources such as inscriptions, ancient texts, archaeological remains, and historical accounts, which are meticulously examined to explore the languages of the region and their interactions. Data collection is focused on these primary sources, aiming to identify the languages spoken and how they influenced one another. The study reveals a multilingual society where Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Armenian, and Kurdish coexisted, reflecting the ethnic and cultural diversity of the area. It also examines the influence of Roman rule on language use, particularly in official and administrative contexts, and how local languages continued to exist alongside the dominant languages of Latin and Greek. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the linguistic diversity of the ancient world by exploring the socio-political dynamics and the role of language in identity and power during the Roman Empire.

Keywords: *Roman Empire, Diyarbakir, Language diversity, History, Local languages.*

Roma İmparatorluğu Dönemi'nde Diyarbakır ve Çevresindeki Diller: Tarihsel Bir Bakış

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Roma İmparatorluğu döneminde Diyarbakır ve çevresinde konuşulan dilleri tarihsel bir perspektifle incelemek ve bölgenin stratejik konumu, ticaret yolları ve bölgesel bir merkez olarak önemi nedeniyle sahip olduğu dilsel çeşitliliğin altını çizmektir. Araştırma, tarihsel analiz yöntemi kullanılarak ve nitel araştırma deseni doğrultusunda yürütülmüştür. Birincil kaynaklar olan yazıtlar, antik metinler, arkeolojik kalıntılar ve tarihî anlatımlar titizlikle incelenerek bölgenin dilsel yapısı ve etkileşimleri ortaya konmuştur. Veri toplama bu birincil kaynaklara odaklanarak, konuşulan dilleri ve birbirlerini nasıl etkilediklerini tespit etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, bölgenin etnik ve kültürel çeşitliliğini yansıtan Latince, Yunanca, İbranice, Aramice, Süryanice, Ermenice ve Kürtçenin bir arada var olduğu çok dilli bir toplumun özelliklerini ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca, Roma yönetiminin özellikle resmi ve idari bağlamlarda dil kullanımı üzerindeki etkisini ve yerel dillerin baskın diller olan Latince ve Yunancanın yanında nasıl var olmaya devam ettiğini incelemektedir. Çalışma, Roma İmparatorluğu dönemindeki sosyo-politik dinamikleri ve dilin kimlik ve güç üzerindeki rolünü araştırarak antik dünyanın dilsel çeşitliliğinin daha iyi anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Roma İmparatorluğu, Diyarbakır, Dil çeşitliliği, Tarih, Yerel diller.*

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1. Introduction

Throughout history, Diyarbakır has held a strategic position as a crossroads between Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and the Middle East. Situated near the Tigris River, the city occupies a location advantageous in terms of both agricultural productivity and access to water resources. Its geopolitical position has rendered Diyarbakır a military and administrative center for numerous civilizations, including the Assyrians, Persians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Seljuks, and Ottomans. The city's walled structure provided significant defensive protection and played a crucial role in ensuring regional security and controlling trade routes. In this respect, Diyarbakır is regarded as one of the key cities contributing to geopolitical stability in southeastern Turkey, both in historical and contemporary contexts (İlhan, 1989; Kaya & Öztürk, 2021; Özdemir, 2020). As can be comprehended that many diverse civilizations have inhabited in Diyarbakır and left their cultural, linguistic traces in the city and environs.

One of these civilizations is the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire, regarded as one of the greatest empires of all times, existed for hundreds of years in the same pot of different cultural elements due to its wide sovereignty. This situation has been an important factor in increasing diversity in culture, art and language. The fact that Rome won important victories in Anatolia in the 1st century BC and expanded its borders in parallel with this brought Rome one step closer to its dreams of being present in Mesopotamia (Tekin, 2008). The fact that European power emerged victoriously from the struggles with important kingdoms in Anatolia changed the political map of the region in favor of Rome. Rome established colonies in Anatolia to increase cultural interaction in settlements such as Cappadocia, Galatia, Lycia and Phrygia. This situation led to the fusion of different cultural elements.

Besides, there was a major obstacle in front of Rome's expansion in Mesopotamia. This obstacle was the Parthians. Rome's greatest desire was to increase its expansion by passing to the east of the Euphrates River, while the Parthian's greatest goal was to dominate Anatolia by passing to the west of the Euphrates. This situation brought the two important powers face to face and sparked wars that would last for centuries (Kalaycı, 2024; Taşdöner, 2014; Yıldırım, 2012). The winners of the wars between the two powers changed over the years (Tosun, 2020). With the collapse of the Parthian Empire, the Sassanids, which also existed in Iran, became one of Rome's most important rivals in Mesopotamia (Çevik et al., 2014; Drijvers, 2009; Morley, 2015; Sauer, 2017). Rome's struggle against the Sassanids ended with the conquest of the region by the Arab Muslims in 639 AD. This led to the emergence of new cultural and political dynamics in the region.

Diyarbakır was a very important location for Rome. Therefore, they built various castles and structures for inhabitance, worshipping and dwelling. The most important presence of this power in Diyarbakır is represented by Amida and Zerzevan Castle. In these castles, there were government and praying buildings, where administrators and people corresponded with diverse languages. During the Roman period, many languages were spoken in the region, including Latin and Greek (MacMullen, 1966), Pahlavi (Middle Persian), Aramaic, Syriac (MacMullen, 1966), and Armenian (Meyer, 2017; Scala, 2016).

