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Brockelmann's *Geschichte* revisited

by Jan Just Witkam

Topics: Brockelmann's *GAL*. A word about the author. The aims of Arabic bibliography. Updating and reprinting *GAL*. A guide for the modern user of *GAL*.

Brockelmann's *GAL*

In 1898 and 1902, the publishing house of E. Felber produced two volumes entitled *Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur (GAL)*. The author Carl Brockelmann (1868-1956) was a young German university teacher from Breslau (now Wrocław in Poland). His objective was to outline the external history of Arabic literature, excluding all internal developments. He had estimated then that it would take at least a further century of hard philological work before even the most important landmarks of Arabic literature would be known and accessible (I, p. iii). It is a sobering thought that a century has indeed passed without Brockelmann's expectations being realized. Brockelmann restricted his *Geschichte* to the surviving works of authors. Had he added the titles of those works that are only known from references and quotations, the size of his *GAL* would easily have doubled.

The basic idea of *GAL* was to provide a framework which divided Arabic literature into periods and subjects and then to add to this structure using information extracted from manuscript catalogues and bibliographies concerning extant texts, and subsequently to add supplementary information on the authors from the biographical dictionaries.

The first volume of *GAL* treated the classical period up to 1258 (the fall of Baghdad to the Mongol armies), while the second volume contained an account of Arabic literature produced in what Brockelmann styled as the age of decline. This age Brockelmann divided into three periods, firstly up to the Ottoman conquest of Egypt (1517), then up to the Napo-

leonic conquest (1798) and, finally, up to the present day (then 1902). Within each section there is usually a geographical division first, which is then subdivided according to subject. This division was used for the second edition, published forty years later, as well.

In using the term '*Litteratur*' Brockelmann understood literature in the broadest sense, that is, all verbal utterances of the human mind, and refused to limit the scope of this subject to just '*belles lettres*'. His main justification was that Arabic has been the vehicle of thought over a long period of time and has covered an enormous territory, all of which he wished to include in his *GAL*. The German language has another word for literature in that broad sense, *Schrifttum*, anything that is recorded in writing. There were two fields, however, which Brockelmann mainly excluded from his survey, namely, the Christian and Jewish Arabic literatures, as these did not address the wider Islamic audience, but only addressed their own limited denominational circles.

GAL is very much the work of a confident youth. Nowadays no individual would dare to start such a project since the number of sources to be surveyed is simply too large for one lifetime. But a hundred years ago the number of sources was limited. Then there were a mere thirty-four manuscript catalogues which Brockelmann had to peruse and make extracts from. These catalogues described the major collections in Europe, North-Africa and Istanbul. The European catalogues in particular offered a wealth of information both on the contents of the texts and on their authors. The best of these catalogues - which remains unsurpassed - was just being completed by a compatriot of Brockelmann. It is the ten-volume monumental catalogue of the Berlin collection by Wilhelm Ahlwardt. When one sees the detail of information on texts and authors in Ahlwardt's work, one understands why this work was the perfect basis for Brockelmann to found his *GAL*. But the Berlin catalogue was by no means an isolated effort. The detailed catalogues of such vast collections as the British Museum and the Bibliothèque Nationale, and the medium-sized collections of the Escorial, Oxford, Cambridge, Gotha, Leiden, Algiers, etc., together provided the material for Brockelmann to use in his *GAL*.

A word about the author

Carl Brockelmann was born into a middle-class commercial milieu in Rostock, Germany, on 17 September 1868 as the fourth child in a family of six. At secondary school he was keen to devote himself to foreign studies. It was the period of the great discoveries and the carving-up of the world by the colonial powers, with which the newly-founded German empire had joined ranks. The geographical journals and accounts of discoveries in far-away regions of Asia and Africa were the source of young Brockelmann's romantic fantasies on the Orient. The German language has one compact word for this, *Fernweh*, the longing for distant places. The fact that quite a number of Rostockians, including his family's friends and acquaintances, had spread over the world only served to widen the youngster's cultural horizon. The young Carl must have been quite a prodigy. As a pupil of the secondary school he devised grammars for the Bantu language of Angola and the biblical Aramaic language. As a youth he hesitated between the careers of missionary, medical doctor and dragoman - professions which had the common advantage of bringing him into direct contact with exotic peoples. But they proved to be daydreams, nor were his grammars ever published, of course, and Brockelmann was later grateful that he never pursued these options.

