Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a good custom that an invited speaker begins with saying to his audience how fortunate it is that he is in the position to speak to such an august group of interested scholars about a subject so dear to his heart. And if I had started my lecture with those words, it would have been the truth. But I wish to say this in a different way. I am coming from Leiden University, in Leiden, The Netherlands, an institution which carries the epithet Praesidium Libertatis, ‘the bulwark of freedom’, in its emblem. The freedom won and protected by Leiden University was, and is, the freedom of Reformation, and in a more concrete and historical sense the freedom from the Spanish tyranny. Leiden University was founded in 1575 as a political gesture during the Dutch Revolt.

Now I am standing in one of the bulwarks of the Counter-Reformation, some four centuries later, the opposite positions of the 16th century have faded away and what remains on either side is remarkably similar. I will elaborate on that in a moment.

Where does one start when describing the Arabic manuscripts in the Ambrosian library? It is not only a history of an institution and of books but also a history of people bringing the books in, and reading and using them. From its very inception, in 1609, the Ambrosian Library has possessed an impressive collection of Arabic manuscripts, a few of Christian content, the majority coming from the Islamic realm. Looking at the different Western and Oriental writing styles of these Islamic manuscripts one can see that they originate from all over the Mediterranean basin, and quite a number even from further East. The availability of such manuscripts had attracted the attention of Cardinal Federico Borromeo (1564-1631), the library’s founder, a brilliant scholar in his own right and a bibliophile of magnificent stature, but how exactly each and every Arabic manuscript at the time ended up in the Ambrosian collections seems impossible to reconstruct, not even with the excellent catalogues that we
have had at our disposition since a few decades. I will develop some ideas about this in this lecture.

History of collections is an important part of scholarship. It tells us, among other things, where and when certain texts became available for study. In more general terms, the circulation in Europe of Islamic books and their acquisition by private and institutional collectors tells us of a certain interest in Islam. Let us first try to place that general idea in a historical context. Why would Renaissance scholars and their immediate successors be interested in Arabic and Islamic manuscripts in the first place? From the North of Western Europe a view presents itself, and several reasons for the pursuit of Orientalism can be distinguished.

1.

First there was the study of the Divine Word. Theologians looking beyond the Vulgate text were hopeful that the study of Arabic, as a member of the Semitic family of languages, and generally considered to contain many archaic morphological features, would provide them with clues for the difficult passages in the Hebrew and Aramaic text of the Old Testament. It would supplement the knowledge that they, often quite reluctantly, had had to acquire from Jewish scholarship.

A second consideration was with the Protestant princes and their politicians. In their rally against the Catholic Habsburg hegemony in Europe they were intent on outflanking their adversaries by taking up alliances with common enemies. For the Dutch Calvinists these were the Moroccans in the South (first official relations with The Netherlands in 1605) and the Ottoman Turks in the South-East and the East (first official relations with The Netherlands in 1610). Some knowledge of Arabic, Turkish and Islam was useful in this context. The Dutch arabist and mathematician Jacobus Golius (1596-1667) was actively involved in either of the two areas: in Morocco as an engineer-consultant to give advice on the possibilities of building a harbour on Morocco’s Atlantic coast, in the Levant as a scholar, diplomat and collector of manuscripts. His different fields of ac-

tion neatly summarize the range of Orientalism in his time. We will hear
more about Golius in a moment.

Thirdly there were the traders, not only in the Levant by the way, but
also in South and Southeast Asia. Recently a Dutch historian has present-
ed an intriguing image of a dual dynamic in the history of European state
building. The politicians at the time fought their devastating wars on the
ground, whereas the traders and merchants constructively built up their
profitable networks over water. For their relations with local partners in
commerce, and with local rulers as well, they would be in need of useful
local knowledge, including languages. However, as with the politicians,
the knowledge of Arabic among such merchants would only exceptionally
rise to academic standards, since either group preferred to use a class of
middlemen, the dragomans, to act on their behalf, and besides, the Italian
language was effectively used in the entire Mediterranean basin as a
commercial lingua franca.