Additionally, During the Empire, Romans encountered extensive communication with languages other than Latin, including some dead languages, some still alive, and some little known, most of which are now long dead. The present article focuses its efforts on providing a broad outline of a single city, Diyarbakır (historically known as Amida), and its environs, as they were under the influence of the Roman Empire. Although the scholarly knowledge of the region is rather rich, the linguistic landscape is only known in a rudimentary way through inscriptions, with Greek and Latin leading the way. This territory's languages such as Aramaic, Syriac, Kurdish and Turkish - the ones that left traces - will be explored in light of their social contexts, as far as it is possible (Bryce, 1999; Mullen,

2015; Rochette, 2012). Accordingly, the current research reveals a multilingual society where Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Armenian, and Kurdish coexisted, reflecting the ethnic and cultural diversity of the area. It also examines the influence of Roman rule on language use, particularly in official and administrative contexts, and how local languages continued to exist alongside the dominant languages of Latin and Greek. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the linguistic diversity of the ancient world by exploring the socio-political dynamics and the role of language in identity and power during the Roman Empire.

Before the Roman conquest, the region, which is now Diyarbakır and its environment, was home to various indigenous languages. The linguistic landscape was diverse, with different groups contributing to the region's cultural and linguistic heritage (Mullen, & Woudhuysen (eds), 2023). These included languages spoken by the Hurrians, Mitanni, and other ancient peoples who lived in the area (Amida Haber, 2023). In this context, a brief word on terminology is warranted. Throughout this discussion, communities that share the same language will be called as "linguistic communities," although it is endorsed that this can sometimes be misleading. It is possible for members of a community to use various languages, and it is also possible for a group of people to speak the same language while being socially far away from each other. Still, the term is utilized as it is the most beneficial and widely recognized in the field (Debié, 2018).

Although invisible, a language is a solid signifier of an identity, almost as solid as a place of birth, death, and burial. The same as most of today's languages, the languages which will be discussed in the current research, had their development significantly affected by the power that had control over the spoken lands. The widely known historical languages and territories, with an immense and intertwined affective and social depth, would one day come to be included within the Empirical domains of one of the greatest powers, Rome (Grbić, 2016). During the Roman Empire, great toil and attention were paid to the Roman control on the local languages – some gradually "dying", and some gradually "living". The present overview, rather naively, tries to just roughly outline viewpoints from which today's languages - dead, little known, still alive, but mostly only known by place names - are probably beyond mutual perception, yet were once respected, and were firm and unshakable (Bonner, 1930; Rochette, 2012). By the end of the study, a brief attempt has been conducted to explain the reason for today's tongues being presentable simply as toponyms, most of which are meals for speculators and daydreamers. A clearly marked Roman and pre-Roman territory, or rather an exceptional entity embedded within an already exceptional one, this meticulous and minuscule article attempts to contemplate how thick the diamond there today could be anthropologically considered, that is, how language/known language as a code could be "there" today. A broader framework will be submitted first, before concentrating on individual languages, which will be reduced to minutes in the steep amphitheater of time, as if hiding the amphitheater's stage with its great canvas.

In sum, the current research aims to investigate the languages spoken in Diyarbakir and its environs during the Roman Empire from a historical perspective, highlighting the region's linguistic diversity due to its strategic position, trade routes, and importance as a regional centre

2. Method

The current research utilizes a historical analysis method and follows a qualitative research design, mainly focusing on primary sources such as epigraphic documents, inscriptions, linguistic elements found on coins, ancient texts, archaeological records, and historical accounts to explore the languages of the region and their interactions. The historical analysis method enables the systematic examination and interpretation of past linguistic evidence within its socio-political and cultural context, which is a fundamental principle of historical research (Tosh, 2015). The study combines methods of

historical linguistics and sociolinguistic analysis. It is claimed that the integration of historical linguistics and sociolinguistic analysis enables the study to examine patterns of language use and contact in relation to social structure, power relations, and domains of communication, thereby situating multilingual practices within the broader sociopolitical context of Roman-era Diyarbakır (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021). Accordingly, examples of Latin, Aramaic, Greek, and local Anatolian languages identified in and around Diyarbakır were analysed comparatively. By integrating these qualitative research techniques with historical methods, the current study aims to provide a comprehensive, contextually rich understanding of the multilingual environment of Roman-era Diyarbakır and its linguistic dynamics, thereby identifying the interactions among languages, power relations, and processes of cultural transmission. Furthermore, the sociopolitical context of multilingualism in the region was addressed in connection with the administrative structure and cultural contact zones of the period. Such an approach is consistent with qualitative historical research, where primary sources are critically analysed to reconstruct patterns of language contact and change (Creswell & Poth, 2013); thus, data collection is centred on these primary sources, aiming to identify the languages spoken and how they influenced one another through rigorous historical and qualitative analysis.

2.1. Research Ethics

Primary sources of the research were predominantly employed when citing references, with particular attention and care to ensure accurate and appropriate referencing. Throughout the current research process, adherence to scientific research principles and ethical standards was highly maintained. All citations and quotations were carefully documented and referenced to uphold academic integrity. Furthermore, the data employed were obtained from publicly accessible academic databases and did not encompass any personal or confidential information. Rigorously avoided plagiarism and ethical violations, ensuring that all sources were correctly cited in accordance with academic writing conventions.

3. Findings

3.1 The Roman Empire in the Diyarbakır Region

The region of Diyarbakır, which was known as Amida during the Roman Empire, is in the north of Mesopotamia. It is situated on the banks of the Tigris River and is surrounded by the Taurus Mountain range, making it a natural fortress (Hadrovic, 2024; Mommsen, 2012). The Tigris River is one of the longest rivers in the world and has many tributaries flowing into it. Fertile agricultural areas in the vicinity of Diyarbakır were appropriate for settlement and due to the abundance of water sources, the region has always attracted different tribes and communities for agricultural and commercial reasons. The city of Amida, or present-day Diyarbakır, is located at the intersection of important trade routes (Grbić, 2016). It is not known for certain when the first settlements were set up in Diyarbakır region. However, there is evidence that the citadel hill was fortified as early as 3000 B.C. The remaining pertaining to the civilizations such as Assyrian, Urartian, Persian, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic epochs have been unearthed in archaeological excavations in and around the citadel (Alper et al., 2016).

