The relationship between Arabic Allāh and Syriac Allāhā

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Abstract

Various etymologies have been proposed for Arabic allāh but also for Syriac allāhā. It has often been proposed that the Arabic word was borrowed from Syriac. This article takes a comprehensive look at the linguistic evidence at hand. Especially, it takes into consideration more recent epigraphical material which sheds light on the development of the Arabic language. Phonetic and morphological analysis of the data confirms the Arabic origin of the word allāh, whereas the problems of the Syriac form allāhā are described, namely that the Syriac form differs from that of other Aramaic dialects and begs explanation, discussing also the possibility that the Syriac word is a loan from Arabic. The final part considers Qur’anic allāh in its cultural and literary context and the role of the Syriac word in that context.

The article concludes, that both, a strictly linguistic, as well as cultural and literary analysis reveals a multilayered interrelation between the two terms in question. The linguistic analysis shows, that Arabic allāh must be a genuinely Arabic word, whereas in the case of Syriac allāhā, the possibility of both, a loan and a specific inner-Aramaic development are laid out. Apart from linguistic considerations, the historical and cultural situation in Northern Mesopotamia, i.e. the early Arab presence in that region is taken into scrutiny. In turn, a possible later effect of the prominent use of Syriac allāhā on the use in the Qurʾān is considered. It is emphasized, that we are presented with a situation of prolonged contact and exchange, rather than merely one-way borrowings.

1) I would like to thank Christian J. Robin for pointing out important material on the issue. I would also like to thank Dr. N. Sinai, Dr. J. Witztum and M. Marx for proof-reading this paper and contributing valuable remarks. Any errors are, of course, my own.
I. Introductory remarks

Allāh is used in the Qur‘ān as the designation of the one God, both as an appellative and a proper name. The word has been variously interpreted as a contraction of al-‘ilmāh > allāh but also, due to the apparent similarity of the two words, as a loan from Syriac allāhā. This article takes a fresh look at the origins of and relation between Arabic allāh and Syriac allāhā. Especially, it revisits the question of a possible loanword connection Syriac > Arabic and/or Arabic > Syriac. Typically, if a loanword relation was assumed, it has been presupposed that the direction was from Syriac into Arabic, since Syriac is attested earlier as a literary language. A closer look at the linguistic situation, however, calls this assumption into question.

II. The linguistic evidence

A. Common Semitic

In Semitic, the oldest, most common word for ‘god’ has the following attestations: Akkadian ilu(m), pl. ilū, Ugaritic ’l-, pl. ’lm, ’lhm, that is */ilu, *ilūma, *’Whūma/, Hebrew ’ēl, Phoenician, Aramaic, Arabic and Old

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South Arabic īl. This warrants a reconstructed form Proto-Semitic *īl-. In Central-Semitic, we also find an extended form: Hebrewʾēlōah (mostly in the pl. ʾelōhīm), Aramaic ʾlāh, ʾēlāh, Arabic ʾilāh, Old South Arabic ʾlāh. In cuneiform writing, we find the forms –(i)lu(a), -ila(i) reflecting Canaanite and Aramaic phonetics respectively. Based on this, we can reconstruct Proto-Central-Semitic *īlāh-. Both Arabic and Syriac diverge from this picture in that they have allāh and allāhā; i.e. they differ in the vocalic anlaut7 and the doubling of the second radical. While in Syriac allāhā8 is the only form in use, Arabic has both (al-)ʾilāh and allāh.9 So let us take a closer look at both Arabic and Syriac.

B. Allāh: the situation in Arabic

Possibly the oldest attestation for allāh is found at Qaryat al-Fāw in the inscription of ʾIgl dating to the 1st century CE.10 Given its importance we will cite the inscription here in full.

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5) There is also Hλ and ḫογ transmitted through Greek.


7) Punic too, has a: alonim, alonuth but these are clearly different derivations of the root *īl-.

8) There is also ēl (West-Syriac īl, written Yl) in Syriac but other than being a lexicographer’s item, it is only used in proper names or as a calque of Hebrew ʾēl. It may, however, reflect older usage, just as the element -il/-īl found in both North and South Arabic names.

9) For the semantic difference between the Syriac and the Arabic, see further below under C.

