

## Humanism, Oriental Studies, and the Birth of Philology: Learning Arabic in Europe since the Sixteenth Century<sup>1</sup>

Two approaches dominate work on the history of the study of Arabic and Islam in Christian Europe: The first focuses on the contribution of scholars who were specialists of matters Middle Eastern, Oriental, or Islamic until the nineteenth century, but their insights are today of purely antiquarian interest. Recent examples are Hartmut Bobzin's analysis of Koran translations during the Reformation period, G. J. Toomer's survey of seventeenth-century British Arabists, or the study of André du Ryer (c.1595–1672) by Alastair Hamilton and Francis Richard. The second approach examines the research of scholars who are active members of the contemporary academic discipline, because their work still reverberates, however faintly, in current efforts of achieving a better understanding of those questions that are considered constitutive to modern Middle Eastern studies. The most influential book is surely *Orientalism* by the late Edward Said, because its ahistorical political argument continues to spawn highly charged responses, such as the recent books by Robert Irwin and Daniel Varisco.

The division of labor reflects the epistemological break that profoundly affected the paradigms of research around 1775. This intellectual watershed is beyond dispute, and it is therefore customarily used to justify the mutual disregard of all research on matters located on the other side of this divide—relative of course to one's own standpoint. To rely on this epistemological break for the construction of periods that are clearly separated has strategic advantages because it keeps research projects in manageable proportions. But the pragmatic decision also presupposes that the break was in fact a rupture, going so deep that there are no continuities that link early modern and modern scholarship.<sup>2</sup> The decision ignores the possibility that within the history of the study of

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<sup>1</sup> This is the slightly changed text of a paper presented on 21 November 2006 at MESA's annual meeting in Boston, Mass. The research belongs to a comprehensive project about the history of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies in eighteenth-century Europe, and was conducted between July and December 2006, when I was Scholar-in-Residence in the Burke Library of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York. While I wish to thank the seminary and Columbia University Libraries for their generous support of this research, I am particularly indebted to Michael Boddy and Seth Kasten who taught me how to find my way between the treasure troves of Burke Library.

To preserve the character of a conference presentation, there are few notes. With the exception of Bernard Cerquiglini's lectures in *Eloge de la variante* (Paris 1989; Engl. tr., Baltimore 1999), Alastair Hamilton's study of *William Bedwell* (Leiden 1985), the survey of *Universities in Early Modern Europe (1500–1800)*, edited by Hilde de Ridder-Symoens (Cambridge 1996), and the conference proceedings of *Istanbul et les langues orientales*, edited by Frédéric Hitzel (Paris 1997), the relevant literature is mentioned in the text.

<sup>2</sup> The strategic advantage of this slash-and-burn approach is obvious, and its attraction is understandable, if the merciless funding fights in the Humanities are considered. From the Anglo-American perspective of privileging immediately applicable knowledge, it can seem daunting, if not impossible, to argue for

Arabic and Islam in Christian Europe some approaches, attitudes, or axioms continued to thrive despite this epistemological break. The heuristic concept of a *longue durée*—most prominently associated with the French Annales school—supposes that societal developments, shifts, and changes occur and proceed in varying paces in different intellectual and cultural areas so that absolute ruptures are in fact impossible.<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, the prize for the very reasonable decision to squarely locate the beginning of modern Middle Eastern studies in the nineteenth century, be it with the critical editions of Antoine I. Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838) and Gustav Flügel (1802–1870), or with the studies of Gustav Weil (1808–1889), Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), or Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921), appeared to be that unrecognized continuities can retain their influence, because that which is claimed to have already ended a long time ago cannot come into view.

Moreover, to locate the beginning of modern Middle Eastern studies in the century that is associated with nationalism and imperialism as well as with historicism and positivism, seems to separate the study of Arabic and Islam from the various intellectual enterprises that are identified with the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. This isolated position of the study of Arabic and Islam is salient. According to the master narrative of western modernity, the Enlightenment is alpha and omega, from human rights and representative democracy to tolerance and secularism. At this state of my research, I do not yet know to how to interpret our unquestioned agreement on this late starting point of the modern history of the study of Arabic and Islam. But between the Reformation of the sixteenth century and the end of the Napoleonic Wars in the early nineteenth century, many men—academia and diplomacy were closed to women—learned Arabic and studied Islam in Christian Europe inside and outside the universities. Even though that which was taught is today considered wrong, racist, or Islamophobic, the Christian European interest in the Muslim Middle East did not begin with the famous Arabists who were working at nineteenth-century universities. In addition, the literary and artistic output of early modern Orientalist scholarship is so rich and varied that on a pragmatic level it seems unrealistic, or perhaps rather neurotic, to assume that modern Middle Eastern studies began with a squeaky clean slate.