The city was initially included in the Roman Empire by Julius Caesar in 43 A.D., when the Romans conquered the lands of the Parthians. The city later became a part of the Roman Empire under Emperor Vespasian in 73 A.D. after a heavy siege (Luttwak, 1979). Why the Roman Empire had great desire for this region was its geographical properties, trade routes, and population. Also, Amida, along with the fortresses located on the borders of the empire, was of great importance in controlling the people who lived outside the empire and in preventing the attacks of the Parthians (Asante & Ismail, 2016). Amida was categorized as a Roman colony for strategic reasons. This classification would provide the opportunity to settle Roman citizens in the city, and, thus, the chance to raise economic activities. It

would also provide military advantages. The rights of Roman settlers were legally recognized, which obliged the local populations to present certain respect to them. After the conquest, Amida was rearranged and reconstructed according to the principles of Roman urbanism (Williams, 2018). Newly built towns, or the enlarged and redesigned towns would be provided with a network of urban roads, temples devoted to Roman gods, law courts, theatres, colonnades, public libraries, triumphal arches, and statues of emperors. The cities were tried to be resembled to Rome in terms of monuments, organization, and culture. The social classes that were sharply divided were mirrored in architecture as well. These changes were accompanied by alterations in economic activities and a redirection toward urban economies and handicrafts. Throughout the Roman Empire, the cities were the centers of economic activities, which would lead to the development of trade and the rise of urban classes. The newly acquired provinces were mostly rural during the pre-Roman period (Migeotte, 2009).

The case of language in the region was uncertain just before the conquest of the Romans. The easternmost part of the Empire is not directly recounted in the records of the Greek historians. However, it is undisputed that the Indo-European tribes who started to live in Anatolia brought their languages with them. Investments in urbanization were made during the reign of Antonine (138-161). The cultural influences of Roman governance on the local people are still an issue of debate. While it is widely admitted that the settlement of Latin-speaking Romans altered the process of cultural exchange, the situation is more complicated when it comes to language exchange. Still, it cannot be refuted that the placement of the settler population commenced the process of language exchange. The embracing of Latin language, similar to Greek, in the western provinces became necessary in order to continue the socio-political status for the indigenous people. The local urban population gradually learned the Roman language so that they could use it in the newly established city councils, law courts, or trade relations with the Romans (Woolf, 1994). Considerable Roman existence, either military or civilian, brought towns, or at least localities, into the "Roman" sphere, which usually meant an alteration in language, or, at least, bilingualism in the prevailing local population. Roman governance would consequently cause marginalization, or even the disappearance of native languages and the dominance of the Roman tongues (Rochette, 2012).

Figure 1

An Assyrian clay tablet unearthed in Bismil, Diyarbakır (Bismil Haber, 2017)

3.2 The Major Languages Spoken in Diyarbakır and Environs during Roman Period

The region of Diyarbakır, which was known as Amida during the Roman Empire, is in the north of the region of Diyarbakır and its environs. The region was home to several languages, which are named as "Diyarbakır Languages", including some that eventually became extinct. Greek and after it, Latin inscriptions, show that Greek literacy became widespread in the region in situations where Greek was not spoken (Thompson, 2013). It is comprehended from inscriptions and accounts that Greek was widely conversed in the Diyarbakır region during the Roman Empire. It also seems that Latin was spoken, albeit to a lesser extent, as informed by the discovery of Latin inscriptions in the region. These two languages were thought to be important and prestigious, with Greek more widely used in community than Latin. As a matter of fact, Greek acted as the lingua franca of the Eastern Roman Empire (Grbić, 2016). As such, it was used in the language of administration, literature, church, and education; and it enabled communication between various ethnolinguistic groups. Latin, however, was employed as the language of the Western Roman Empire, and it remained as the language of law and the Catholic Church in the East even after it became disuse in everyday life (Waquet, 2002).

Figure 2

A mosaic of Roman Times in Greek found in a house in Ergani, Diyarbakır (Milliyet, 2025)

Apart from Greek and Latin, it is certain that an indigenous language, generally designated as "Diyarbakır languages" or "Diyarbakır inscriptions", were spoken in the area before the Greeks and Romans arrived there. Recent findings have brought to light that this language pertained to the north-west branch of the Middle Euphrates dialect of the so-called Upper Mesopotamian dialect group (Gzella, 2018). For instance, Aramaic emerged in Syria around 2000 BC and from there spread to regions such

as Anatolia, Northern Mesopotamia, Iran, Greece, Egypt and Israel. The main reason why Aramaic spread over such a wide area is that its alphabetic script is much simpler than cuneiform and that it can be easily understood by peoples speaking other Semitic languages due to common or similar grammatical features. The fact that the Aramaean caused large-scale migrations and were influential in administrative and commercial aspects in the regions, where they went to, also played an important role in the spread of the Aramaic language (Millar, 1993; Özer, 2019).

While almost all the languages spoken in ancient times are now considered dead, Aramaic has survived to the present day with its different dialects. One of these dialects is Syriac, which is a classical language. Most Syriac people speak the Western accent of Syriac. Classical Syriac is the written language (Millar, 1993; Özer, 2019). Yusuf Kenan Haspolat, in his work called Syriacs and Chaldeans in Diyarbakır, reports that some respected family children's mother tongue was Syriac; therefore, it was very easy for them to translate many Greek works to Syriac language. This historical linguistic continuity highlights the role of Diyarbakır as a cultural and intellectual hub in the region, facilitating the preservation and transmission of classical knowledge.