Brockelmann's university career, first as student and later as a professor, was unimpressive. It was rather his wide scholarly interests, his incredible memory and the enormous energy with which he pursued his goals, that have made him an outstanding figure even today. In 1886 he enrolled as a student of Oriental studies and classical philology and history at the University of Rostock. In spring 1887 he moved to the University of Breslau, and a year later he moved again, this time to Strasbourg in order to complete his studies with the most famous German Orientalist of his time, Theodor Nöldeke (1836-1930). In the course of these scholarly wanderings, young Brockelmann vigorously studied classical philology (Latin and Greek), Accadian, Arabic, Ethiopian, Hebrew, Turkish, Persian, Sanskrit, Armenian, Egyptian and Indo-Germanic studies - and the list is probably far from complete. He engaged in classical

philology as a sort of life insurance, should he be unable to find a job in Oriental studies. But apart from a short period (1890-1892) as an assistant-teacher in the Protestant Gymnasium in Strasbourg, Brockelmann was always employed in academic positions. In 1890 he had defended his inaugural doctoral thesis in Strasbourg on the relationship between Ibn al-Athir's *Kāmil* and al-Tabarī's *Ta'rikh*. In the German university system it was, and is, normal to write two doctoral theses, the inaugural thesis, completing a course of study, and the habilitation thesis, which opens the road to a professorship. In 1892 he returned to Breslau as a private university teacher. This was basically an unpaid position, but Brockelmann's participation in projects such as E. Sachau's edition of Ibn Sa'd's *Tabaqāt*, and other activities, mainly teaching, earned him a living. In 1893 he defended his habilitation thesis which contained a study on Ibn al-Jawzi's *Talqīh fuhūm ahl al-Āthār fī Mukhtasar al-siyar wa-al-akhbār*. In 1895-1896 he made a journey to Istanbul, stopping in London and Paris. In 1900 he was appointed to the Institute of Oriental Languages in Berlin, but not for long. From 1900-1903 he occupied the extra-ordinariate chair in Breslau, and in 1903 he was appointed as ordinarius in Königsberg, now Kaliningrad in Russia, where he stayed until 1910. Next, he was appointed in Halle an der Saale where he stayed until 1922. It was there, as rector of the university, that he experienced the chaotic aftermath of the Great War and saw the German empire disintegrate and change into an unstable republic with the seeds of disaster already visible. It was also the pinnacle of his scholarly activities. In at least four specialized fields, Syriac studies, Arabic studies, Semitic linguistics and Turkish studies, his name had become famous throughout the world. But as author of *GAL* he was to earn eternal fame. From 1922-1923 he took an appointment in Berlin, but this proved to be a bad move. He came into conflict with the minister of culture, the Islamologist C.H. Becker, who was to take the Berlin professorship to provide himself with an emergency exit from politics. Brockelmann never forgave him, and called him in the preface of his *GAL*, among other things, the minister *against* German culture. Brockelmann was lucky to be able to return to the university of Breslau, where he stayed until his retirement in 1935. In 1932 he had become rector of the university, but he

was obliged to step down because of the vehement attacks on his views on academic liberty by the Nazi press. In 1937 he moved back to Halle, where he was able to use the library of the German Oriental Society (DMG) for the completion of the new edition he wished to publish of his *GAL*. Between 1937-1942 the three supplementary volumes came out, and these were followed in 1943-1949 by the publication of an updated version of the original two volumes. In 1945 he was destitute and he took up the librarianship of the DMG. In this job he was able to return most of the 'evacuated' books to their rightful place. In 1947 he was appointed honorary professor for Turkish studies in Halle (which was now in the Russian zone, later the German Democratic Republic), and in 1953 he retired once more, at the age of 85. He died in his sleep on 6 May 1956 in Halle.

Brockelmann has left us an autobiographical account, which he wrote in the course of 1947 for his son Carl, after the latter was reported to have survived Soviet captivity at Stalingrad in 1943. Johann Fück has used this account for his two *In Memoriams*, and large parts of it have been published by Rudolf Sellheim - but the text, valuable as it is, was for private use only and clearly not intended for publication. When one first reads Brockelmann's invariably disgusted remarks on the Jewish scholars he had met and experienced, it is as if a hard-core Nazi is speaking. But Brockelmann was far too intelligent to indulge in simple antisemitic bragging. Being primarily an academic, he would have defended academic liberties against attack from any quarter, fascist and communist alike. However, when the Nazis took power in Germany in 1933, he was in the comfortable position of being already 65 years old and was soon to retire. He survived the war as a private scholar, and was never compromised in any official capacity before, during or after the war.