Finally, the Renaissance scholars and their 17th-century successors
were not so much in search of the intricacies of Bible exegesis, but more
interested in the Islamic versions of those texts of the Greek and Hellenis-
tic heritage that were only fragmentarily available in the original Greek
version, or the Greek version of which had been lost altogether. Apart
from within this latter group of academic Orientalists, knowledge of Ara-
bic would never rise to very high standards. Yet, knowledge of Arabic in
the North-European universities would play a role of some importance in
trade and war. From the Roman-Catholic perspective these Calvino-
Muslim alliances must have lead to an awareness of encirclement, certain-
ly in the political sense. The Counter-Reformation, of which Cardinal
Borromeo was such an important proponent, was not only the theological
but also the intellectual and artistic reaction to the Reformation. That
movement has been studied too little from the perspective of Oriental
studies, and the already existent image of Oriental studies of the North
could be complemented by a deeper insight into the Islamic studies pur-
sued by their ideological opponents in the South.

2.

These four groups of professionals involved with the Islamic Middle East
have for simplicity’s sake been mentioned here separately, but theology,

\footnote{W. Blockmans, \textit{Land en water. Farewell lecture}, Leiden University, September 17, 2010.}
war, trade and scholarship were always part of one and the same cultural complex. That is the context that we need to consider more closely when thinking of the cultural and political climate in which the Ambrosian Library was founded, and in particular in as far as Arabic studies are concerned. Although such studies happened simultaneously and very much in a similar way, both in Milano and in the Netherlands, the underlying conditions could not be more different.

In my summing up of the reasons why one should study Arabic in 16th- and 17th-century Europe the modern reader may think that the need of writing pamphlets and treatises against Islam is missing in the list. In fact, these polemics were not the work of Arabists. When Petrarca, who had no knowledge of Arabic, gave expression to his aversion of the Arabs he did not so much attack the Arab physicians on the basis of their writings in Arabic, but he rather referred to the Latin translations that were circulating at the time, and he looked at them and their European followers as unwelcome intruders in European intellectual life. To one of his friends he wrote, while touching upon the transmission of Greek science to European Latinity via Arabic translations:

«... Before I close this letter, I implore you to keep these Arabs from giving me advice about my personal condition. Let them stay in exile. I hate the whole lot. I know that the Greeks were once most ingenious and eloquent men. Many very excellent philosophers and poets; outstanding orators and mathematicians have come from Greece. That part of the world has brought forth princes of medicine. You know what kind of physicians the Arabs are. I know what kind of poets they are. Nobody has such winning ways; nobody, also, is more tender and more lacking in vigor, and, to use the right words, meaner and more perverted. The minds of men are inclined to act differently; but, as you used to say, every man radiates his own peculiar mental disposition. To sum up: I will not be persuaded that any good can come from Arabia ...».

The same spirit still pervades the refutation of the Qurʾān published in Basel in 1543. It came, together with the Medieval Latin translation, with introductions by Melanchton and Luther, and several other texts, which were brought together into one volume by Theodore Bibliander. However,

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as was the case with Petrarca, for refuting the content of a heretical work in Latin, knowledge of Arabic was not really necessary. For the Christian adversaries of Islam the matter was in fact unambiguous. An Arabian pseudo-prophet had with his heretical teachings somehow taken possession of the hearts and minds of entire populations, had whipped them up into fanaticism and now these formed a threat to the Christian lands. At the beginning of the 16th century that threat was not very impressive, though. In Spain the Arabs had lost their last kingdom in 1492. The slow speed of the Muslim advance in the Balkans in the 16th and 17th centuries was in no way comparable to the dynamics of the early Muslim conquests in the first millennium and only culminated in a number of failed sieges of Vienna. The third Muslim entry into Europe, the still ongoing originally Tatar advance from the East, to deep into Poland, is so gradual and inconspicuous that it has almost entirely escaped notice, even till today⁴. Prominent Christian victories, such as the conquest and subsequent sack of Tunis (1535) and the battle of Lepanto (1571) made it clear that Western Europe had little to fear from Islam. In addition the Turks were, more than the other Mediterranean powers, at a geopolitical disadvantage because of their greatest distance from the gold of the Americas. Portuguese plans to capture Mecca in order to trade it in against Constantinople (under Turkish domination since 1453) were at that time not so unrealistic as they seem to be now.

