

# Reading the Arabic Qur'an in Early Modern Europe

*By postdoc Paul Babinski*



For centuries, orientalist scholars in Europe have read and annotated the Qur'an, the central text of Islam. How did these scholars work? And what can their readings tell us about changing European attitudes toward Islam?

## **Orientalist scholars**

In November 2020, I joined the ERC Synergy project “The European Qur'an: Islamic Scripture in European Culture and Religion 1150-1850” (EuQu) at the University of Copenhagen's Faculty of Theology as a postdoctoral researcher. My project traces the changing practices of reading the Arabic Qur'an in early modern Europe through a survey of annotated Qur'an manuscripts and printed books. My work builds on the scholarship of generations of historians (several of whom I have the pleasure of working with here in Copenhagen) who have sought to recover the intellectual and social contexts of oriental studies in Europe from the Renaissance to the present, reconstructing a vast network of scholars and teachers stretching from Oxford, Leiden, and Madrid to Istanbul, Aleppo, and Isfahan. These scholars contributed to an increasingly specialized field of

oriental studies and, more broadly, a new understanding of Islam within Western and Central Europe.

In particular, I am interested in what this scholarship meant in practice: the lived experience of orientalist learning. How did scholars read? How did they learn languages? Did they work alone or collaborate with others? Sometimes the orientalists themselves can serve as informants, in their letters and in the prefaces they wrote for published works. More often, however, we must look to their notes for answers. In deciphering texts, compiling information, and producing scholarship, orientalists left a trail of annotations in manuscripts and printed texts that lets us trace—often with remarkable detail—how they worked.

Doing so gives us a fuller picture of the methods of early modern orientalists, as well as new perspectives on basic historical questions. For instance, in identifying new manuscripts, bringing together dispersed scholarly libraries, and attributing and deciphering annotations, historians have provided a much deeper understanding of the continuities between orientalist and Islamic and Eastern Christian learning. A European orien-

talist faced with a tricky word might turn to an Arabic encyclopedia or a Turkish or Persian commentary, and they often worked closely with scholars from Ottoman Europe, Asia, and Africa.

### **A puzzle of annotations**

In this kind of research, every annotated book becomes a puzzle. Informed by often unconscious conventions of note-taking picked up through schooling and emulation, it was natural for early modern scholars to think through texts pen in hand, and we often find books bursting with the notes of seventeenth or eighteenth-century readers. However, these readers rarely left information about how, when, and where they read. Piecing that together can involve comparing handwriting across manuscripts to make attributions, identifying sources used to decipher or gloss the text, and differentiating between the layers of writing that accrued over time.

Much of my work so far has focused on the identification and analysis of these annotated books through a survey of major early modern collections. I work systematically, examining each volume to compile a database of information on individual books and their provenance. This database allows me to reconstruct dispersed libraries, bring together volumes that were read or studied together, and identify the handwriting of individual orientalist. In this work I have benefited enormously from the help of librarians who have given me invaluable advice and encouragement, and who have facilitated the consultation of a large quantity of manuscripts. In this respect, I am particularly fortunate to be

working in Copenhagen, whose Royal Library possesses one of Europe's finest collections for the study of the history of oriental studies.

### **Changing attitudes to Islam**

What can the early modern orientalist's Qur'an tell us in light of these methods? Quite a lot, in fact, about both changing European attitudes toward Islam and the development of European oriental studies more broadly. No other work in Arabic was more frequently read, and the abundance of Qur'an manuscripts with annotations attests to both enduring interest among orientalists and the growing availability of sources for its study.

Manuscript sources allow us to trace parallel developments at different levels of scholarship. Among the most advanced early modern orientalists, they show how generations of students and teachers contributed to increasingly sophisticated methods of Qur'anic study through the analysis of Arabic commentaries, as well as translations in Persian and Turkish. Manuscripts with multiple layers of notes attest to both collaboration between scholars and the critical role played by the manuscript transmission of unpublished scholarship. We find, for instance, instruments of scholarship, such as indices, compilations of Qur'anic vocabulary, and guides to the Arabic grammatical terminology used in commentaries, passing from orientalist to orientalist. Excerpts and annotations also show an increasing breadth of orientalist study of Islam, with new interests in hadith, Islamic law, and the varieties of religious practice developing over the early modern period.