Haspolat also mentions that some Christian people living in Diyarbakır spoke Chaldean dialect (Haspolat, 2021; Millar, 1993). Chaldeans were found in different densities in places such as Diyarbakır, Mardin, Mosul, Siirt, Urfa, Van, Hakkari, Aleppo, Cizre, Midyat, etc. Although the Chaldeans perform their ceremonies in the language of the country/region they are in, they mostly use their traditional language, Chaldean, also called East Syriac language (Albayrak, 2006). The continued use of Chaldean in both religious and familial contexts demonstrates the resilience of linguistic identity among minority communities in the region. Besides, the distribution of Chaldean speakers highlights the historical mobility and settlement patterns of Christian groups in Upper Mesopotamia, offering important insights into the socio-cultural dynamics of the area.

In addition, it is believed that the community called Armenians today has lived in this region since the 4th century BC. They are connected to each other by their sense of homeland, traditions, the language they speak and their religion (Akbulut, 1995). It was put forth that Armenian language was derived from Urartian. Yet, as can be seen, there is a close relationship between Hurrian and Urartian. Despite all the efforts, there is no closeness between Armenian and Urartian. As is known, Armenian belongs to the Indo-European language group. So, Armenian has no connection with Urartian (Ceylan, 2015). Hence, the current findings emphasize that, despite geographical proximity and historical interactions, linguistic affiliation must be distinguished from cultural or regional coexistence. Consequently, Armenian's classification within the Indo-European family may confirm its independent development separate from the languages of neighbouring ancient civilizations.

One of the other ethnic groups that lived in Diyarbakır and its environs is the Kurds. There are different approaches to the origin of the Kurds. The Kurds, whose homeland is known to be the Zagros Mountains, are shown to be related to Iranian tribes in terms of history and language rather than ethnic origin (Minorsky, 1977). The communities (Karduks) that Xenophon (4th century BC) called Kardukhoi have been associated with the Kurds by some modern researchers. While some researchers associate them with the Cyrtii, others with the Medes, who lived in mountainous areas of northern Mesopotamia (Akbaş, 2019). According to this information, when the Romans captured Diyarbakır and its environs, the Kurds, speaking Kurdish language, lived in the mountainous regions of these areas.

In addition, since ancient times, Mesopotamia and Anatolia were a homeland for Jews. During the Roman and Byzantine periods, there were small Jewish communities in Anatolia known as Karaites and Romaniots. There were also important Jewish communities living in the eastern parts of Gaziantep, Urfa, Siverek, Diyarbakır, Çermik, Mardin, Nusaybin, Cizre, Başkale and Van. Therefore, Hebrew was

used in religious and cultural contexts during the Roman Empire, especially among the Jewish communities in Diyarbakır (ancient Amida) and its surroundings (Şanlı, 2017). The presence of these Jewish settlements not only contributed to the linguistic diversity of the region but also fostered cultural exchange among languages. In addition, the survival of certain Hebrew and Aramaic expressions in local oral traditions and inscriptions indicates a long-standing continuity of religious and linguistic interaction throughout the centuries.

Furthermore, it seems that gatherings of speakers of the indigenous language, named as the "Diyarbakır language" group, could rely on exclusively kin and village-based cultural milieu. In other words, it might be that acceptance of Greek and the Greek alphabet worked a radical change in the linguistic habits of the indigenous language group, so that the Greek alphabet started to be utilized for the transcription of their language, at least highly aware that by so doing they were placing new limits on the use of their language. The richness of textual evidence would thus point to mainly bilingual (Greek-Diyarbakır language) and bi-literacy (Greek and Greek alphabet-Diyarbakır alphabet and Diyarbakır language) social formations, with the Greek side of it at the same time one of the wider multilingual settings.

3.3 The Influence of the Roman Empire on Local Languages

During Roman governance and cultural authority, the local languages in Diyarbakır experienced the most important transformations (Grbić, 2016). Certain rules or properties that were new for the local languages such as Semitic languages, even Phoenician flourished under Roman influence. The first area was usage of idioms in public or literary life under the authority of the new administrators. (Millar, 1993; Mullen, 2015).

The local citizens of Rome were mostly composed of many Roman stock-settled outsiders, many of them native Latin-speakers. Latin appeared at the foreground of the languages spoken in the area as the dominant language of administration, public life, and, of course, literary life The new provincial populations who were non-Latin-speakers encountered a new linguistic formality to access the new power and social structure (Adams, 2003). Great majority of the settled Romans or Roman citizens were non-urban pastoralists, farmers, or non-literate local kingdoms' audiences. Agrarian and pastoral syncretism were the lifestyle for them in the ruling period of the native kingdoms (Varak, 2023). As a result, Latin slowly influenced the local language classes of the nomadic pastoralists to paraphrase some of their vernacular speech into Latin for the state managements and public formalities. However, this remained not a direct borrowing of Latin forms but as local adaptations due to vernacular phonological arrangements. It could also be thought a bilingual two variable language disposition of a widely spoken but less literary local language and a minor learned or widely used literary language (Alam, 2022). The same changes happened with Greek vernaculars which paraphrased their prior vernacular use of Greek numerals into Greek forms used in literary life (Alexiou, 2018).