The consequence of all this was that the Western-Europeans, content with their deeply felt horror of Islam, were not in need of any new knowledge about the heresies from the East. It was only the Utrecht professor of Oriental languages and Hebrew antiquities Adrian Reland (1676-1718), an important figure of early European Enlightenment, who in his bestseller on Islam (first published in 1705)⁵, convincingly demonstrated that much of the anti-Islamic discourse of his time was in fact directly derived from the polemics of the Byzantine scholars of half a millennium earlier, full of misquotations, mischievous attributions and incomplete references. Reland scathingly referred to these Byzantine polemists as Graeculi, ‘the little Greeks’, and he easily refuted their arguments with his


⁵ De religione Mohammedica libri duo. First edition Utrecht 1705, second enlarged and illustrated edition Utrecht 1717. The first edition was translated into English (London 1712), the second edition into Dutch (Utrecht 1718) and French (The Hague 1721). Reland’s work of the Muslim law of war may even have been more widely read than his main work on Islam. English (London 1712) and Swedish (Stockholm 1738) translations exist.
philological scrutiny and enlightened common sense. Convincing as Reland may have been in his time, the echo of some of these originally Byzantine arguments can, now almost a millennium later, still be heard in modern anti-Muslim discourse.

3.

The earliest collections of Islamic manuscript materials in the Ambrosiana cannot be connected with any of these apologetic pre-occupations, as the Renaissance scholars of Arabic were not involved in polemics. What they were after, was the Greek and Hellenistic heritage, and in order to dig up the lost bits and pieces of Antiquity they needed to learn Arabic, in the same way as the theologians of their time had been in need of learning Hebrew. As the basic tools, Arabic grammars and dictionaries, were almost entirely lacking in 16th-century Europe, making these had an urgent priority, and here the manuscripts of the Ambrosiana played an important role.

The value of a collection becomes tangible when one finds out what has happened with it. With the Ambrosian manuscripts this is not too difficult to discover, because already in 1632, the year after the death of the Library’s founder, there appeared the four impressive volumes of an Arabic-Latin Thesaurus, based, as indicated on its title-page, on the manuscripts and printed books kept in the Ambrosiana. The author, the Arabist and Hebraist Antonius Giggeius († 1632), in the opening words of his preface to his ‘Treasure of the Arabic language’ begins with the simile of the sea, from which the rivers originate (by rain), and to which the rivers eventually return. That is how Giggeius addresses the library’s founder, Cardinal Borromeo, who inspired him to compile the dictionary, and to whom he now, albeit posthumously, dedicates the finished product.

In the dedicatory preface the main purpose of the dictionary is made clear: the conversion of the Orientals, with whom Giggeius did not mean Muslims, but Oriental Christians of other denominations. In his introduction, which he dates August 1st, 1632, Giggeius mentioned the purpose of

 Kartez اللغة العربية

\[\text{F\v{s}te \textit{Thesaurus linguae Arabicae quern Antonius Giggeius Mediolanensis [...] ex monumentis Arabum manuscripts, & impressis Bibliothecae Ambrosianae erat, con- cinnavit, Latinis turīs fictis, ac in quattuor volumina distribuit. Auspicis, & liberalitāte aeternae emoriae Federici Borromaei [...]}.\]