## **Annotated Qur'an manuscripts**

The study of annotated books also illuminates a much larger group of readers who approached the Qur'an through available translations and specimens in print. These works, largely written in Latin, guided a more selective study of the Arabic text. Indeed, the manuscripts of these readers suggest the challenges and limitations of Arabic studies. One example is the German orientalist Abraham Hinckelmann, today famous for producing the first widely available printed edition of the Qur'an, in 1694. Until recently, we had little knowledge of the extent of Hinckelmann's Arabic studies. In the EuQu project, where we are reconstructing his reading of the Qur'an across multiple manuscripts, this more granular view has cast light on both the German orientalist's limitations as an Arabist and his indebtedness to earlier scholars. Whereas Hinckelmann claims to have worked through an Arabic commentary, his notes reveal instead a piecemeal study of the Qur'an through available Latin and French printed sources. The numerous annotated copies of Hinckelmann's edition that we have identified in turn show how generations of later scholars used the printed text as a space to collect glosses and information from a variety of other sources.

Other manuscripts show the different techniques used to align Qur'an translations and extract glosses for the study of the original Arabic text, such as a French interlinear translation of the Qur'an, now in the French National Library in Paris, that was produced by a group of students on the basis of André Du Ryer's translation, or an interleaved manuscript

in Stuttgart that shows the German orientalist Wilhelm Schickard studying the Qur'an alongside the Latin translation of Bibliander's edition. Charting these efforts over time, we can follow the increasing sophistication and availability of material for Qur'anic study.

## **The circulation of manuscripts**

Annotations illuminate the circumstances under which Qur'an manuscripts came into orientalist collections, and the trajectories of individual manuscripts link the advancement of oriental studies with European histories of war and diplomacy. Ownership inscriptions in particular provide valuable information and are sometimes accompanied by detailed accounts of the circumstances under which the manuscript was acquired. For instance, we find numerous inscriptions that link copies of the Qur'an to merchant and diplomatic networks, as travelers abroad acquired gifts or souvenirs, and orientalists used increasingly stable diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire as an opportunity to amass collections of Islamic manuscripts.

War played a similarly important role in the circulation of Qur'an manuscripts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially in Central Europe. Most notably, in the years after the Ottoman retreat that followed the Siege of Vienna in 1683 armies pushed deep into Ottoman Europe and soldiers looted hundreds of manuscripts from conquered Ottoman cities such as Buda. Many of these manuscripts contain detailed notes commemorating their looting, as we find, for instance, in a number of volumes looted from the Great Mosque in Buda. In addi-

tion, the notes of later owners allow us to reconstruct the circulation and gradual consolidation of Qur'an manuscripts into scholarly collections and major libraries. The German orientalist Andreas Acoluthus, for instance, collected dozens of Qur'an manuscripts, often noting on their endpapers where—and from whom—he acquired them. Most had been looted from Ottoman Europe, and they served Acoluthus in an ambitious project to publish a polyglot Qur'an in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Latin.

### **A history of reading**

My aim is to bring together these diverse sources into a new account of the early modern European encounter with the Arabic Qur'an as a history of reading. Taken together, they suggest that orientalist Qur'anic study was a collective endeavor that gradually evolved over time while remaining rooted in an earlier Islamic philological tradition. As part of the EuQu project, I am writing a monograph that will chart this transfor-

mation of orientalist Qur'anic study as a paradigmatic example of the transfer of philological knowledge from the Islamic world into non-Ottoman Europe and a case study in the origins of world literature. I hope that my research will offer the foundation for a comprehensive survey of annotated Qur'an manuscripts in European collections.

At EuQu, I am also fortunate to be able to participate in a major new project to build a database of printed works and manuscripts related to the study of the Qur'an in Europe. This is a collective effort bringing together each of the four teams that make up the EuQu project (in Copenhagen, Madrid, Nantes, and Naples) and it promises to uncover new connections and insights from the mass of information produced by EuQu researchers.

Finally, I am grateful for the opportunity to undertake this research at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Copenhagen, and for the warm welcome I have already received here.