The aims of Arabic bibliography

Arabic literature by its very nature presents a problem of bibliographical control. It is as yet impossible to make even a rough estimate of how many works were written in Arabic by so many prolific authors over a period of some fourteen centuries in an area ranging from China to deepest Africa and from

Morocco to the Philippines, let alone to fully establish the links between those works. The vast scope of Islamic manuscript literature was only recently bibliographically defined for the first time ever. The *World Survey of Islamic Manuscripts* (Leiden 1992-1994) has provided us with an insight into the enormous potential of Islamic literatures, of which Arabic is the major component. The development of our learning is also clearly visible. By the middle of the seventeenth century the Turkish bibliographer Hājji Khalifa (d. 1657) gave an account of his knowledge of Arabic literature. His *Kashf al-Zunūn* contains some 15,000 titles by about 9,500 authors. This is approximately the same proportion that one encounters in Brockelmann's *GAL*: the index in the third supplementary volume, which was published in 1942, contains some 25,000 titles and 18,000 authors. If the data contained in the bibliographical sources mentioned in *World Survey* were to be added to *GAL*, there would be an increase of many times the original number of titles and authors and there would be many additions of manuscripts to the references already known. Unique manuscripts would prove to be not so unique after all, and texts which fifty years ago were thought to be preserved in relatively few manuscripts would prove to exist in abundance. But the most considerable result of reviewing the data of *World Survey* would be our increased knowledge of Arabic literature as produced on the periphery of the Arab world and, even more important, that from Islamic countries outside the Arab world.

In the third supplementary volume to *GAL*, Brockelmann made a quite successful attempt to describe the modern literatures of the Arab world. An up-date of this covering the past fifty years would result in a reference work of unheard of dimensions. In fact, such an endeavor has not been attempted for any of the larger literatures of the modern age.

When Brockelmann compiled the final version of *GAL*, the manuscript treasures of peripheral areas such as Mauritania, Morocco and the Yemen, had barely been explored. The extent of Arabic literature in Sub-Saharan Africa, East Turkestan, the rest of China, South-East Asia's mainland and Indonesia is, even today, almost a closed book. The Indian subcontinent has had its own contribution to Arabic literature, but that branch of

Arabic literature too is relatively little known. An additional complication is that the Arabic literature of these areas can only be put into true perspective if their complementary indigenous literary tradition is taken into account as well. For the bibliographer this poses additional, linguistic, problems.

Arabic traditional literature is probably the largest body of literature in the world. Incorporating all new bio-bibliographical information in one large database would be of prime importance. It has been tried, but so far it has failed. It could never be the work of one man, but at best a dedicated institution with large and long-term funds might be able to perform that task.

Brockelmann's *GAL*, now half a century old, still stands out as the only successful comprehensive attempt at bibliographical control of the vast body of Arabic literature. Arabic bibliography must move forward, and this is happening, as can be witnessed by the numerous bibliographical surveys on specific subjects and areas and by the veritable boom of manuscript catalogues. *GAL* is still a safe point of departure for most of the bibliographical work that lies ahead.

One recent instance of creative use of *GAL* should be mentioned here. Some 1690 titles taken from the title-index of the third supplementary volume of *GAL* were the source material for A.A. Ambros for an enlightening analysis of the composition and function of rhyming titles in classical Arabic literature. It shows that *GAL*, apart from its obvious use as a bibliographical reference work, has more in store than probably even the author himself was aware of.

In many libraries all over the world copies of *GAL* are in use that contain numerous handwritten additions of generations of learned librarians and other users. Brockelmann's own interleaved copy, which he constantly updated until shortly before his death, lies in the library of the DMG in Halle. This is certainly not the only copy with extensive glosses; there must be at least a hundred copies of similar importance. It would be interesting to make a survey of those copies including the remarks and corrections of learned librarians, and to make an attempt to incorporate that cumulated bibliographical knowledge into a modern database.