Press of the Collegium Ambrosianum, Milano, 1632, 4 volumes. The work was begun under Cardinal Borromeo’s auspices, the \textit{imprimatur} is dated as early as 27 January 1624, and the book, when finally published, was dedicated to his eternal memory on its title-page.
his *Thesaurus* in a more detailed way. Most important remains of course the refutation of the heresies of the Orientals, but the dictionary was intended to serve another purpose as well, by making accessible in Latin the most important books of Greek wisdom that have survived in the Arabic language. And Giggeius continues to praise the enormous collections that have been brought to Milano from the Orient by that great founder of the Library, the sponsor of his dictionary. The double mention of the refutation of the heresies of the Oriental churches reads like an obligate excuse for the pleasures derived from the pursuit of Arabic lexicography.

The oldest collection, the Antico Fondo, of the library is known from its first printed catalogue, the booklet which Joseph von Hammer compiled in 1839. In its arrangement Von Hammer followed several ideas at the same time. He let himself be guided by the ideas on the division of the sciences as given in the *Miftāh al-Saʿāda*, 'the key to happiness', by the Ottoman encyclopedist and biographer Ẓāshkūprüfīzada (1495-1561). He also referred to the catalogues of manuscript collections in the Serail, about which he had read in Toderini’s history of Turkish literature. But in the end he used a simple division in thirty parts, divided over three main sections (theology, language, sciences).

From Von Hammer’s description of the dictionaries and the other lexicographical works in the Ambrosian Library it may be surmised, that while Cardinal Borromeo organized the library and Giggeius was working on his great *Thesaurus*, a conscious acquisition policy for lexicographical materials had been put in place. The two main sources for the *Thesaurus* can easily be reconstructed from Giggeius’ introduction and Von Hammer’s catalogue. They were *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ* by al-Fīrūzābādī (d. 817/1415) and *al-Mugmal fil-Lughā* by Ibn Fāris al-Qazwīnī (d. 395/1005). However, Giggeius’ *Thesaurus* was not the very first published Arabic dictionary published in Europe. One should leave aside the *Vocabulista aravigo en letra castellana* by Pedro de Alcalá, which was published in Granada as early as 1505. This Granadese Arabic-Spanish glossary falls outside the category of general Arabic-Latin dictionaries.

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8 VON HAMMER, Catalogo, pp. 17-21: «Lexicography».

9 GAL S II, 234, MS Ambrosiana A 205 inf. VON HAMMER, Catalogue, no. 98 (pp. 17-18); Catalogue Lofgren, vol. 1, No. LXXI (p. 51).

10 GAL G I, 130, MS Ambrosiana C 42 inf. VON HAMMER, Catalogue, no. 99 (p. 18); Catalogue Lofgren, vol. 1, No. CXIV (p. 70).
Giggeius’ immediate predecessor was of course the *Lexicon Arabicum* by Franciscus Raphelengius (1539-1597), Plantin’s son-in-law and the first printer of Arabic in The Netherlands. That dictionary was posthumously published in 1613 by the author’s two sons, and Giggeius probably was aware of its existence. Yet he does not seem to refer to it, and in order to understand that I can offer two complementary explanations. Firstly, the sources on which Raphelengius had based his *Lexicon* of 1613 were an odd bunch of texts and glossaries which happened to be available to him. None of these texts was a product of classical Arabic lexicography and at least half of sources must be classified as of marginal importance for the compilation of a dictionary. The other reason may have been the fact that the entire scholarly output of the professors of the newly established Calvinist university of Leiden had been placed on the ‘Index of Forbidden Books’, not only the works by theologians and philologists – what would have made sense – but also works on the sciences such as mathematics and medicine, and these books have remained there for centuries\(^\text{11}\).

4.

One Arabic text in particular was eagerly sought after by 16th-century students of Arabic, namely the *Qurʾān*. They were not so much interested in the Muslim version of God’s Word, but they wanted to have it simply because the *Qurʾān* was one of the very few Arabic texts that came fully vocalized. In Giggeius’ time, there were several copies of the *Qurʾān* in the Ambrosian Library\(^\text{12}\). However, the *Qurʾān* in any language was a forbidden book as well. One wonders whether Giggeius would ever have touched or used any of these *Qurʾān* manuscripts in the Ambrosiana.