Similarly, the courts of Roman generals enforced Latin legal terminologies over the local kingdoms' legal vernaculars and the rustic classical texts. At this time, certain Roman legal and administrative terms passed into the vernaculars and thus changed their previous meanings. These episodes show that the Roman existence in the vernaculars affected much the literary or formal use of the languages while the everyday language remained unaffected and thus transformed only at the very end of the Empire's governance (Bedos-Rezak, 1996). The vernaculars experienced major modifications theological transcriptions and much Indo-European calques congregationally influenced by pre-existing Greek forms. These show a basal literary vernacular or a gross linguistic state prior to the Roman

interventions (Dutcher, 2001). Koine Greek continued to exist as a cultural language for many educated Romans throughout the areas under Roman rule, while in Egypt and the eastern regions of the Empire it was used as a second official language of government alongside Latin (Horta, 2022). In conclusion, the impacts of the Roman dominance over the vernaculars are great and transformative but only on the literary or formal grounds and these are the very basis for the following analyses of the vernacular transformations (Ledgeway, 2012).

3.4 Language Contact and Linguistic Diversity

Amida, now Diyarbakır, a city in the north of Mesopotamia, is the oldest settlement in the region where the Tigris River flows through mountainous terrain. It is located at the intersection of northern Mesopotamia, southeastern Anatolia, and northwestern Roman Armenia (Assénat, 2015). During its historical life, Amida has found itself under the rule of peoples and states, which have spoken different languages. During the Roman Empire, Amida was the capital of the province of the same name. Since people generally carry and live their languages at the time of their movement from one place to another, and since the migrations of peoples in the historical past was much greater than it is today, this city and its environs must have been linguistically very diverse (Kerswill, 2006). Ever since people first started a journey to conquer lands, bringing in their own languages, and pastured their sheep and goats on one side of the river while other peoples did likewise on the opposite side, languages have merged, bickered, and quarreled with one another, becoming alike and different, pure and contaminated, and prestigious and worthless. Words, phrases, and even entire texts have been borrowed from one language into another; grammatical structures have been transferred from one tongue to another; some languages have entirely became extinct, while the others have changed dramatically; the very nature of languages has changed; pidginization and/or creolization processes have started; some languages have remained stable despite an otherwise chaotic situation; and societal perception has made some languages prestigious and others worthless (Poplack, 2017).

It is possible to infer irreversibly that in the course of history, many different languages were spoken in this region. Though some of these languages have remained unknown to the scholars or people, the extant inscriptions, reports of historians such as Herodotus, Strabo and Ammianus Marcellinus, as well as the writings of other authors like Pliny the Elder and Ptolemy, encompass enough data related to several languages used in this area. Epigraphic materials, particularly cuneiform and Aramaic inscriptions discovered in and around Diyarbakır, further confirm the linguistic multiplicity of the region (Alper et al., 2016). Some of these languages were commonly spoken across broad territories and were in everyday use for a long period, while the use of some languages was temporally restricted to narrow regions. Some of these languages were slowly forgotten, while some others appeared anew in this area. However, most of these languages existed together, and in some cases parallel to one another, for a long time. Thus, it may be inferred that this co-functioning of languages in a single community fit into the notion of "multilingualism" or "plurilingualism," which characterizes the everyday life of societies of the present day as well as those of the past (Grbić, 2016).

From a scholarly perspective, while these interpretations rely on archaeological and historical sources, it is important to acknowledge that any reconstruction of linguistic history involves a certain degree of inference, and absolute objectivity may not always be attainable in the evaluation of such ancient data. In this context, linguistic archaeology and historical linguistics serve as complementary disciplines attempting to bridge the gap between material evidence and linguistic interpretation. By analysing the unearthed inscriptions, phonetic traces and lexical borrowings across different strata, these fields aim to reconstruct the sociolinguistic landscape of past civilizations as accurately as possible (Vasiloudis, 2024; Posani, 2022). Nevertheless, interpretations inevitably reflect the methodological

limitations and cultural frameworks of modern scholarship, emphasising the necessity of a critical and transparent approach when assessing the linguistic heritage of ancient Anatolia and Mesopotamia (Grigoriev, 2023).

3.5 Literary and Epigraphic Evidence of Languages

The assessment of language use in historical contexts relies heavily on literary and epigraphic sources, as these materials provide the most tangible and accessible evidence of linguistic practices. Discussions regarding linguistic communities in the Roman Empire have often focused on the types of literature produced in various languages and what this can reveal about social status, identity, and historical circumstances. This is particularly relevant to the languages of Diyarbakır and its surroundings, especially Greek and Latin, although this study does not focus specifically on these languages. The languages of interest here, however, do not leave a conventional literary corpus; the available evidence is limited to references in historical sources and secondary analyses by scholars (Johnson, 2010). The study of these languages requires clarification of what is meant by "texts and documents." In this context, the evidence primarily consists of references to inscriptions, administrative records, and other historical materials as discussed in secondary analyses by scholars, rather than direct access to the original documents (Mullen & Bowman, 2021). These scholarly sources provide insight not only into the official or ceremonial uses of language but also into the probable everyday linguistic practices of the period. Analyses of multilingual contexts reveal the coexistence and interaction of different linguistic communities and help illustrate the cultural and linguistic diversity of the region (Mullen, 2015).

In various areas such as Diyarbakır, the examination of historical sources and secondary analyses enables scholars to reconstruct the geographic distribution and social functions of languages used in antiquity, and this is rather helpful in terms of defining the language map of many civilizations throughout of the history; however, such an investigation always holds a great deal of challenges since direct access to many original inscriptions and documents is limited, thus, scholarly works provide insight into the types of texts that would have existed, including administrative records, dedicatory and funerary inscriptions, and commercial documents (Çetin, et al., 2020). These analyses suggest that multiple languages coexisted within the same communities, reflecting both official and everyday linguistic practices, and all of them are the acute life indicators of those civilizations. For instance, multilingual contexts in Mesopotamia indicate that Aramaic, Syriac, Greek, and Latin were often employed in parallel, demonstrating interaction between different linguistic groups and the functional distribution of languages across social and administrative spheres (Ruffing, 2023). Such evidence underscores that multilingualism and cultural diversity were integral to daily life in the Roman Empire and its peripheries. Additionally, historical artifacts, such as manuscripts written in multiple languages; for example, a Bible transcribed in both Hebrew and Greek (fig. 3) provides tangible illustrations of the coexistence and practical use of these languages, highlighting the ways in which religious, administrative, and commercial spheres intersected in multilingual settings.