Igl fils de Hōfīamm a construit pour son frère Rabī‘<'>il fils de Hō-
fiamm <ce> tombeau, ainsi que pour lui, pour ses enfants, pour son é-
pouse, pour ses enfants (à elle), pour leurs petits enfants
et pour leurs femmes, nobles du lignage de Ghalwān. Puis
il l’a confié à Kahl, à <Al>lāḥ, à ʿAthṭhar
a<sh>-Shāriq contre n’importe qui de puissant et de faible,
acheteur et preneur de gages, pour toujours,
contre tout dommage, tant que donnera
le ciel de la pluie et que la ter-
re sera couverte d’herbe

This text makes use of the definite article ʾl-, showing the same behaviour as known from Classical Arabic, i.e. assimilation before ‘solar’ consonants, cf. ʾs2rq and ʾs1my for /aš-šāriq/ and /as-samā‘/. As is to be expected, doubling of consonants is not indicated. Furthermore, the first alif of the definite article is hamzat al-wasl, that is, it is dropped when preceded by another vowel, cf. w-lʾrd = /wa-lʾard/. Hence w-Lḥ in line 5 could be read as /wa-Llāḥ/ rather than /wa-Lāḥ/. This seems to be confirmed by another inscription from Qaryat al-Fāw:

11) English translation: “Igl, son of Hōfīamm, has built <this> grave for his brother Rabī‘<'>, son of Hōfīamm, as well as for himself, his children, his wife, her children, their grand-children and their wives, nobles of the line of Galwān. After that, he has entrusted it to Kahl, <Al>lāḥ, Ṭṭṭar a<sh>-Šāriq against anyone, powerful or weak, buyer or mortgage taker (?), forever, against any harm, as long as the sky give rain and the world be covered with grass.”

12) Or perhaps rather /aš-šāriq/ and /as-samay/.

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Here we find the form ʿlh /allāh/ with the onset intact. Theoretically, one could read lāh in the first inscription and ʾilāh in the second. However, since the inscriptions are likely to be in the same variety of Arabic, applying Ogham’s Razor, it is preferable to assume a form (a)llāh in both cases. This Early North Arabic inscription displays, next to a few others, e.g. in Ṣamāra and Ḥarrān, the use of the definite article al-. ¹⁴ What is more, the article behaves, as noted above, as in Classical Arabic. There is a good deal of evidence for both allāh and al-ʾilāh, both epigraphical and other. In addition to the above mentioned inscriptions there are also transcriptions of Arabic names found in bilingual Arabic-Greek texts, which confirm the existence of the form allāh even in Safaitic, ¹⁵ cf. an inscription from the Jordanian desert (WH 1894) where WHB ṿLH is transcribed into Greek as OYABAéconom, suggesting an underlying Arabic form /wahballāh/. The same evidence is found in Nabatean. ¹⁶ In Palmyra we find two proper names ZBDLH and NBWLH that might be interpreted as something like /zabdallāh/ and /nabullāh/ ‘Zabd is the God’ and ‘Nabû is the God’. ¹⁷ At the same time we find al-ʾilāh e.g. in Zabad (60 km south-east of Aleppo) in an inscription dated to ca. 512 CE¹⁸:

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\begin{align*}
\text{[d]}(k)r^l^\prime lh \ Srgw \ bn \ ^\prime ml \ Mnfw \ w-Tlh\ ^\prime bn \ Mr^l Qys \ w-Srgw \ bn \\
S^d w-Srw \ w-Sy\, f. fhw.
\end{align*}
\]

Que Dieu se [souvi]enne de Serge fils d’Amat Manāf, de Tlh’ (?) fils d’Imru’ al-Qays, de Serge fils de Sa’d, de Strw et de Sy\, f. fhw (?) ¹⁹


¹⁹) The translations given are by Robin: “La réforme”, p. 337.
This latter inscription illustrates the use of *al- ’ilāh* in a Christian context. This means that use of the definite article with the generic term for god was seen as suitable to denote the Christian God. Indeed, the use of *al- ’ilāh* next to *allāh* in a monotheistic context is also attested e.g. in a poem by *an-Nābiya ad- Ḍubaynī.*

_Lahum šimatan lam yūʾtiḥā llāhu ḥayrahum // mīna l-ḏūdi, wa-l-ʾaḥlāmi ḡayri ʾawāzibī__

_maqallatuhum dātu l-ʾilāhi, wa-dīnunum // qawīman fa-mā yarjūna ḡayra l-ʾawāqibī._

“They have a virtue that God [allāh] has given to no one but them, // [a virtue] of bounteouness, and unyielding prudence.