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financial support in order to expand the general human knowledge base: research for research's sake. Convincing referees of a project's merit seems easier if immediate benefits of its results can be argued for the near future, and such benefits seem much more probable for research on contemporary issues. The pressure of external factors on the design of research projects needs to be acknowledged, because political and socio-economic pressure will not go away because we wish to ignore them.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Walter Rüegg in de Ridder-Symoens, *Universities*: 13–14.

My interest in the transition from early modern to modern Orientalist scholarship follows from my work with Islamic manuscripts on the one hand and from my efforts of crossing the abyss that in the West still separates the study of the Arabic language and literature from current research on both historical linguistics and literary criticism in the West-European languages.

It is of course always dutifully recognized that Islamic manuscripts constitute the most important body of primary sources for the study of Islam and Middle Eastern Muslim societies since the emergence of Islam in the seventh CE. But the current state of research on Islamic codicology and paleography is very low-key, if measured by the exalted rhetoric in praise of the riches of Islamic manuscripts. Even more surprising seems that despite the intense debates about European Orientalism in the wake of Said's bestseller, the history of European book collections and research libraries for the study of Arabic and Islam has attracted little scholarly attention. The neglect is noteworthy because the availability of both primary and secondary sources is of crucial importance for the level of understanding that can be obtained about a foreign civilization from the outside. The extant research offers some vivid descriptions of how during the seventeenth century Dutch,<sup>4</sup> French,<sup>5</sup> and British scholars struggled to get access to Islamic primary sources.<sup>6</sup> During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, scholars continued their efforts in building Islamic research libraries. Yet, it is usually not even mentioned to which degree modern Middle Eastern studies obviously benefited from the already extant European collections of Islamic books, be they Islamic manuscripts or Christian imprints. Silvestre de Sacy and Flügel, for example, could only prepare critical editions, because they chose works for which they had sufficient manuscript copies available to them in Paris and Vienna respectively.

The importance of the nineteenth-century editions, such as Harîrî's *Maqâmât* (1822), the Koran (1834), Katip Çelebi's *Kashf al-zunûn* (1835–1858), or Tabarî's *Ta'rikh al-rusûl wa-l-mulûk* (1879–1901), was never contested, even though the publication of

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<sup>4</sup> Raphelengius and Scaliger had to make do with chance discoveries in Europe. Erpenius had an agent in Istanbul, where the dealers were much better stocked and much more expensive than their colleagues in Cairo and Alexandria. Golius worked from 1622 to 1624 for the Dutch in Morocco, and from 1625 to 1629 in the Levant.

<sup>5</sup> Du Ryer stayed from 1616 to 1621 in Egypt as a language student, returned from 1623 until 1626 as vice-consul, traveled from 1626 to 1629 in the Levant, and served from 1631 to 1632 as interpreter to the French ambassador in Istanbul.

<sup>6</sup> The important European collections of Islamic manuscripts in Oxford, Cambridge, London, Paris, and Leiden originated in that century, but the actual purchasing and collecting of Islamic books also reflects seventeenth-century attitudes to books as collector's items, be they imprints or manuscripts. Codices of the Koran or Persian epics were prized possessions: precious exotic objects of considerable material value, but not texts to be read, studied or censored.

critical editions has never been considered the hallmark of modern Middle Eastern studies. The difficult access to Islamic books in Christian Europe was one reason as to why scholars needed to produce editions of Arabic literature to be printed in Europe.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the European history of the study of Arabic and Islam cannot only be written as the collector's tale of treasure hunting,<sup>8</sup> but also as the scholar's tale of woe about the obstacles in the way of seeing Arabic texts and reference books, such as dictionaries and grammars<sup>9</sup>, to the printing press.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, any survey of early modern Oriental studies that does not include an evaluation of the many book manuscripts that never made it to the press will provide a dangerously incomplete picture of the extent to which Arabic and Islam was of interest to the learned.<sup>11</sup>

