

A reaction to the article „The Lost Archive“, *The Wall Street Journal* 12.1.2008, page 1 (US edition)

http://online.wsj.com/article_email/article_print/SB120008793352784631-1MyQjAxMDI4MDEwMjAxODI3Wj.html

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The lost archive, the myth of philology, and the study of the Qur'an

The belief in the myth that old manuscripts should be mysterious and powerful is part and parcel of the age of Modernity. That such expectations were operative in the discussion on the Qumran fragments is still remembered, and more recently the Da Vinci Code, in itself a quite shallow story, sold extremely well. The fact that the *Wall Street Journal* placed an article on the “lost Bergsträsser-film archive” of Qur’anic manuscripts on its front page on 12th of January seems to be due to the myth of “textual wars” taking place in the world. Labelled as a clash of civilizations or war of religions, conflicts today in the Middle East and Europe involving Christians, Muslims and Jews are likely to be perceived in isolation from their economical, social, or political preconditions. On September 12th 2001 a friend of mine bought a copy of the Qur’an in order to “understand what is going on”. Indeed, as if in the spirit of the protestant slogan of “sola scriptura” (= “through scripture only”), the idea of deciphering the software of “Muslim patterns of action” through the Sacred Book of Islam is tempting. As superficial as it may look, this very perception of the direct causal link between “what Muslims do” and passages of the Qur’an seems to be widespread. No article on the missing enlightenment in “Islam” without pointing to a still missing “but urgently needed” critical edition of the Qur’an. Almost no coverage on warfare in the Middle East and suicide bombings without the attempt to dig out passages from the Qur’an and pictures of praying and reciting Muslims. The cultural, social, and religious diversity of a whole region, the Middle East, that European and American history labels as the cradle of civilisation and the birthplace of Judaism and Islam appears transmuted into a “disturbing” monolithic religious monster.

The article on the lost photo archive of old Quranic Manuscripts collected by Gotthelf Bergsträsser (1886-1933) and his colleague Otto Pretzl (1893-1941) calls to mind a whole tradition of philological research on the Qur'an that has fallen into oblivion since World War II. Two centuries ago, it was German speaking philologists who laid the foundation for critical approaches to the Quran. Abraham Geiger's (1810-1874) often quoted and frequently misunderstood book "Was hat Mohamed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen" ("What did Mohamed take from Judaism?"), published in 1833, can be seen as a landmark, setting up a school of Jewish scholars who for almost a hundred years included the study of Islamic sources into the text corpus of Jewish texts they studied. The title of Geiger's book is misleading, since the author is far from attacking the prophet but sees Mohamed as a kind of genius, embedded in a (Late Antique) context where Jewish texts and traditions are seen as integral parts of the emerging first Muslim community. It is a paradoxical fact that the founding figure of the Jewish Reform movement sought to trace Jewish tradition back to a Middle Eastern context in order to accommodate Judaism in post-Napoleonic Central European societies by studying interconnections between rabbinical traditions and the Qur'an. In a society where the ghettos just had been dissolved, a Jewish movement developed its vision of a European Jewish identity by tracing their tradition back to the Middle Eastern context and showing links to another religion emerging in the same region.

The 19th century also saw German speaking scholars like Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921), Theodor Nöldeke (1836-1930), and Gustav Weil (1808-1889) who laid the foundations of a philologically sound approach to Middle Eastern literatures in Arabic, Syriac, Hebrew, and Persian. The fruits of their and their students' works are often considered milestones of text edition and are still to be found in bookstores in the Middle East and the Western world. It was Theodor Nöldeke who left a book on the history of the Qur'an that is considered a landmark of philological scholarship of the Qur'an by Western and Eastern scholars. Even if Nöldeke, in his 19th century spirit, referred to the prophet as a genius, thus attributing authorship of the text to him, his work offers proof of a degree of knowledge of Islamic tradition and philological methods that is almost non-existent today. Among Nöldeke's successors were scholars like Gotthelf Bergsträsser and Otto Pretzl who developed the project of creating a philological critical study of the Qur'an. Bergsträsser not only travelled diverse Arab countries (the Mediterranean Sea) to take pictures with the newly developed

