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THE BACKGROUND TO ARABIC STUDIES IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

It would be anachronistic to speak of a specifically English contribution to Arabic studies in the Middle Ages. Among the leading figures in the twelfth-century renaissance which drew largely on Arabic sources were Englishmen, such as Adelard of Bath (fl. 1130), the translator of al-Khwārizmī’s astronomical tables and Euclid’s Elements; and his contemporary, Robert of Ketton (fl. 1114-50), who translated al-Khwārizmī’s work on algebra and made the first Latin version of the Qur’an under the auspices of Peter the Venerable of Cluny. The English origin of Adelard and Robert has no real bearing, however, on their work, which was not carried out in England (Robert in fact was archdeacon of Pamphion), nor undertaken for national purposes.

Apart from such individual scholars, any traces of a school of Arabic in early twelfth-century England would have arisen from casual circumstances rather than any historical or political necessity. In the later eleventh century relations existed between the Iberian peninsula and Lorraine, which produced a diffusion of Arabic knowledge to the latter region. Then a Lorriane, Robert of Losinga, was bishop of Hereford between 1079 and 1095, and another, Walcher, became prior of Malvern in 1091. So about the end of the century these two places acquired some importance for Arabic learning.

It has further been suggested that a connection may have existed between the Hereford group and some shadowy indications of the teaching of Arabic at Oxford in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Later writers looked back to a mythical chair of Arabic and other oriental languages at Oxford, one of five allegedly set up by the Council of Vienne in 1312. But this remained a paper scheme: the Oxford chair was to have been maintained by the king of England, and dependence on government funding then as in later times proved unreliable.

The modern history of Arabic studies in western Europe begins in the sixteenth century. Here there is a solitary English precursor in Robert Wakfeld (d.1537), probably a Yorkshireman, certainly a Cambridge graduate, who travelled on the Continent to acquire a knowledge of Hebrew and

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Syriac as well as a little Arabic. He taught at Tübingen and Paris, and in 1519 he returned to England, where he became chaplain to Henry VIII. He lectured at Cambridge, and later at Oxford also. During the remainder of the century, the foundations of modern Arabic studies were being laid on the Continent. Three principal centres developed. In Paris the pioneer was Guillaume Postel, who was sent by Francis I to the Levant, where he visited Egypt and Istanbul, collected oriental manuscripts, and acquired a knowledge of Arabic. In 1538 or 1539, shortly after his return from the East, he published an Arabic grammar, which with all its faults supplied the needs of contemporary students. The establishment (under the patronage of Cardinal Ferdinand de’ Medici in 1584) of the first press to use movable Arabic type opened the way to the publication of texts at Rome, where the foundation of the Maronite College in the same decade facilitated the contribution of Arabic speakers to the new scholarship. In this connection it is noteworthy that an early production of the Medicean Press, al-Idristi’s Naṣihat al-mustāqiq (1592), was translated into Latin by two Maronites, Gabriel Sionita and John Hesronita, and was published in Paris in 1619 under the misleading title of Geographia Nubienis. Another Arabic press was set up in the Netherlands by Francis Raphelengius (1539-97). As a young man he had studied Greek and Hebrew, visited Cambridge, and subsequently worked as corrector for a famous printer, Plantin of Antwerp. In 1585 Plantin set up a new press in Leiden, which Raphelengius inherited. He taught himself Arabic, and made himself an Arabic font. He also compiled an Arabic dictionary, which his sons published after his death. An exemplar of the sixteenth-century scholar-printer, Raphelengius was in 1586 appointed professor of Hebrew at the university founded in Leiden twelve years earlier. A Jewish convert, the first professor of Arabic at Leiden, held the chair from 1599 to 1601. His successor (after a long interval) was the great Arabist, Thomas Erpenius, appointed in 1613.