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\(^\text{11}\) I have not checked from when exactly onwards Roman Catholic scholars were allowed to consult Raphelengius’ *Lexicon*, but I saw that the 16th-century scholarly production from Leiden was still completely forbidden according to a Spanish *Índice de los libros prohibidos por el Santo Oficio de la Inquisición Española* [...] (Madrid 1873), which edition was lastly made up-to-date in the end of December 1872. Raphelengius’ *Lexicon* is mentioned on p. 541. The works of Snellius and Boerhaave are on that Index as well. However, one may assume that an inquisitorial interdiction of an author would not always automatically lead to his books never being used. Some books were simply too good and too useful to be forbidden, even if the author was on the black list. I saw in a Spanish library a note to that effect on the title-page of the first edition of the Arabic grammar of the Calvinist author Thomas Erpenius (Leiden 1613). And speaking of Erpenius, the last edition of his Arabic grammar was published by De Propaganda Fide (‘In Collegio Urbano de Propagande Fide’, Rome 1829) itself.

\(^\text{12}\) VON HAMMER, *Catalogo*, pp. 3-4, nos. 1-10.

42
The Ṣahāḥ by al-Ǧawharī (d. 393/1003),\textsuperscript{13} was the first lexicographical reference for the Arabic-Latin dictionary by Jacobus Golius in Leiden, whom I already briefly mentioned. Three years before the publication of Giggeius’ \textit{Thesaurus}, he had come back to Leiden from a journey through the Levant, where he had purchased several hundreds of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish manuscripts, both for his university and for himself\textsuperscript{14}. When Giggeius’ \textit{Thesaurus} appeared he had already begun working on what would become his own great Arabic-Latin \textit{Lexicon}, but that was to be published only some twenty years later\textsuperscript{15}. At first the publication of Giggeius’ four-volume \textit{Thesaurus} had made Golius interrupt his own work, as he had the impression that the Milanese \textit{Thesaurus} was, at least for the moment, sufficient as a lexicographical tool. After a while, however, the \textit{Thesaurus} ceased to live up to his expectations: first, it was, with its four volumes in-folio, not easy to handle, but what was more serious: the explanation of the Arabic words proved to be unsatisfactory, and the defective orthography of Arabic and the complicated internal organization made the \textit{Thesaurus} into an unreliable tool. Yet, it had been an enormous step forward as compared to Raphelengius’ dictionary of 1613\textsuperscript{16}. Golius’ \textit{Lexicon} would in due course be superseded by Freytag’s four-volume \textit{Lexicon}\textsuperscript{17}, but that dictionary too had basically the same sources as the dictionaries by Giggeius and Golius. In the choice of their sources they had been on the right track all along.

The difference between Raphelengius’ and Giggeius’ approach was one of principle. Raphelengius had had to use anything that was available to him, and the corpus of twenty texts which he enumerates is far from uniform and consistent\textsuperscript{18}. He simply had to work with all that he could lay his hands on, and these were manuscripts that happened to circulate in Europe at the time. With Giggeius’ choice of sources it was a different matter. Cardinal Borromeo was one of many European scholars who understood that for the regular acquisition of manuscripts one should not sit and

\textsuperscript{13} GAL G 1, 128.
\textsuperscript{14} I have told this story in my \textit{Jacobus Golius (1596-1667) en zijn handschriften}, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1980.
\textsuperscript{17} Published in Halle, 1830-1837.
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Elenchus Librorum quibus in concinnatione Lexici sui usus est Auctor}, in RAPHELENGIUS, \textit{Lexicon} (1613), *3-8*4.
wait, but go to the Orient, in particular to Constantinople, where at that
time there must have been an antiquarian book market of impressive di-
mensions. The immense libraries which the victorious Ottomans, ever
since their conquest of the Mamlûk empire in 1517, had brought to their
capital, were now coming up for sale, and the Cardinal had his share from
this, and not only he. All older European collections of Oriental manu-
scripts in Europe date from the first half of the 17th century and most
were acquired in the Ottoman capital, sometimes under fierce competition
between the different groups of Franks.