Figure 3

A Bible written in gold in Hebrew and Greek (Haberler.com, 2019).

Different kinds of inscriptions in various languages of the region are crucial for understanding how these languages were utilized. Language utilization in public is particularly revealing, since it marks what the authors of inscriptions felt were significant elements of their cultural and social identity. Inscriptions also provide proof of the same text in different languages and help emphasize differences in language use between the community groups these texts represent. Also, as much as can be reconstructed from the available evidence of languages in Diyarbakır and its environs, various materials such as reliefs and inscriptions most clearly show how languages were utilized and recorded. Of all the evidence available for the use of languages, inscriptions may be regarded as the most fixed in in terms of defining a possible language, and script cannot be changed unless a person destroys the original text. There is a discussion over whether a text recorded in different languages and scripts forms separate textual objects, or if the difference in languages and scripts only changes the linguistic exterior of a single text. This debate aside, the presence of the same text in a variety of linguistic forms does allow for significant observations about society and cultural interaction, and this is particularly relevant for understanding how inscriptions work as markers of social difference. Accordingly, the term "linguistic community" is used to describe groups sharing the same language, since people within one community may speak multiple languages, and speakers of the same language may be socially distant. Despite this, the term remains the most practical and widely accepted in linguistic studies (Debié, 2018). Hence, throughout the present study, numerous relics attesting to the languages spoken in and around Diyarbakır during the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) period have been identified.

For example, on the city walls of Amida (modern Diyarbakır), a series of reliefs and inscriptions commemorate the reconstruction of the fortifications under the emperors Valentinian, Valens, and Gratian, reflecting the artistic as well as administrative language of the Roman period. The reliefs, carved alongside the inscriptions and located near the Harput Gate (modern Dağkapı), visually emphasize imperial authority and divine protection, while the inscriptions themselves record the official dedication in the language of Roman governance. This combination of visual and textual expression demonstrates how the Roman authorities employed both image and written language as instruments of power and communication in the provinces. Such reliefs and inscriptions were not merely decorative or commemorative elements; they functioned as ideological tools reinforcing political hierarchy, imperial legitimacy, and cultural integration.

The following Figure 4 illustrates one such example from the Harput Gate (Dağkapı), where a Roman-period inscription is accompanied by sculptural motifs typical of imperial iconography, showcasing the characteristic features of Roman epigraphic and artistic style in the region. Such examples have been the subject of extensive archaeological, epigraphic, and linguistic studies, as they reveal how official and local languages, and visual representations, coexisted and interacted across

Anatolia and Mesopotamia (Mitchell, 2014; RomeArtLover, 2009). Thus, it is possible to claim that Roman Empire's language held a great deal of dominance during their period in Diyarbakır, and during that time, many official and daily tasks may have been mostly conducted via this language. As a result, it may be asserted that in the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire, Greek served as the primary language of government administration and public documentation from the 7th century onwards, whereas local vernaculars (such as Syriac, Aramaic and regional dialects) continued to be used in everyday and religious contexts, and Latin, though formerly dominant, gradually receded from official use. Occasionally, the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire engaged in conflicts with Arabic-speaking polities and other neighbouring states, and as a result, traces of multiple foreign languages can be observed in inscriptions, administrative documents, and other material remains from the period.