It is against the background of these developments on the Continent, especially in Protestant Leiden, that the efflorescence of Arabic studies in England took place. William Bedwell (1563-1632), the patriarch of the English Arabists, was something of an isolated figure in his particular commitment to Arabic and his lack of institutional support, albeit he was one of a circle of Cambridge Hebrews, and enjoyed the encouragement and patronage of Lancelot Andrews, master of Pembroke Hall and subsequently bishop of Winchester. Bedwell was a friend of Erpenius, and visited Leiden, where he arranged for the printing of his edition of the Arabic version of the Johannine Epistles by the sons of Raphelengius. The leading Arabist of the next generation, Edward Pococke (1604-91), was a pupil of Bedwell’s but
had begun the study of Arabic under Matthias Pasor, a refugee scholar from Heidelberg, who himself had learnt Arabic in Paris from the Maronite, Gabriel Sionita. With Pococke and his contemporary at Cambridge, Abraham Wheelocke (1593-1653) we move into a new period of organized Arabic studies at the universities. The chair of Arabic at Cambridge was established (at first somewhat hesitantly) by Thomas Adams, a London draper, in 1632 for Wheelocke, his fellow-countryman from Shropshire, while Pococke was designated by Archbishop Laud for the Oxford chair two years later. Thus provision came to be made for the teaching of Arabic at the English universities a generation later than at Leiden, and nearly a century after Postel was appointed professor at Paris. Pococke’s eighteenth-century biographer, Leonard Twells, describes the method he followed in his teaching. The textbook he used was a collection of proverbs ascribed to ‘Ali b. Abi Talib, which had been published anonymously in 1629 at Leiden by Jacobus Golius, Erpenius’s successor. Twells writes:

Upon this Book, observing the Directions of the Archbishop in the Statutes he had provided, he spent an Hour every Wednesday in Vacation-time, and also in Lent explaining the Sense of the Author, and the Things relating to the Grammar and Propriety of the Language; and also showing the Agreement it hath with the Hebrew and Syriack, as often as there was Occasion. The Lecture being ended, he usually tarried for some Time in the publick School, to resolve the Questions of his Hearers, and satisfy them in their Doubts; and always, in the Afternoon, gave Admittance in his Chamber, from One o’Clock till Four, to all that would come to him for further Conference and Direction.7

It appears from this account that lectures on Arabic as an optional extra in the Oxford curriculum were relegated to the vacations and Lent, and also that Pococke followed up his weekly lecture-hour with three hours of tutorials. Among his fragmentary papers preserved in the Bodleian is a portion of his lecture notes on these proverbs, and also what seems to be a student’s notes on the same course. These, which become thinner and more badly written as they go on, serve to identify the grammar used in connection with the course as Erpenius’s shorter publication, *Rudimenta linguae Arabicae*, first published at Leiden in 1620.

Two other courses given by Pococke were on the first *Maqāma* of al-Hariri, and on the twelfth-century *gasība* by al-Ṭūğrī known as *Lāmiyyat al-Ṭajām*. The first of these texts was published in Golius’s reissue of Erpenius’s longer grammar entitled *Linguae Arabicae syriacae* (1656); the second is included with the proverbs of ‘Ali, and in 1661 was republished by Pococke himself with a Latin translation as *Carmen Tograi*. The book also includes Pococke’s introductory lecture to the course and over two hundred pages of notes, which may be taken as the substance of his teaching on this text. A full commentary on almost every word deals with syntax and etymology, and frequently makes comparisons with cognate words in Hebrew and Syriac.

It is clear from this that English teachers and students of Arabic were largely dependent on the grammars and textbooks produced in Leiden. On his visit there in 1612, Bedwell had purchased (but had not immediately received) the Arabic type of the Raphelengian Press. In fact, what he finally received was an incomplete set. This passed on his death to Cambridge University. It appears, however, not to have been used and certainly not for the purpose for which it was bequeathed, the printing of Bedwell’s *magnum opus*, a much-laboured Arabic lexicon, which never achieved publication. The earliest specimen of Arabic printing from Cambridge is dated 1688, and is of another font. Oxford university in the meantime was using Arabic type produced from equipment also bought in Leiden (although not from the Raphelengian Press) in 1637. This was used to print, among other works, Pococke’s editions of historical texts.

To build up collections of manuscripts was a primary object of the Arabists and their patrons in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was for this purpose that Francis I sent Postel on his tour of the Levant between 1534 and 1537. As the century went on, the development of Western commercial and diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire facilitated access for travellers and scholars. The important dates for England were 1581, when Elizabeth I chartered the Levant Company, and 1583, when Sultan Murad III granted (or rather renewed, since an earlier grant in 1580 had been abrogated) capitulations to the Turkey merchants, representatives both of the queen and the Company. Henceforward there was an English ambassador in Istanbul, and English consuls were at various factories in the Levant.