Astonishing is that the quite intensive efforts of producing printed editions of Islamic primary sources never generated a discourse on how to actually edit Arabic literature. Scholars of Arabic and Islam worked on editing projects comparable to those prepared in classics and biblical exegesis by Humanists and Enlightenment luminaries, but all the hands-on editing never initiated a methodological debate about the applied textual practice, be it before or after the epistemological break of the late eighteenth century. This disconnect between practical work and theoretical reflection constitutes therefore another continuity between early modern and modern oriental studies, and may explain as to why there is at the moment not one single monograph about the editing of Arabic literature. In Adam Gacek's systematic bibliography of the Arabic

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<sup>7</sup> The argument that the printing of Arabic books supported successful missionary activity in the Middle Eastern was advanced until the beginning of the eighteenth century. But it is rather difficult to decide as to when the missionary argument ceased to be an actively pursued political agenda, and had become an obligatory topos of Arabic literature printed in Christian Europe. When Savary de Brèves set up his printing press in Rome, he focused on Arabic-Latin books as teaching material for European students of Arabic and on Roman-Catholic missionary literature in Arabic and Syriac addressed at the indigenous Christian minorities.

<sup>8</sup> I subsume under the term *book* both manuscripts and imprints, because manuscripts are not by definition archival records or documents, and a handwritten book is a book as well as a manuscript. A good example of how a book circulated because it was primarily valued as commodity, see the example of the famous purple Koran that belonged to the French booty when the troops of Charles V sacked Tunis in 1535; cf. Deroche, François. *Manuscrits musulman: 1,2 – Du Maghreb à Insulinde*. Paris:, 1985: 36–37 s.v. 305-308.

<sup>9</sup> The first Arabic grammar that was printed in Christian Europe appeared in 1616, and is the *Grammatica arabica Maronitarum* by Gabriel Sionita and Johannes Hesronita.

<sup>10</sup> Since the 1980s several exhibitions have traced the history of oriental studies as the history of Oriental printing in Christian Europe. The two most recent were *Exotische Typen*, which was on display in Berlin in Spring 2006, and *Middle Eastern Languages and the Print Revolution*, which accompanied a conference held in Mainz in the summer of 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Hamilton, *William Bedwell*: “His [i.e., Bedwell's] is not just a story of failure, of frustrated plans and unprinted books. To obtain a proper impression of Bedwell one does indeed have to consult his unpublished manuscripts for, like most other Arabists of the time, he had trouble in finding publishers and patrons.” (1).

manuscript tradition, Michael Carter’s 1995 article in Greetham’s MLA handbook *Scholarly Editing* is the only entry under “editing.” In contrast, students of Latin, Greek, or biblical literature can choose between several introductions and handbooks, and of course all of them open with the claim that there is not a really good one yet easily available to the student in the need of guidance.

At this point, one may ask as to whether it is justified to compare different fields to conclude that on a structural level comparable activities should lead to comparable outcomes, even though one has paired apples with oranges. While I am willing to concede that there is formalist merit to this separate-but-equal argument, I would insist on a pragmatic and intellectual level that I desire a better answer than the rather unsatisfactory academic relativism. What is the purpose of paying lip service to interdisciplinary research, if comparisons will be banned whenever the results raise more questions than they provide answers? In addition, scholars working on Arabic and Islam were not living in splendid isolation. Their own education had surely exposed them to that which was happening in Biblical hermeneutics and classics, because these fields retained their importance within both general education and university curricula across the epistemological break and despite an absolute loss of influence during the course of the nineteenth century.

The observation that specialists of Arabic and Islam as academics, gentlemen scholars, or intellectuals, were also always members of larger learned and professional social networks may be the most important argument as to why the starting point of modern Middle Eastern studies can be located in the nineteenth century. It was in the first half of this century that a critical mass of men working on non-European cultures and civilizations founded learned societies, such as the Société asiatique in 1822, the RAS of Great Britain and Ireland in 1823, the AOS in 1842, and the DMG in 1845. Until World War I, specialists of Arabic and Islam were a minority in these professional organizations that were dominated by researchers of India and the ancient Near East. Nonetheless, all members developed a shared professional identity as Orientalists. The epistemological break of the late eighteenth century explains the conceptual changes within the definition of academic disciplines that in turn made these socioeconomic shifts possible and generated the ideal type of the professional academic Orientalist, though it does not follow that modern Middle Eastern studies was invented from scratch. It indicates rather that modern Middle Eastern studies was the result of pooling scattered resources in a newly founded discipline, downplaying the tradition of Arabic

and Islamic studies in Christian Europe while generating the creation myth of a new beginning.

Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, the study of Arabic and Islam was not the prerogative of any specific academic discipline. In the sixteenth century, the study of Arabic, the sister of Hebrew, was advocated by theologians who hoped that the understanding of Arabic would develop the grasp of biblical Hebrew. The teaching of Arabic as an auxiliary language of Bible studies was abandoned in concert with the improving knowledge of Hebrew. But Islam and Koran studies remained important for dogma and salvation history. Since Islam was perceived as Christian heresy, the military might of the Ottoman and Safavid empires challenged Christian supremacy. Islam therefore could serve as interface for debates of Christian heresy, while the study of Arabic became a pursuit of missionaries, aiming at the conversion of both Oriental Christendom and the Muslim *umma*.<sup>12</sup> Historians grappled meanwhile with how to fit Muslim societies into their evolving master narratives of a universal history. Scholars of medicine and the natural sciences acquired at least a working knowledge of Arabic to gain access to Arabic translations of Greek sources. But outside the universities the study of Arabic was much less important than the practical mastery of Persian and Ottoman, as well as a solid working knowledge of Islamic law as applied in the Ottoman and Safavid empires. While Persian was the lingua franca that connected people between the Indian Ocean and the Bosphorus, Arabic, despite its privileged status within the Islamic sciences, was just the arcane language of Islamic cultus and law as well as the argot of the natives in the Ottoman Arab provinces. The imperial rivals of Protestant Britain and Catholic France courted the Sunni Ottomans and the Shi'i Safavids to contain Orthodox Russia and Catholic Hapsburg, while walking both sides of the street: vying for trade privileges and courting delusions of a last Crusade against the Infidels.

These diverse interests in Middle Eastern societies explain as to why Arabic remained a minor language within the early modern university curricula, while France and Britain established language schools to train specialists of the contemporary

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<sup>12</sup> Halle/Saale, which could boast of a renowned university and the Frankeschen Stiftung was a center of Oriental studies, linked to theology and missionary activities. In contrast, Paris was the center of Oriental studies in the service of imperial diplomacy with a double agenda: examining the options for a successful crusade to destroy the Ottoman power while seeking a political alliance with the Ottoman sultan to obtain the Christian European monopoly for trade in the Ottoman empire, to support the activity of the Roman-Catholic orders in the Ottoman empire, and to become the acknowledged protector of the indigenous Christian minorities. After Genoa and Venice, France had been the first great European power to establish diplomatic relations with the Porte.

languages for diplomatic missions.<sup>13</sup> The teaching of living languages could not be accommodated at early modern universities, the curricula of which were developed by the faculties of theology, jurisprudence, medicine, and philosophy.<sup>14</sup> Between the late sixteenth and the early nineteenth century, theology, salvation history, and rhetoric were transformed into religious studies, universal history, and philology. History and religion had evolved into concepts that established independent subject fields to be studied on their own merits. The new academic disciplines came of age in an era that was dominated by historicism as well as positivism.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, scholars of history and religions considered it on theoretical grounds impossible to study current societies and their modern religions because fair and final judgment of ongoing processes could not be passed.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century, philology established itself as the new methodology that allowed for the reconstruction of the vernacular past of Europe's modern national languages.<sup>17</sup> But the canonical works of the major West-European languages were not contemporaneous: Shakespeare, Corneille, Racine, Moliere, la Fontaine, and Goethe are not nineteenth-century authors. While philology had evolved from the methodological foundations of the editing of Greek and Latin literatures, hermeneutics was, and has remained, the well-established Christian methodology for the interpretation of biblical texts. In the twentieth century, the lessons of hermeneutics were expanded in its applicability to non-biblical texts, and fed first into epistemological debates in philosophy and then served as the methodological starting point of deconstruction and critical theory.

From the perspective of a non-Jewish or non-Muslim European it may be rather unremarkable that the epistemological watershed between “l'âge classique” and “l'âge moderne”—to use Michel Foucault's terminology—was Eurocentric and privileged Christianity. But these internalized and unquestioned Christian foundations may explain

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<sup>13</sup> Savary de Brèves campaigned hard for the foundation of schools of Middle Eastern languages and cultures, but unlike his printing press, these educational institutions were not considered a contribution to Roman-Catholic missionary activities or even a crusade.