Their scripture is that of God [al- ’ilāh], and their religion is one of rectitude, they only want (anticipate) the consequences [of their acts].”

As mentioned before, it has been suggested very early on to derive *allāh* from a contraction of *al- ’ilāh*. Barring the assumption of a loan from a different language, such a contraction would seem to be the only way to explain the form in question. Infact this kind of contraction seems to be regular at least in some parts of Arabia. Already Brockelmann (*Brockelmann: Vergleichende Grammatik*, §54e) states:


It was David Testen who noted, that _al- + ’u/CaC > al-CaC_ is a regular “Hijazi” development, not shared by all dialects. We would second the analysis of *allāh* as being made up of the definite article _al_ + ’ilāh since

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21) Translation by Ghasan El-Masri.


23) In this, schematic notation _C_ stands as a place-holder for any consonant. The _anlaut_ of the respective word can have either _i_ or _u_ but not _a_.

24) It seems likely, however, that this development is not exclusive to “Hijazi” but was actually characteristic of a more widespread ‘western’ dialect continuum.
1) the *anlaut* behaves like the definite article in Classical Arabic.
2) \( al + 'u/iCā > al-\text{-}Cā \) is a regular phonetical development in at least some dialects of Arabic.
3) the doubling of \( l \) cannot otherwise be explained in Arabic.
4) there is a parallel case with \( al-\text{'}ilāt > allāt \).
5) \( allāh \) is used parallel to \( al-\text{'}ilāh \).
6) \( allāh \) means ‘one particular god/the God’.

So what was understood in Arabia by the use of \( allāh \)? Firstly, the word seems to be employed to denote a specific god as in the *Qaryat al-Fāw* inscription, invoked next to other gods. Also, it would appear that it can be understood as ‘the specific god in context’, i.e. the one whom I worship or who is related to a certain sanctuary or the like, as perhaps proper names like *Nabūllāh* ‘Nabū is the god’ suggest. Even *Wahballāh* may be interpreted that way. I.e. \( allāh \) could not only be taken to refer to a god named \( allāh \) but also as meaning ‘gift of the god’, i.e. ‘of the god whom I worship’. In this case \( allāh \) would function as a generic term. This interpretation would also account for the high number of personal names that contain the element \( allāh \) against the scarcity of the word occurring in isolation.

That means that in actual inscriptions, the name of the god invoked is mentioned, whereas in names a particular god is only implied but simply designated as ‘the god’. A parallel can be found in Old South Arabic where the word \( 'lh-n /'ilāhān/ \) that is \( 'ilāh + \) the OSA definite article \(-ān \) is employed to denote the god venerated at a specific temple, when and where it is used *en lieu* of the proper name of the god to whom the temple is dedicated. It is also found in monotheistic contexts. Lastly there is evidence,
from the Qur’an, that allāh has been understood as a ‘High God’ even before the adoption of Islam. This is suggested by passages like:

- Q 43:87: “If thou ask them, who created them, they will certainly say, ‘God’ (allāh).”
- Q 10:31: “Say: ‘Who is it that sustains you (in life) from the sky and from the earth! or who is it that has power over hearing and sight? And who is it that brings out the living from the dead and the dead from the living? and who is it that rules and regulates all affairs?’ They will soon say, ‘God’ (allāh). Say, “will ye not then show piety (to Him)?”
- Q 39:38: “If indeed thou ask them who it is that created the heavens and the earth, they would be sure to say, ‘God’ (allāh).”

These verses seem to address ‘polytheists’ rather than Christians or Jews. Hence they would seem to suggest belief in a supreme creator God among ‘pagan’ Arabs. In brief, we find the use of allāh denoting either ‘the god’ in a specific context or an individual god who might have been viewed as a ‘high god’ before Islam. The term is also used by Christians to denote their God.