Of these, the most important for the history of Arabic studies in England was the factory at Aleppo. The English merchants, however, showed no great inclination to acquire the local languages: Dudley North, for example, who lived in Turkey between 1661 and 1680, was exceptional, if not unique, in his ability to speak and write Ottoman Turkish. The ordinary members of the Levant Company were therefore inexpert agents for the scholars in England. The problems of one such are described in a letter of 1624 from Thomas Davies, a merchant in Aleppo, to the biblical scholar James Ussher, subsequently archbishop of Armagh. Davies had obtained a slightly imperfect Samaritan Old Testament, ‘which notwithstanding I propose to send by this shipp last I meet not with another.’ He had sent to Damascus for a perfect Pentateuch, ‘and yt not there to be had to mount Garazin’ (Gerizim). A messenger sent to Mount Lebanon and Tripoli was unsuccessful: he could get
one there in two months' time as they wanted parchment to make a copy of one of the books. Furthermore he could not vouch for a Hebrew version on offer.

For neyther my selfe nor any other man here can determine it, only I must be forced to take his word that sells it to me who is a minister of the sect of the Marranists, and by birth a Chaldean but not Scholler, neyther is there any to be found in these parts.\(^8\)

In these circumstances, the royal letter which Laud obtained 1634, requiring each of the Company's ships to bring back a Persian or Arabic manuscript may not greatly have enriched his collection.

The principal service of the Company to scholars and scholarship was rendered by its chaplains. Outstanding among them was Pococke himself, who was chaplain at Aleppo from 1630 to 1635. One of his predecessors there had been Charles Robson, whose _Newes from Aleppo_, published in 1628, gave an account of his journey to Aleppo, and described that city. Later travel books were written by Thomas Smith (at Istanbul in 1668) and Henry Maudrall (Aleppo, 1695-1701). Smith, like John Covel, his successor at Istanbul, wrote about the Greek Church. Another chaplain at Aleppo, Robert Huntington, who was there from 1671 to 1681, was one of the great collectors of oriental manuscripts in this period. Finally, and as an anticlimax, John Luke, who was chaplain at Smyrna from 1662 to 1669, went on to hold the Sir Thomas Adams Chair at Cambridge from 1685 to 1702 but, according to one of his twentieth-century successors, 'left no recorded impress on Arabic studies.'\(^9\)

While he was at Aleppo, Pococke made the acquaintance of a Muslim named al-Darwish Ahmad, who was probably one of his Arabic teachers there. During a second visit to the Levant, which Pococke made in 1637-41 to collect oriental manuscripts, Pococke and al-Darwish Ahmad kept in touch. A number of al-Darwish Ahmad's letters are preserved in the Bodleian, and these show that he was both transcribing and purchasing manuscripts on Pococke's behalf. The letters throw an interesting light on these activities, and provide evidence of growing Western competition to obtain manuscripts, as the following excerpt from one of the letters shows. It refers to Jacobus Golius, who had spent eighteen months in Aleppo shortly before Pococke went out there as chaplain, and to Golius's brother, Peter, who became a Carmelite, and must have been in or near Aleppo when the letter was written. The 'Girolamo' referred to, probably a dragoman at the English factory, was acting as Pococke's agent in these transactions. Al-Darwish Ahmad writes:

> Whatever book you want, write its name in Arabic, and send it to Girolamo, and I will send you everything you want. Send and tell Girolamo also, if I bring a suitable book to take it, for Golius the Fleming has sent to ask his brother for most of the books I want to send, especially the book _sabb al-aṣāh_. He [Girolamo] did not wish to take it, so I went myself to the son of the scribe, and outbid the brother of Jacobus Golius, and took it, and brought it to Girolamo, so this was the means of obtaining it.\(^10\)

The result of such activities was that by the end of the seventeenth-century the Bodleian had acquired an impressive collection of Arabic and other oriental manuscripts. Chief among these was Laud's great donations, Pococke's own collection (purchased from his widow in 1692), and an important part of Huntington's collection, also purchased in 1692-3. The manuscripts of Narcissus Marsh did not come to the Bodleian until 1713, but they are essentially a seventeenth-century collection comprising material acquired from Huntington and Golius. Oddly enough, the manuscript collection of Golius's predecessor, Erpenius, came to form the foundation of the Arabic holdings at Cambridge. Erpenius had intended them to go to his own university of Leiden, but they were bought by the duke of Buckingham in 1625-6, when he was in the Netherlands. His intention to present the collection to the university of Cambridge, of which he was chancellor, was frustrated by his assassination in 1628, and the manuscripts were ultimately obtained from his widow. The anxious and exasperating delays suffered in the meantime are reflected in a letter from Adams to Wheelocke, written on 30 March 1632:

> . . . whatsoever the feare at Cambridge be least these Orientall books will be diverted, yet I hope your Universitie is in better likelihood to have them in regard of some late endeavours then in truth it was formerly, however supped otherwise. The certainty is this, Mr Howlesworth upon the receipt of your letter 3 wickes agoe (as I take it) went immediately to the house of the Dutches and spake to Mr Bowles her Chaplaine who promised his furtherance and to move the Dutches about them within a few daies, and Mr Houlsworth replying that my L: of Lincolne had already made way to the Dutches about them, Mr Bowles answered, I wish he had spake unto her, but he did not, only he acknowledged he spake unto him about them. The second time Mr Houlsworth repaying thether recced this answere from Mr Bowles that the dutches replyeth that she would consider of it. Then did Mr Houlsworth understand privately that there was great means used to gaine the books for Oxford. The 3rd time Mr Holsworth went to Mr Bowles for the dutches wh was that she would speake to the king about them. Hereupon Mr Houlsworth acquainted the Earle of Dover being his parisoner with the busines and prepared him with several arguments to the dutches but not meeting with her he went to my Lord of Holland by whom means was used to his majestie, and thus it is hoped that the jewels will be reserved for Cambridge and tomorrow this nobleman afrenamed will stir againe about it and we hope we shall understand the danger is prevented. Thus you will say Praised be the Lord daily even the God that helpeth us and poureth his benefites upon us.\(^11\)
But not until 8 June was Adams able to assure Wheelocke that
the books are faithfully promised to be sent to Cambridge this wicke and . . .
[Holdsworth's] servant told me, he supposed he saw the trunke at the carriers
wherin they were, directed to doctor Mason of St Iohns (as I remember).13

What, in the opinion of these seventeenth-century scholars, was to be gained
from a knowledge of Arabic? Some idea of their views may be obtained from
their inaugural lectures and the introductions to their publications. Bedwell's
preface to his Johanni Epistles, published in 1612, stresses the wide extent
of the lands inhabited by Muslims, 'from the furthest shores of the extreme
West, that is from the Fortunate Islands, even to the islands of the Moluccas
in the extreme East.' He goes on to say that

in almost all these places, the privileges and diploma of kings and princes, the
instruments and contracts of merchants and nobles, finally the familiar letters
of all, are expressed and written almost solely in this Arabic language.

He passes on to assert the importance of Arabic to scholars, assuring his reader
that 'no language (Greek and Latin excepted) contain more records of solid
and scientific erudition.' A knowledge of Arabic is valuable to students of
theology, medicine, philosophy and mathematics; while ancient writers,
whose works are lost in their originals, 'overwhelmed by darkness, lie in
obscurity.' Finally he speaks of Arabic as ancillary to Hebrew and Old
Testament studies.13

Bedwell's remarks on the role of Arabic in trade and diplomacy are not
followed up by later writers, who otherwise on the whole, ring changes on the
themes he adumbrated. Matthias Pason's Oratio pro lingua Arabicae
professione, delivered at Oxford in 1626, and published in the following year,
speaks like Bedwell of the wide diffusion of Arabic:

in Turkey, Persia, India and Tartary, where the superstition of Mahomet rages,
even though other languages may be in common use, yet in almost every house
there will be at least one who understands Arabic.

Pason places first among the uses of Arabic to Christians its utility in Hebrew
and biblical scholarship. A Protestant refugee, he has already said that
oriental and Greek studies are needed to 'purge the Anglean stable of papistical
superstitions, and to wash away the filth of the Schoolmen's sophistry'.
A knowledge of Arabic, he continues, enables Western Christendom to bring
consolation to the distressed Christians under Muslim rule, and to attempt the
conversion of the Muslims themselves. This is a theme which was to receive
some emphasis later in the century, when an interest developed, if not in the
conversion of Muslims to Christianity, at least in the conversion of Oriental