Updating and reprinting *GAL*

Carl Brockelmann had always wanted to publish an updated reprint of the first edition of *GAL*. Alongside his numerous other activities he had recorded additions and corrections in his interleaved copy of the edition of 1898-1902. That first edition was published by E. Felber, a small publisher in Weimar and later in Berlin. He had agreed to publish Brockelmann's edition of Ibn Qutayba's *Uyūn al-Akhbār* on the condition that he would have the right to publish another work by Brockelmann which would yield him more profit than Ibn Qutayba. Brockelmann agreed and offered him his *GAL*, a project about which he had already been thinking for quite a while. This decision would have far-reaching consequences for generations of students of Arabic literature. Felber proved to be a crook and Brockelmann was not his first and only victim. When the typesetting and printing of half of the first volume of Ibn Qutayba's text had been completed, the work was stopped and Felber disappeared. Some time later he re-emerged and fulfilled his engagements albeit in a reduced form, restricting the publication to four volumes, whereas Brockelmann had had ten volumes in mind. Brockelmann was forced to pay if he wanted the work to proceed, a classic trick. To appease Brockelmann's anger for a while Felber gave him a typewriter, his first. Brockelmann grudgingly accepted it. *GAL*, which in the contract with Felber was Brockelmann's subsidy to finance the Ibn Qutayba edition, was printed more or less simultaneously with the Ibn Qutayba edition, but instead of the one thousand copies which he was allowed to produce, Felber had three thousand copies printed, thereby cashing in for himself on a possible second and third edition. Three thousand copies is quite exceptional for any Orientalist publication where print runs usually do not exceed a few hundred copies. But there was more mishap to come. During several involuntary peregrinations, Felber (who was always on the run from his creditors and authors) had lost part of his stock, the printed sheets of about half of the second volume of *GAL*. Complete copies of *GAL* became a rare item and it took a long time before Felber made a photographic reprint of those lost sheets. *GAL* thereby became a

work that, for many years, one could only procure through the antiquarian book trade, if at all. Later on, it was also Felber who hindered the publication of a new edition, since he had so much old stock left. Recourse to juridical action by Brockelmann was to no avail. The German copyright law apparently could not be applied. The book was considered a commodity that, once sold, transferred ownership. The author, who in such a situation was considered to be the former owner, could never again exercise a right to his work. The only way to regain the rights on the book was if someone was to buy the entire remaining stock. During Felber's lifetime this proved to be impossible, and also after Felber's death the successors to his estate asked such an extravagant price for the remaining copies of *GAL* that this possibility proved to be impractical.

Brockelmann then found the director of Brill's of Leiden, Mr. Th. Folkers, ready to publish the additional data in three supplementary volumes, which appeared between 1937-1942. In order to maintain the connection between the original two volumes and the three supplements, the page-numbers of the original edition were constantly referred to. At the end of each supplementary volume, additions and corrections to the original edition were included. The indexes in the third supplement had references to both the original two volumes of 1898-1902 and the three newly published supplements.

It was only after the publication of the third supplementary volume that it became possible for Brill's to acquire the rights to the original work. Then nothing stood in the way of an updated second edition of the two original volumes. With ample reference to the supplementary volumes these were published in 1943-1949.

The pagination of the first edition of *GAL* had been the source of reference for the supplementary volumes and they had been included in the indexes of the supplements. Now, in the new edition of the two original volumes, it was to be that same, old, pagination that would be used. This is why the new edition of the two original volumes has the page-numbers of the first edition retained in the margins. And it is to those marginal page numbers that the indexes of the entire new set refer. It is all perfectly logical if one takes the printing history of the book into account, but for the newly initiated bibliographer it is a

source of bewilderment and confusion. The use of the marginal page-numbers is, therefore, not just an innocent peculiarity in which Carl Brockelmann indulged, but a complication imposed upon each and every user of the book, now and in the future.

This having been said, it should be added that a reprint of *GAL* as it is, is a necessity now that the current reprint of the original issue of 1937-1949 is out of print. Whereas Brockelmann dared to undertake the compilation of his *GAL* single-handedly a hundred years ago, it is out of the question that anyone would do this now, not even Brockelmann himself. This is proven by the very fact that no one has indeed dared to make even an updated version. Attempts of a more limited nature have been made, of course. The most notable of these is Fuat Sezgin's *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums (GAS)*, which is still in progress (nine volumes published between 1967-1984). But although Sezgin treats all subjects and sciences, he has limited his work for the time being to the early history of Arabic literature, up to approximately the year 430 of the hegira, that is, mainly texts from the first millennium (plus later commentaries on these). If the literature of the second millennium were to be treated in the same way, the size of such a survey would amount to a great number of volumes.