Figure 4

Dag Kapisi - reliefs and inscriptions (RomeArtLover, 2009).
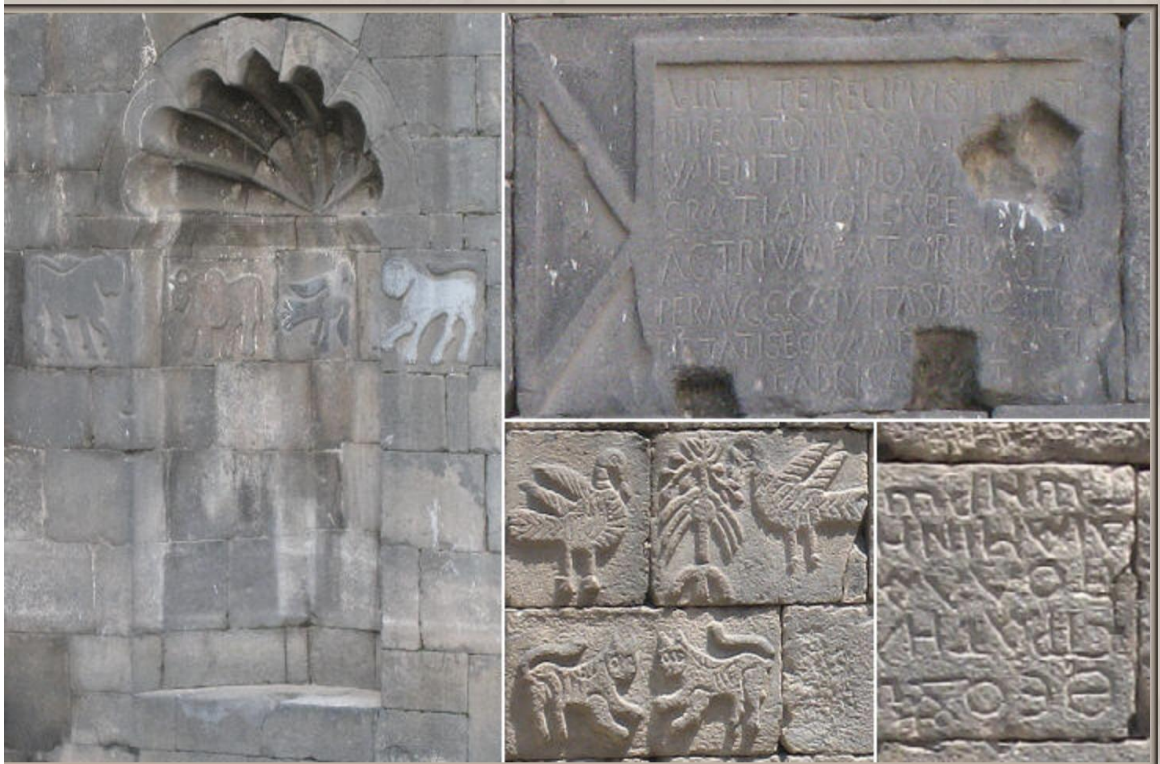
As another example from the territories of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire in and around Diyarbakır, a significant rock-cut tomb discovered in the Bahçeköy village of the Silvan district bears Syriac-Aramaic epitaphs commemorating a priest called "Monoha," thus demonstrating the survival of Aramaic dialects in a Christian community under late antique and medieval contexts (Syriac Press, 2019). The tomb comprises a main chamber flanked by two smaller side chambers, and the inscriptions (Fig. 5) were initially examined by Gabriel Akyüz, a Syriac Orthodox priest of the Mor Behnam Church in Diyarbakır, to verify their linguistic origin and authenticity. His analysis confirmed that the tomb belongs to a priest named Monoha and that the inscriptions invoke all readers to offer prayers for the deceased priest; therefore, this case underscores the complexity and dynamics of sociolinguistic hierarchies and identity markers in multilingual societies. The inscriptions, particularly those analysed in the Silvan tomb (Fig. 5), provide direct evidence of the persistence of Syriac/Aramaic in Christian communities in and around Diyarbakır, alongside Latin and Greek, which were employed in official and monumental contexts. These inscriptions are not merely relics of the past but active indicators of how communities asserted their religious, cultural, and linguistic identities in relation to the dominant

imperial powers. Besides, the epigraphic evidence illustrates processes of language dominance and language shift: while Roman and later Byzantine authorities favoured Latin or Greek in administrative inscriptions, Aramaic and Syriac continued to be used in everyday and religious contexts, maintaining community cohesion and identity.

Figure 5

Syriac Inscriptions Found in Rock Tomb (Syriac Press, 2019).

3.6 Archaeological and Epigraphic Evidence

Besides the epigraphic evidence already debated, the archaeological findings complete and strengthen these discoveries. The archaeological artifacts, structures, and sites unearthed in Diyarbakır and its environs picturize the linguistic practices of the period and add new dimensions to the epigraphic evidence. Several epigraphic evidence were excavated during archaeological exploration, which constitutes a primary reason for the preference towards epigraphy. Nevertheless, the archaeological context of a finding is necessary in interpreting patterns of language usage. Where a find was unearthed, and in what sort of structure, provides vital information on language usage. The combination of material culture and language displays a fuller picture of the way of life in Diyarbakır and its province during the Roman Empire (Mullen, 2015).

Examples are given from archaeological sites in and around Diyarbakır, which have been uncovered recently and have provided critical insights into historical interactions among different cultural and linguistic communities. On the other hand, the study of material evidence allows scholars to address specific questions regarding language usage, multilingualism, and sociolinguistic hierarchies (Carroll, 2018). Recently discovered epigraphic evidence in non-Greek and non-Latin alphabets, such as Syriac/Aramaic inscriptions from the Silvan and Hasuni sites, together with the archaeological findings, highlights the complex relationship between material culture and linguistic diversity. Language is a conspicuous marker of social identity, and inscriptions mirror the sociocultural transactions between people. Generally, archaeological excavation reports, notebooks, and peer reviewed academic studies documenting these sites are consulted to verify the context and authenticity of the finds (Sinner, & Velaza, 2018). Besides official archaeological research, artifacts unearthed in informal or illegal excavations are sometimes examined for comparative purposes, though their use is limited due to

potential issues of provenance. While medieval epigraphic evidence inscribed in Arabic script exists in the region, these materials are excluded here because they pertain to a different historical period. A significant aspect worth noting is the synergy between linguistics and archaeology in historical studies: language and material culture must be analyzed together to fully understand past societies. If either language evidence or material culture evidence were considered in isolation, key dimensions of social, religious, and cultural life would be overlooked. For example, the inscriptions found in temples or tombs provide information not only about the function of these sites but also about religious practices, identity, and social stratification. Language and material culture thus speak together and mutually reinforce each other in the reconstruction of past societies (Laitin & Ramachandran, 2022).

Some other examples from Diyarbakır and its environs indicate the relics of Roman Empire in terms of language and society. To exemplify, in the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, including the region of modern Diyarbakır, Greek and Latin coexisted as languages of administration, literature, and ritual. The Romans, whose mother tongue was Latin, officially used an alphabet derived from the Greek script through Etruscan intermediaries, while Greek maintained a superior position in literary, educational, and religious domains. Consequently, Greek was widely employed in official documents, inscriptions, and religious artifacts throughout the eastern provinces, even as Latin continued to function in administrative contexts. One of the most illustrative examples of this linguistic duality is the 6th century AD baptism bucket discovered at Zerzevan Castle, considered a fundamental artifact of the Christian period. Initially found by local villagers in the 1890s, it was later cataloged in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum in 1895. The inscription "ΥΠΕΡ ΕΥΧΗС ΚΑΙ СΩΤΗΡΙΑС ΑΝΤΙΠΑΤΡΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΠΑΝΤΟС ΤΟΥ ΟΙΚΟΥ ΑΥΤΟΥ ΚΥ¬ΡΙΟС ΦΥΛΑΞΙ СΑΓ" ("For the acceptance and salvation of the wish or offering of Antipatros and his family. God bless you") demonstrates the use of Greek as a medium for religious expression in a region where multiple languages were spoken (Coşkun, 2019; Coşkun, 2023) (Fig. 6). This artifact exemplifies the intersection of linguistic, religious, and social practices, revealing how inscriptions served as tangible markers of cultural identity and the coexistence of languages in the Eastern Roman provinces.