C. Allāhā: the situation in Syriac

In Syriac allāhā the generic name for ‘god’, most notably, but not exclusively, is used for the Jewish and Christian God. Thus, in a pagan context, we find e.g. allāhā sânē bnayyā ‘the God who hates (his) children’, for Saturnus (Kronos). We find it also in following contexts: in the absolute state hayklā d-metprē d-kul allāh ‘the temple which is called ‘of every god’, i.e. the Pantheon; in the plural yawmātā d-allāhē ‘the days of the gods’, i.e. the seven days of the week; in a Jewish and Christian context e.g. allāhā

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31) For the presence of Christians in Arabia and adjacent territories cf. e.g. John Spencer Trimingham (1979) and Theresia Hainthaler: Christliche Araber vor dem Islam: Verbreitung und konfessionelle Zugehörigkeit; eine Hinführung, Leuven et al., 2007.
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dʿālmē ‘eternal God’, rendering Hebrew ’el ’olām; distinctly Christian in allāhā rabbā yešūʿ mšīḥā ‘the great God Jesus the Messiah’; and, last but not least, in bsēm abā wa-brā w-rūḥā qaddišā, ḫad allāhā šarrīrā ‘in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, One true God’.

The exact shape of the Syriac word has been debated. One finds both transcriptions as allāhā and alāhā. While we find references to doubling in standard grammars, e.g. Nöldeke (Nöldeke: Kurzgefasste Syr. Grammatik S. 14/§21) and Brockelmann (Brockelmann: Syrische Grammatik, §135), it was Blau who argued strongly for reading alāhā. This form is, however, morphonetically impossible in Syriac. A proto-form **alāh- must become > elāh(a) in Syriac, according to the well-known rule of vowel-reduction: a pretonic a is reduced, and the remaining aleph is then vocalised to e, as can be seen in verbs with initial aleph, e.g. *amara > ’(s)mar > emar, analogous to *qatala > qatal. Blau claims that the initial a- of al(l)āhā was preserved due to a preceding ‘. In Syriac however, ’ (aleph) seems never to be retained at the beginning of a word, no matter what the quality of the anlauting vowel, as can be easily gathered from Syriac phonotactics. Blau refers to Nöldeke for examples of retention of a (not ’, one may add!) as in e.g. akōl/akūl (the imperative of ekal ‘to eat’) or amīr (passive participle of emar ‘to say’). Yet, the anlauting a- here is not due to a retained ’ but rather to paradigmatic leveling. At any rate, to my knowledge, all instances of *aCā- show > eCā-, cf. e.g. *anā (older *an’a) > enā (‘I’), that is the regular development as expected. The Syriac evidence, as noted by Brockelmann (Brockelmann: Syrische Grammatik, §135) and others, clearly points to l. In West-Syriac, allāhā is only secondarily pronounced alāhā /alōhō/, as all doubled consonants are simplified in that dialect. This, however, does not affect the establishment of the original form and is a later development, not specific to the word in question.

Blau’s statement seems to be based on Bar Hebraeus who notes that the East Syrians (madnḥāyē) do not double the l in al(l)āhā. It is, however, not clear, whether this reflects the original state of affairs. It could also be

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34) For example the uniconsonantal preposition b-, l- form one syllable with a vowel, in /ballāhā|ballahāy, /lallāhā/not /b-*allāhā, /l-*allāhā. The original ‘is never “stable”.
36) Moberg (1922:227)
secondary since laryngeals, pharyngeals and also r lose, as noted by Bar Hebraeus (ibidem), their doubling even in East Syriac.\textsuperscript{37} The latter is clearly a secondary development. Note that in a different area of phonetics l behaves similarly to the above mentioned consonants in that an original $^*e > a$ before l.\textsuperscript{38} Indeed, Brockelmann explains the Syriac form by this process: $^*\text{ilāhā} > '\text{ellāhā} > ('\text{allāhā}$. In order to do that, he still has to posit a doubled l since the soundchange $^*el > al$ only occurs in closed syllables. That means that the change of initial $e > a$ would be even less explainable within Syriac, if we would posit $^*\text{alāhā}$ since we are dealing with an original '$e- < 'i not $a$- as in amīr etc. Note also, that Bar Hebraeus mentions the pronunciation of the l in West-Syriac $\text{allāhā}$ as $\text{nufahhama}$.\textsuperscript{39} He goes on to note, that some speakers of West-Syriac use the same pronunciation with secondarily doubled l (‘pīpā). This pronunciation, at least in the divine name, could, of course, be due to Arabic influence rather than to the preservation of something old. It is, however, remarkable, that this pronunciation was conferred to cases of (secondarily) doubled l in West-Syriac. While it’s not possible to infer the original pronunciation of $\text{allāhā}$ in West-Syriac from Bar Hebraeus’ statement, $\text{allāhā}$ must have been ‘felt’ to contain a double l be it due to Arabic influence or not. Last but not least, it should be noted that there seems to be a tradition that has a Jewish Babylonian vocalisation of the divine name as ‘$\text{alāhā}$.\textsuperscript{40} The vocalisation is, however, fraught with difficulties. Note, that the more common form is ‘$ylh$ /$\text{elāhā}$/ and that the former is typically found in the mouth of non-Jews. Hence, apart from the difficulties in vocalisation, it is doubtful whether $\text{alāhā}$ represents a genuine phonetic development in a dialect independent of Syriac or rather a form used by non-Jewish Syriac or Arabic speakers.