When the Bibliothèque du roi was founded in Paris, the collection policy was comprehensive and encyclopedic (i.e., différentes langues de toutes les nations; les langues étrangères). But Middle Eastern or Oriental languages did not yet form a clearly defined separate group. German, English or Dutch may have been perceived as north-European vernaculars, while Russian and modern Greek were diplomatic necessities.

<sup>14</sup> Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann in de Ridder-Symoens, *Universities*: 489.

<sup>15</sup> The challenge of European academic diversity leads to the question of how to describe the nineteenth-century system of German-speaking research universities, so that the Humboldt system makes sense to scholars only familiar with the French or the Anglo-American university systems.

<sup>16</sup> Within current US curricula, history is considered a soft social science, and the methodological problem as to whether ongoing processes can be the subject of scientific historical inquiry is a non-issue.

<sup>17</sup> Cerquiglini, *Eloge de la variante*.

as to why professional organizations of Orientalists seemed such a great idea to nineteenth-century scholars who were specialists of a dazzling variety of Others, standing clearly outside the academic Christian mainstream. In addition, it may offer a first clue as to why the study of Arabic, as well as the study of Persian and Ottoman, kept itself at a safe distance from philology. This new discipline stood in the service of European nationalism because it spawned the academic disciplines of English, German, and French studies, which in turn supplemented the diplomatic history of the West-European nation states with the literary history of their national languages. Conversely, philology could seem irrelevant to the languages of Middle Eastern societies that had not yet been fully affected by European imperialism. Only after 1850 did the *nahda*, the Renaissance of Arabic letters, emerge. The turn to the so-called Golden Age of Classical Islam in Abbasid Baghdad was also a response to the pressure of the conflicting colonial interests of the Ottomans, the French, and the British. European Orientalists responded in kind, and projected European nationalism unto Islamic literatures, even though they continued to skip the methodological discourse on editorial practice. Toward the end of the nineteenth centuries, the histories of Ottoman, Persian, and Arabic literature by Elias John Wilkinson Gibb (1857–1901), Edward G. Browne (1862–1926), and Carl Brockelmann (1868–1956), respectively, fitted the major languages of the Islamic civilization into the European mould of a national language.

At this point, a complex picture emerges. The development from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century may be described streamlining and externalization. During the Reformation period the study of Arabic and Islam was integrated as research topics into various disciplines across the early modern university curriculum. After the Napoleonic Wars, Arabic studies constituted a single discipline within the large field of Oriental studies, which formed the catch-all for those disciplines, the research in which did not directly contribute to the understanding of how a Christian European nationalism be the inevitable result of humankind's universal history. Unfortunately, a negation does not contribute to a definition, because that which is claimed to matter is absent. In other words, modern Oriental studies in general and Middle Eastern studies in particular identified themselves as outsiders within western academia. Consequently, they never saw the necessity to communicate with other disciplines through conducting a theoretical discourse on their specific disciplinary methodology. In the language of psychoanalysis, this silence can be described as repression. The return of the repressed is then represented by our lack of interest in the continuities between early modern and modern Oriental studies, such as the absence of a critical discourse on editorial practice.



This interpretation is supported by the process through which we are renewing our MESA membership. The form asks us to describe our research from five perspectives: discipline, sub-areas, specialties, geographical areas of interest, and research languages. But this politically so correct diversity is a smoke screen, concealing that geography is the only common denominator, and consequently Muslims in Europe and North America are primarily perceived as Middle Eastern immigrants. Is it really less discriminatory, less racist, or less condescending, to study Islam and Arabic, securely protected against the influence of other academic disciplines by the high walls of Oriental, Middle Eastern, or Islamic studies? During the Middle Ages, Muslims ruled for centuries over parts of the Spanish Peninsula and Southern Italy. The import of slaves from East and West Africa led to the establishment of the first Muslim underground communities in North America, even though the conditions of slavery ensured that little to nothing has been preserved about these Muslim congregations. Sizeable Muslim communities of citizens in all societies of Western Europe and North America make it today nonsensical, not to say irresponsible, to approach Islam as an exclusively non-western phenomenon. The ethical issue is then whether the current approach to the study of Islam and Arabic is superior to that of the early modern period.