Roman language policies led to a gradual decline in the influence of Aramaic in the region. Latin, the dominant language across the imperial territory, played a decisive role particularly in public administration, law, and cultural activities. While Latin was prevalent in the western provinces of the Empire, Greek maintained its widespread use in the eastern provinces under the influence of the traditional Hellenistic heritage. The designation of Latin as the lingua imperii clearly demonstrates its central position in administrative and official spheres. Within this multilingual setting, Aramaic largely retained its function as a language of daily communication among local communities, yet it increasingly assumed a secondary status in the face of Latin and subsequently Greek dominance in official and cultural contexts. Aramaic inscriptions dated to the Roman period in the Diyarbakır region are therefore of particular significance, as they provide insights into the structure and use of the language during this era. These enrollments hold significant potential for understanding the religious and cultural practices of the time, particularly in terms of language use and the influence of different cultural traditions within the region. The uncertainty surrounding their full interpretation highlights the challenges faced by scholars in deciphering ancient texts, especially when considering the complex linguistic and historical context of the period. As scientific research continues, these inscriptions could provide valuable insights into the religious and social dynamics of the late Roman period in the region, shedding light on the interaction between local populations and the broader Roman Empire. Furthermore, these Aramaic inscriptions serve as tangible evidence of the persistence of local languages alongside the official languages of the Roman administration, revealing patterns of multilingualism in sacred spaces. They underscore the role of inscriptions as instruments of both religious devotion and social identity, offering

a unique window into the ways communities expressed cultural and linguistic affiliations, negotiated influences, and maintained local identity within the broader imperial context.

Figure 6

The baptismal bucket found in Zerzevan Castle with a Greek inscription on it (Coşkun, 2023).

4. Conclusion, Discussion and Recommendations

Understanding the interplay between language and power dynamics in a specific historical context develops comprehension of broader themes and universal issues in language history and prehistory. Such understanding may also appeal to widely shared worries and anxieties about languages, identities, and politics today. In the light of these results, attention to a past moment of change and exchange may resonate with contemporary situations in the world.

The languages spoken in Diyarbakır and its environs during the Roman Empire constituted a diverse linguistic landscape. The evidence reviewed in this study illuminates how different languages coexisted, interacted, and affected each other. While Latin appeared as the dominant language under Roman rule and became the mother tongue of local elites, Greek was spoken widely outside city borders. Local languages such as Aramaic, Syriac, Hebrew, Armenian, and Kurdish maintained but transformed through the processes of Romanization. These findings may deepen understanding of the cohabitation of diverse, even divergent, languages throughout history. The careful consideration of the languages in inscriptions as text languages possesses particular relevance beyond the specific context, touching on more relevant questions regarding the borders of language use and the possibility of mutual understanding across distinct languages (Millar, 1993). Furthermore, it is possible to assert that the persistence of Aramaic and Syriac inscriptions in religious and social contexts illustrates how local communities actively negotiated their linguistic and cultural identity alongside the official Roman administrative languages since the human beings having lived during that period were able to practice a multilingual context and that is why their cultural value and language awareness are rather divine.

Local languages spoken by the native people kept on being used together with the dominant languages of imperial power, undergoing transformation rather than replacement. These transformative processes, however, may vary great deal from the Latin and Greek models in other regions of the Empire. While Roman rule deeply influenced local languages, their profound structures remained intact, restricting broader applicability of the findings to paralleled situations elsewhere in the Empire. However, specific local contexts may offer insights into wider implications related to popular responses to elite language use and assimilation among unequal power relations. At the same time, the consideration of peace and stability, however temporary, supports awareness of the limits of the applicability of findings to changing situations beyond the local focus. Nevertheless, further comparative research across different provinces may be entailed to determine whether these patterns of linguistic resilience and adaptation are unique to Diyarbakır or represent broader phenomena within the Roman East; however, the fragmentary nature of epigraphic and archaeological evidence are clear artefacts and they may require cautious interpretation, as surviving inscriptions may overrepresent official or elite perspectives while underrepresenting everyday language practices.

Inscriptions in the different languages of Diyarbakır and its environs during the Roman Empire attracts researchers beyond what is undertaken here in language forms. Scholarships broadly considering the influences of the same inscriptions investigated here as texts, independent of their linguistic medium and form, may be a fruitful path for future inquiries. Great majority of the languages discussed herein still find visible expressions in modern Diyarbakır, where their historical languages are now memorialized by many scholars or human beings living in those contexts. For this reason, the relevance of these languages has not completely faded from present concerns, even if memories have dimmed, partially unifying under the shadow of greater powers. The expectation is to have nudged open a door for others to enter and explore in many different manners.

As a result, the purpose has been to arouse appreciation for the often-unnoticed memorials of past languages, as these marked moments of historical change inscribe the human wish to make sense of the world and convey that sense to others. Inscriptions memorializing the languages of Diyarbakır and its environs during the Roman Empire bear witness to the imaginative struggles of diverse polities and peoples negotiating their identities through historical change, often in peaceable and inclusive ways, however temporary such negotiations might have been.

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