Thus, for the purpose of this study, I’ll posit an original form $\text{allāhā}$. Note, however, that many of the major points made in what follows are valid also if one posits $\text{alāhā}$. So, to sum up, Syriac $\text{allāhā}$ is phonetically problematic.

\textsuperscript{37} Bar Hebraeus uses the term $\text{hwišā}$ for ‘doubling’ which corresponds to Arabic $\text{mušaddad}$. Cf. also Moberg (1907–1913:38).

\textsuperscript{38} As minor details, I would posit $^*\text{elāhā}$ (with $e$) as Aramaic proto-form and leave out the glottal stop (‘) in the Syriac since it isn’t pronounced.

\textsuperscript{39} He uses the word $\text{liḥtā}$ which was misunderstood by Payne-Smith (1981), but is probably correctly understood by Moberg (1907–1913:45). Cf. also Sokoloff (2009:532). Phonetically, $\text{taḥīm}$ in Arabic is either velarisation or pharyngealisation.

\textsuperscript{40} Cf. Sokoloff 2002:133
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All other Aramaic dialects have continuations of Proto-Central-Semitic \textit{*'ilāh}, namely \textit{elāh(ā)}. That means that the Syriac form differs in two crucial points: 1) the anlaut has \textit{a-} rather than \textit{e-}, and 2) the second radical is doubled, i.e. \textit{ll} vs. \textit{l}. One might account for the second phenomenon by referring to the doubling or gemination of a consonant after short vowel found in some Syriac words, e.g. \textit{leššānā} < \textit{*lišān-}, \textit{attānā} < \textit{*atānā} ‘she-ass’ etc.\textsuperscript{41} This, however, still does not account for the anlaut \textit{a-}. A development \textit{eCC-} > \textit{aCC} other than due to analogy is, to my knowledge, unattested in Classical Syriac. For now, this leaves us essentially with three possibilities: Syriac \textit{allāhā} (\textit{<} common Aramaic \textit{'elāh(ā)}) may be due to either:

1) some sort of analogy.
2) morphological adjustment or
3) borrowing.

As for 1), the problem with analogy due to semantic attraction is, that there seem to be no candidates that would be semantically close enough to trigger such a development.\textsuperscript{42} With regard to 2), there is a possibility that because the form \textit{pāʿal(ā)} (\textit{<} \textit{*paʿal}) in Syriac is overwhelmingly associated with abstract or action nouns, \textit{allāhā} owes its form to alignment with the agent noun pattern \textit{paʿāl(ā)}. Note the Aramaic \textit{elāh-} is from \textit{<} \textit{*piʿāl}, not \textit{*paʿāl}, but the two patterns coalesce in Syriac into \textit{p(ā)ʿal} so that, synchronically, there would have been no difference for speakers of Syriac. This alignment could have happened after a ‘strengthening’ of the second radical \textit{*elāh > *ellāh} or without this intermediate step. An intermediate step would, however, probably have facilitated the passage from Pattern \textit{pāʿal > paʿāl}. As for 3), one could assume a loan from Arabic, namely \textit{allāh}, which, unlike the Syriac, is morphonetically motivated or derivable.\textsuperscript{43}


\textsuperscript{42} Semantic attraction refers to the fact that words which are either antonyms, near synonyms or are otherwise semantically grouped together, often show secondary morphological alignment.