Another attempt to further bibliographic control which deserves to be mentioned is the serial publication *Arabic Literature of Africa*, edited by J.O. Hunwick and R.S. O'Fahey. A first volume came out in 1994. The entire series is projected in six volumes. Here the regional element is the selective factor, and although Islam in Africa has a long history, the bulk of its literature dates from a relatively recent time. Even this limited approach required a team of authors, rather than relying on a solist like Brockelmann.

Has Arabic bibliography come to a standstill? On the contrary, it is precisely because of the fast-growing and ever increasing output of manuscript catalogues over the past fifty years that the production of a new *GAL* has been hampered. The paradox is rather that the success of Arabic bibliography hinders the creation of a *GAL*-like synthesis. This has gone beyond the capabilities of a single scholar, but no project based on teamwork has ever yet been organized to address the problem in its entirety. New techniques of presentation, production and

distribution will have to be decided upon if ever such a project for an updated 'History of Arabic Literature' should come into being.

So, for the time being the next-best thing is the original updated version of *GAL*, the three supplements with the new edition of the two original volumes, which now dates back about half a century, reproduced with all its faults and defects - and there are many of these. It is published, once again, in the German language, which few scholars outside Europe can still understand. And it is published with its intricate system of pagination, and with all other baffling features, of which the lack of explanation of the numerous abbreviations is the most conspicuous. It illustrates at the same time the greatness of the original book, and our inability, for the time being, to proceed along the road first taken by that great German scholar, Carl Brockelmann.

A guide for the modern user of *GAL*

A glimpse of the publishing history of *GAL* shows that there is a logic behind the curious marginal numbering in the second edition of the two original volumes. It also shows why it is important that students of Arabic literature keep using these marginal numbers, rather than the official page numbers. There are more peculiarities in *GAL* that may need some explanation or deserve a short mention.

For the beginner in Arabic literature the quality of bibliographical references in *GAL* seems to be very defective. In the end, one usually finds what one is looking for, but it is not made easy. A good list of abbreviations was, and is, missing. Brockelmann was so accustomed to his own reference system that he probably did not realize that half a century later his readership would have difficulty in retracing his bibliographical information. The only practical advice that can be given here is to use the *World Survey of Islamic Manuscripts* alongside *GAL* and to refer to it in all cases of doubt or bewilderment. Most questions related to the bibliography of catalogues will be solved by such a procedure.

Another problem is the complex nomenclature of Arabic personal names. This is not Brockelmann's fault. In his short

study on Arabic nomenclature, A.F.L. Beeston lucidly explains and analyzes its intricacies. For the bibliographer it is always a dilemma knowing which name to use for the alphabetization in his index of personal names. With such complex name systems as Arabic, this becomes a complicated affair. Brockelmann usually chooses for the *ism*, the personal name. Only in very few cases does he select the *nisba* or another element such as *kunya*, *laqab* or *'urf*. Only a few of the best known authors are mentioned under more than one name in the index, and as a rule the authors have a single mention only. This means that whoever searches for an author's name in Brockelmann's indexes, first has to know the *ism* of that author, and preferably also his patronymic. Only if these are known, can searching under the name of the author be profitable. This implies that, preceding a search in Brockelmann's persons' index, a biographical search for a certain author in other sources has to be conducted in order to know his *ism*.

Experience has shown us that searching in *GAL*'s title-index for the title of the book, rather than looking for the author, is a far more satisfactory procedure. All complexities of Arabic personal nomenclature suddenly disappear and if the book is mentioned by Brockelmann, it is easily found by the title. It is in fact the method used by the traditional Islamic bibliographers as well. They, too, have realized early on that the title is the only stable and unambiguous information by which a book can be found.

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Brockelmann

GESCHICHTE
DER
ARABISCHEN LITTERATUR
(*GAL*)

VON
CARL BROCKELMANN

ERWEITERT UM EIN VORWORT VON JAN JUST WITKAM

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