5.

The collection of Arabic manuscripts which is described by Von Hammer
in 1839, and again by Oscar Löfgren & Renato Traini in 1975, can to
some extent be viewed as originating from Mamlûk libraries. It would be
worthwhile to search for a substrate in the Ambrosian collection. Librari-
ans in Giggeius’ time were, unlike their predecessors of the 16th century,
not dependent anymore on the haphazard supply that came their direction,
but they could travel to the unbelievers, have a look for themselves and
sometimes even order desiderata by the title. It is the Milanese scholar
Antonius Giggeus who first showed the impressive results of this new ap-
proach.

6.

So far for the Ambrosiana’s ancient history with Arabic manuscripts.
With the magnificent catalogue of the Antico Fondo and the Medio Fondo,
which Löfgren and Traini published thirty-five years ago, it is already a
story worthy of telling. But it is not the happy ending yet. Arabic manu-
scripts have continued to come to Milano. This must have happened be-
cause of the critical mass of the older collections.

Exactly one century ago, at the tercentenary of the Ambrosiana, the li-
brary’s holdings were enormously expanded by the acquisition of the col-
lection of Giuseppe Caprotti19. This is a truly remarkable collection of Ar-
abic manuscripts on all subjects from the Yemen. It had been brought to-

19 P.F. Fumagalli, Raccolte significative di manoscritti: Mosè Lattes, fondo Trotti, Giu-
seppe Caprotti, in Storia dell’Ambrosiana. L’Ottocento, Milano, Cariplo, 2001, III, pp. 167-211;
ROMAN, The development, p. 158.
gether in Ṣan‘ā’ by Caprotti, an Italian merchant, and with the help of a fundraising campaign of a number of Milanese merchants it could be acquired for the Library. The Yemen is a region slightly on the periphery of the Arab world, which throughout its history has known a high degree of literacy and book culture of great diversity. Its position outside the centre, together with its difficult access, makes the Yemen collections the ideal time capsule for the preservation of bibliographical treasures. The fact that the several writings of the Mu’tazila have only been preserved in the Yemen and nowhere else is an illustration of this extraordinary situation. Caprotti had collected on all subjects. A close look at the catalogue by Griffini immediately conveys the impression of bibliographical wealth.

This is, however, not the only feature of Griffini’s catalogue that strikes the eye. Between Von Hammer’s catalogue of 1839 and Griffini’s catalogue of 1910-1919 the idea of what is actually a catalogue had drastically changed. From a simple inventory list, a guide on a tour through the collection, a means to find manuscripts in a library, the catalogue had evolved into a source in its own right. This in itself was not an invention of Griffini. As a new trend in cataloguing it can be observed during the second half of the nineteenth century all over Europe, and not only with Arabic manuscripts. The catalogue had effectively become a collection of building stones for a literary history.

Griffini’s thoroughness in cataloguing had a self-defeating feature, which everyone who has wished to catalogue a collection of some dimension will recognize. The dilemma is as follows. The cataloguer is overwhelmed by the richness of the collection which he is describing. He goes deeper and deeper into the contents of ‘his’ books and he is unable to skip all the discoveries he makes. The result of this is that in the end he will be short of time to complete his description of that collection. This is exactly what has happened to so many authors of catalogues, and also to Griffini, whose activities were far from limited to describing the Ambrosian manuscripts. A sequel to Griffini’s catalogue was published by Ṣalāḥ al-Din al-Munaqqīd in 1960, but useful as this listing is, it was only a small step forward in the direction of a complete description of the Arabic treasures of the Ambrosiana.