\textsuperscript{43} The problematic form of the Syriac word was already noted by W. Fischer and the possibility of a loan from some Arabic dialect into Syriac is discussed in Krone: \textit{al-Lāt}, p. 464 ff.
III. Discussion

In what follows I will further discuss the possibility of Syriac allāhā being a loanword from Arabic, the possible influence of Syriac on the Arabic word and the state of affairs as present in the Qurʾān. Speakers of Arabic dialects using the definite article al- and showing the form allāh rather than al-‘ilāh settled in the vicinity of Syriac language centres. Indeed, it is the official language of Edessa, the capital of the realm of Osrhoene which was founded by an Arabic dynasty in 132 BCE, at least some of whose members bore Arabic names: Abgar(?), Wā’il (w’il), Mā’nū. There are also a number of words in Syriac which might be early loans from Arabic, such as wālē ‘it is fit, behoves, one should’ (< Arabic WLY?) and wa’dā ‘appointment’ (the latter being also attested in other Aramaic dialects). Arabic loans are also found in other Aramaic dialects, most notably Nabatean. Most importantly, perhaps, there are a number of divine names of Arabic origin attested in Edessa, as well as in other cities of Greater Syria, like Hatra and Palmyra. Thus, Ἄζιζ (zyzw, Greek Azizos) and Mon’im (Mn’y)m, Greek Monimos) are well attested in Edessa. Of special importance are PN like ʾabdallāt/ and wahballāt/ in Old Syriac and Palmyrene inscriptions respectively. It seems to reflect the Arabic theonym allāt. This then would indicate not only the presence of Arabic theonyms but moreover, one that is probably formed in analogy to allāh, namely allāt < al-‘ilāt, cf. Brockelmann’s statement cited before. All taken together there is a visible Arabic element in the Osrhoene. Note also, that most early Christian texts attested in Arabic use al-‘ilāh but allāh is also found. Given its use in a pagan con-

47) See for example Drijvers & Healey 1998:58 and Healey 2009:158ff. The latter, i.e. /wahballāt/, corresponds to Greek Athenodoros ‘gift of Athena’.
48) Cf. however Healey 2001:112f. for different derivations of the name Allāt.
49) That these forms were felt to be interchangeable is also demonstrated by the two versions of the inscription of Hind bint al-Ḥāriṭ, transmitted by al-Bakri and
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text, it could be argued that if *allāhā* was a loan from Arabic, *allāh* must have been ‘tuned down’ to a less ‘definite’ meaning than ‘the particular god’ etc., so that in Syriac it could be used just as a generic term for god, without any ‘definiteness’ attached to it per se.\(^{50}\) On the other hand, incorporation of a word with a definite article is nothing unusual. One example from Arabic is *timsāh*, pl. *tamāsīh* ‘crocodile’ < Copt. *ti* - (def. article) + *msah*.\(^{51}\) Conversely, there are examples of loans from Arabic into other languages like Coptic [attalak] < *aṭ-talāq* (‘divorce’) or Spanish e.g. *alcalde* < *al-qādī* (‘mayor’, < ‘judge’), neither of which bears any ‘definite’ quality.\(^{52}\)

Regardless of whether the Arabic word was or was not the source of Syriac *allāhā*, Arabic *allāh* can be plausibly explained as being not a loan word but the result of inner-Arabic developments, namely resulting from *al* + *’ilāh*. As mentioned above, the development *al*+’/uCāC > *al*-CāC is well documented. The word also behaves just as we would expect, as the *an-laut* is treated as an *alif al-waṣl*. One could, of course, suppose that if *allāh* was a loan from Syriac, it would have been secondarily adjusted, that is, re-interpreted as containing the definite article. Such developments are known from Arabic, cf. e.g. the reinterpretation of Alexandria as *al-Iskandariyya*. However, the very early use of *allāh* as meaning ‘the god/God’ and the parallel use of *’ilāh* + definite article in Old South Arabic seem to counter this scenario.\(^{53}\) Also, the parallel scenario of *al-*’ilāt > *allāt*, earlier attested also as *han-*’ilāt\(^{54}\) speaks strongly in favour of an inner-Arabic genesis.