Christians to Anglicanism. Pococke himself published an Arabic translation
of the Anglican catechism in 1671, and of the liturgy three years later. The
latter was done at the request of Huntington, who distributed Pococke's
missionary publications in Aleppo. Pason has more to say than Bedwell about
the value of Arabic to Western learning, and speaks particularly of Arabian
writers on medicine and chemistry. Many names both of diseases and
remedies, he says, are Arabic. Al-Razi's work, al-Hawi, comprises the work
of over three hundred Arabian physicians. In the translations of Avicenna's
Canon, there are so many discrepancies and obscurities that a knowledge of
Arabic is necessary to reach the sense. Philosophy, physics, mathematics,
history and poetry can all be better studied with a knowledge of Arabic and
he even asserts that 'the books of Livy, the loss of which Latin bewails, are
extant in Arabic'.

The importance ascribed by Pason to 'Arabian' science is echoed ten years
later in the lecture entitled De lingua Arabicae utilitate et praestantia,
delivered by Thomas Geaves in 1637, and published in 1639. Thomas Geaves
was at this time deputizing for Pococke, who had gone to Istanbul on his
second visit to the Levant. After speaking of the wide geographical range
and copious vocabulary of Arabic, Geaves goes on to mention its literary and
scientific treasures. The Arabs, he says, preserved the learning of the ancients
in the time of barbarism, and their own discoveries are also important.
'Another Lyceum has been opened to us by the great Averroes, into whom any
Pythagorean would swear that the genius and soul of Aristotle himself had
migrated.' Avicenna is outstanding in medicine and eloquence. The Arabian
geographers transmitted the learning of Ptolomy, and described almost the
whole globe. Chief among them is Abû'l-Fadîl'. Their rulers cultivated the
sciences, and this explains their rapid cultural development. Although their
academies have mostly been destroyed by the Turks (an ill-informed remark),
copious libraries still survive.

The value of Arabian science thus became a commonplace of Western
scholars in the seventeenth-century and even subsequently. The discourse of
a later professor at Oxford, Thomas Hunt, De antiquitate, elegantia, utilitate,
lingua Arabicae, pronounced in 1738, deals at some length with the Arabian
writers on medicine, science and mathematics. Yet nothing much came of all
this, and in conclusion one may perhaps speculate on the reason for the
comparative neglect of this part of the Arabian heritage. Indeed for all their
respectful references to the works of the Arabian physicians and scientists,
the Arabists at the English universities were not greatly interested in them. They
themselves were after all primarily clergymen by training and vocation, and
valued Arabic above all as ancillary to the study of Hebrew and the Bible.
Bedwell's edition of the Johannean Epistles is an early instance of this predilection. Then in the middle years of the century came the great team project which resulted in the London Polyglot (1654-7). Among the English orientalists who contributed to it in various ways were Wheelock and Pococke, with their successors at Cambridge and Oxford respectively—Edmund Castell and Thomas Hyde, and also Thomas Greaves. On the other hand, the scientists, mathematicians and physicians who had an interest in the legacy of the Arabians were for the most part amateurs in the oriental languages. Exceptional among them was Thomas Greaves' brother, John Greaves, Pococke's travelling-companion in 1637; he was a mathematician and an astronomer. Among his publications were a Persian grammar and the text (with a Latin translation) of part of the geography of Abu'l-Fida'. The imbalance between the interest in Arabic of the humanists and theologians on the one hand, and of the physicians and scientists on the other, reflected the changing intellectual attitude of scientists as the seventeenth century went on—a change aptly summarized in the motto of the Royal Society, Nullius in verbo. This shift from authority to experiment as the touchstone of scientific knowledge inevitably rendered obsolete the works of the ancients and the Arabians alike.

The publication of the London Polyglot and the foundation of the Royal Society, both events of a single decade at mid-century, symbolize the fact that the motives which had fostered Arabic studies in the first half of the century were about to reach their term. Pococke published his last Arabic text (apart from missionary literature) in 1663 and in the same year he wrote to Thomas Greaves, 'The Genius of the Times, as for these Studies, is altered since you and I first set about them, and few will be persuaded they are worthy taking notice of.' A similar loss of interest was noticeable at Cambridge. Castell was appointed professor in 1667. 'His Lectures were heard first with great Applause, but, in a few Years, were so much neglected, that being easy, and disposed to be pleasant, he put up this Affix upon the School Gates: Arabicæ Linguae Praeceptor cras ibi in Desertum.'

Notes