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21 See on Griffini’s life L. Beltrami, Eugenio Griffini Bey, MDCCCLXXVIII-MCMXXV, Milano, Tipografia Allegretti, 1926.
That step forward finally came from the Ambrosiana itself. The magnificently published volumes of the Ambrosian catalogue, which are compiled by Oscar Löfgren and Renato Traini, and published in the series ‘Fontes Ambrosiani’, finally do justice to the grandeur of the collections. The impressive appearance of the catalogue was made possible by the Banca Commerciale Italiana with the aim of furthering Arabic studies. The luxuriously edited volumes with their colour illustration show the world what treasures can be found in the Ambrosian library, which today is celebrating its quatercentenary. It is hoped that the fourth volume of the catalogue will appear before long. Renato Traini, whom I know since 1987 when we met in Hammamet, a seaside resort in Tunisia, last week writes to me, that he is unable to come Milano, this time. Yet he intends to come in the near future in order to resolve a number of ‘vexing questions’ concerning the Ambrosian manuscripts. Apart from a dozen manuscripts that still need to be described, his catalogue is ready, but the devil is in the detail, and the section ‘corrections and additions’ takes more of his time and energy than he had anticipated. Let us hope that a next session of the august Accademia Ambrosiana will see the presentation of the finished fourth and final volume to its learned author.

23 The first volume published in 1975, the second volume published in 1981, the third volume in 1995, the fourth volume in 2011 (and I will present it on the next volume of «Orientalia Ambrosiana»).

24 Personal information by e-mail from Prof. Renato Traini, 4 November 2010.

25 The fourth volume of the Arabic catalogue has been published in the meantime: R TRAINI, Catalogue of the Arabic Manuscripts in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana. Vol. IV: Series F-H (Nos. 1256-1778), Silvana Editoriale, Milano, 2011, xxiii, 385 pp (Fontes Ambrosiani, Nova Series IV). The funding of the publication by the Intesa Sanpaolo Bank has proved to be indispensable. During a Solenne Atto Accademico in the early evening of Monday 7 November 2011 the final volume was festively offered to the author and presented to an audience of scholars and notables who had come to celebrate the event in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana. I had the pleasure and honour to pronounce the laudatio to the author at that occasion. It will be edited on the next volume of «Orientalia Ambrosiana». 
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Saggi e ricerche su tradizioni
culturali e religiose del Vicino Oriente

CLASSE DI STUDI SUL VICINO ORIENTE
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IN AMBROSIANA
NELLA CORNICE
DEL IV CENTENARIO
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Primo Dies Academicus
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INTRODUZIONE

Ogni inizio ha un proprio valore simbolico ed è un καιρός straordinario – davvero extra ordinarium – con una propria sacralità separata da tutto quanto segue.

Tale straordinarietà era significata nelle culture antiche anche dal diritto del primogenito, di colui che per primo apre il grembo della madre. Nella tradizione biblica è concretizzata nel dare al primogenito בּּוּרִּים בּּוּרִּים pî š'njim ovvero la doppia parte di eredità spettante a tutti gli altri figli (cf. Dt 21,15-17).

Questo era anche il senso autentico della rappresentazione dei miti cosmogonici all’inizio del nuovo anno, come la festa di A.Â.L.TU (akītu) a Babilonia. E ciò spiega perché si osservasse con accurata attenzione l’inizio in particolari frangenti della vita sociale e individuale, per dare senso al tempo seguente. Sempre a Babilonia, durante la festa di akītu, vi era anche il momento della fissazione dei destinì per il nuovo anno che iniziava: in esso si ripeteva ritualmente la fissazione dei destinì al momento della creazione. Qualche traccia di questa mentalità si può ancora trovare in alcune usanze o credenze dei nostri contadini: i giorni che vanno dal Natale all’Epifania o i primi dodici giorni dell’anno sono considerati preannunzio meteorologico per ciascuno dei mesi dell’anno seguente.