\(^{50}\) In monotheistic use the word does, of course, acquire that definiteness by virtue of the creed associated with it. It’s not ‘a god’ or ‘this specific god’ but ‘the one and only God’. However, if Arabic *allāh* was loaned into Syriac, this would have happened before the advent of Christianity because *allāh* is already attested in pagan Syriac inscriptions, cf. e.g. Hendrik J. W. Drijvers: *Old Syriac (Edessean) Inscriptions*, Leiden, 1972, p. 2.


\(^{52}\) Thus e.g. in Spanish there can be *un alcalde* ‘a mayor’ or *el alcalde* ‘the mayor’.


At the same time, Syriac-speaking Christians were present from al-Hīra to Na'īrān at least from the 6th century CE onwards, that is, Christians whose literary language, if not that of daily speech, would have been at least partly Syriac. Therefore, the use of Syriac allāhā for the Christian God would have been familiar to some Arabs. It could thus, although not as a formal loanword, still have semantically influenced the use of Arabic allāh. This is borne out by a brief look at the Qurān. There, we find essentially three more or less appellative denominations of ‘God’: rabb, raḥmān and allāh. Rabb is of very early attestation, it is found in South Arabic inscription referring to gods. Raḥmān is well known as a designation of the monotheistic God in South Arabia. It is also common in Jewish post-biblical literature. In the course of the Qurān both raḥmān and allāh are accepted as names for God (Q 17:110) although raḥmān is later relegated to the role of epithet. Allāh, who was probably already a prominent god in Mecca becomes ‘the God’ in the monotheistic sense of Islam. Since God is one of a kind, allāh is both a nomen genericum and a nomen proprium.

IV. Conclusion

Three points emerge from the above: 1) With the evidence at hand it remains unclear whether Syriac allāhā, a curious form within the framework of Syriac, is due to inner-Syriac development or due to borrowing from an Arabic source. 2) There is no reason to assume a loan from Syriac into Arabic, as allāh is perfectly motivated, i.e. phonetically regular, in (some dialects of) Arabic and its development within Arabic is safely accounted for. 3) The use of allāh (next to ar-raḥmān) as personal/generic name for the One God in the Qurān can be explained by its use in Arabic proper. There is, however, a good possibility that the prominence of Syriac allāhā and its near homophony positively influenced the use of allāh in the Qurān. That is to say, we find allāh in the Qurān not only because it was the most ‘fitting’ word to be used, in spite of or because of allāh’s promi-

56) See Böwering: “God and his Attributes”.
58) Eschewing raḥmān as sole designation. Although the latter is found prominently in rabbinic writings and was used in (South) Arabia as the near exclusive designation of the monotheistic God and, apparently, also by contemporary prophets, most notably Musaylima, it was given less prominence than allāh, possibly due to an
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nent position within pre-islamic religion, but perhaps because pre-islamic connotations were more easily superseded taking into consideration that its near homophone Syr. *allāhā* was already prominently used in a monotheistic context.

To sum up, Arabic *allāh* denoted a specific god, in the sense of ‘the god in question’ or an individual god who, at least at some point, had assumed the role of a ‘high god’. The word was therefore, on the one hand, suited to be taken over into Syriac as a generic term for ‘god’, especially so, because in the receiving language the Arabic definite article did not necessarily manifest its determining character. On the other hand, in Arabic and on the Arabic peninsula, it was understood as ‘the god’, and thus lent itself to the designation of the monotheistic God, as, next to Judaism and Christianities, ‘pagan’ henotheistic or even monotheistic tendencies were already present.59 This latter use of the word could well have been enforced by the near homophone Syr. *allāhā*,60 which had become the standard word to refer to the Christian and Jewish God in Syriac and would, given the presence of Christians whose literary language was Syriac, have had at least some currency in Arabia.

We find, then, that both, inter- and intralingual specifics have to be considered. A strict look at phonetics and morphology yields results with respect to the question of immediate ‘physical’ borrowing. Of course these findings should, if possible, be accompanied by a historically plausible scenario taking into proper consideration both ‘physical’ and ‘intellectual’


circumstances. As the above indicates, we do not deal with simple ‘who from whom’-scenarios but intricate interrelationships between languages and groups engaged in a process of simultaneous giving and taking, rather than just one or the other.

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