Anche questo volume è un inizio.

È uno dei frutti della feconda rinascita dell’Accademia Ambrosiana, con la penezze delle sue sette Classi di Studi: בּּוּרִּים בּּוּרִּים šēbā šōbaš «sette è penezza». Nella nuova Accademia, la «Classe di Studi sul Vicino Oriente» nasce composta già da quattro sezioni tra loro coordinate, se pure indipendente l’una dall’altra: Arabistica, Armenistica, Ebraistica e Sirica. Il progetto di lavoro non si fermerà certo al completamento della catalogazione delle preziose collezioni possedute, ma si spingerà oltre – in un orizzonte più creativo e fecondo – per far incontrare i migliori accademici a livello mondiale e coltivare nuove piste di ricerca, affinché il patrimonio della Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana sia sempre più valorizzato e sempre meglio conosciuto.

La ricchezza delle Sezioni comprese nell’unica Classe di Studi ci permette di articolare meglio i Dies Academicì che ogni anno – la seconda settimana di Novembre – scandiranno il cammino della ricerca. Ogni tre anni la Classe si concentrerà per il suo Dies su un unico tema di ricerca,
mentre nei due anni intercalari ogni Sezione potrà muoversi con libertà, scegliendo un proprio particolare tema.

Ogni anno la Classe di Studi pubblicherà un volume miscellaneo che verrà a costituire la nuova collana «Orientalia Ambrosiana», la quale a sua volta è sottocollana di «Accademia Ambrosiana». Esso comprenderà i contributi offerti nei Dies annuali, ma raccoglierà anche altri studi che i singoli Accademici vorranno trarre dalla loro particolare cucina di ricerca. La parte finale di ogni volume sarà utilizzata per pubblicare quelle «Informazioni accademiche» che rimarranno così in un archivio pubblico per i prossimi anni, degno di un gruppo di ricerca che non vuole dimenticare i passi, soprattutto i primi, del proprio cammino.

È sembrato giusto al Consiglio Direttivo, nella seduta preliminare del 15 settembre 2009, fissare l’argomento del primo Dies Academicus, celebrato a Sezioni unite, sugli studi orientalistici in Ambrosiana, nel quadro del IV Centenario dell’apertura al pubblico della Biblioteca (8 dicembre 1609). Ciascuna sezione ha quindi offerto interventi che, in modo più o meno esplicito, hanno mirato a mettere in luce la ricchezza derivata dall’idea geniale del grande fondatore, il card. Federico Borromeo, di creare una biblioteca «ad maiorem Dei gloriam et ad publicam utilitatem».

Il presente volume contiene la massima parte degli studi presentati nel corso del Primo Dies Academicus della Classe di Studi sul Vicino Oriente (8-10 novembre 2010), iniziando dalla pregevole, successiva prospettiva di S.P. Brock, dedicata ad Abbot Mushe of Nisibis, Collector of Syriac Manuscripts, tenuta durante l’«Atto accademico» la sera del 10 novembre 2010.


Introduzione


Prima della sezione dedicata alle «Informazioni accademiche» questo volume porta lo statuto dell’Accademia, ancora in vigore ad experimentum, nelle versioni italiana, inglese, araba, armena, ebraica e siria. È un modo gentile di permettere a tutti coloro che sono interessati a conoscere la nostra Classe di Studi di poter accedere direttamente nella propria lingua e capire che cosa vuole essere l’Accademia Ambrosiana.

Gli indici, soprattutto quello dei Nomi di persona, utilissimi per la snella fruizione del presente libro, chiudono il primo nato della collana «Orientalia Ambrosiana».

Alle porte preme ormai il secondo volume, che sarà pubblicato all’inizio del 2013. Per il Dies Academicus del 2013 (11-13 novembre), infatti, dovrà essere consegnato il terzo volume.

إِن شاء الله

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