first transportable Leica photo-camera but also went regularly to Cairo to participate in the meetings of the Royal Egyptian Academy of Sciences. He can be described as a scholar who not only studied his “object”, Arabic texts, but who also understood that knowledge of the Muslim tradition had to be included in his intellectual approach by sharing and exchanging knowledge with his Middle Eastern colleagues. After his premature and unexpected death in 1933, he left behind a treasure that was lost from sight after World War II. The widespread belief in its non-accessibility was reinforced by rumours of the destruction of the material in 1944 and the silence of his successor Anton Spitaler (1910-2003).

Many, although by no means all, German scholars who remained in Germany after the Nazis came to power, did have sympathies for the Nazis. In times of war, knowledge of foreign languages qualified scholars for specialized positions in the German war machinery where their linguistic skills were seen as important. Nevertheless, measuring the achievements of German scholars by examining their political biographies seems to me not helpful. Gotthelf Bergsträsser only experienced the very beginning of the political catastrophe that was the Third Reich. His colleague at Munich University, the musicologist Kurt Huber (1893-1943), who together with Bergsträsser published an article on the recitation of the Qur’an in Cairo, joined the White Rose movement that opposed the Nazi regime. He was executed in 1943. The fact that the German philological tradition of studying the Qur’an flourished in the 1920s and remained in existence during the Nazi period, cannot in itself justify describing German scholarship in that field as having a Nazi agenda (as observed in many internet blogs discussing the “The Lost Archive”). As Jewish scholars in Germany and Europe were killed or had left the country, post-War Germany had lost not only its intellectual elite, but also German as a language of international scholarship underwent a decline, not only in Oriental studies.

Post World War II studies on the Qur’an no longer followed the tradition set by Goldziher, Nöldeke, and Bergsträsser. In the 1970s, the works of John Wansbrough (1928-2002) and Patricia Crone suggested a new perspective on the Qur’an, where the text either would emerge one to two centuries after the prophet, or come out of Palestinian religious movements (reducing Mecca and Medina to collective retrospective imaginations of the

Muslim community). Neither theory is in harmony with results of research of the last two decades. Today, perhaps neither of the scholars mentioned would write their books a second time in the same vein. Yet, in a field like Qur'anic studies, both works were often seen by Muslim readers as revealing the true aims of Western scholarship, thus to a certain extent they can be said to have destroyed mutual trust. For scholars from Europe today, the suspicion of belonging to a "revisionist school" can still be sensed in the Middle East, and is often an obstacle to academic exchange between scholars.

The field of Qur'anic studies, that can be described as under-studied compared to two centuries of Biblical studies, contains many "blank spaces" on the research map. The lack of a comparative study of the oldest manuscripts and the oral Muslim tradition requires a lot of documentation and analytical work. The Bergsträsser photo archive affords a good overview of important old manuscripts from European and Middle Eastern libraries, it can not, however, serve as a magic wand. From the material that has been entered into a database to date it would appear that any expectations that old Qur'anic manuscripts in the Old Hijazi script included in the Bergsträsser photo archive would offer a different text of the Qur'an are unjustified. It is interesting to note that orthographic differences observed in manuscripts of the early 8th century are variations of spelling that a comparison of 20th century prints of the Qur'an from Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Nigeria show to be still alive. Muslim tradition does indeed refer to one text, yet still allows and transmits variant readings and writings within a certain range. This "unmodern" attitude towards the text, (textual behaviour) of allowing ambiguity and a range of readings, can be described as having characterized Muslim tradition since the earliest times. Until the present day, the Qur'an is recited in slightly "diverging" textual and acoustic shape in Morocco and in Egypt. What is required here is a systematic study of all the available material, manuscripts or sources on the different Muslim traditions of reading the Qur'an, in order to study the text of the Qur'an – in the same way the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are studied – with due diligence, knowledge, and precision.

Since Nöldeke, Bergsträsser, Pretzl and their Australian colleague Arthur Jeffery (1892-1959) developed a framework for a systematic study in the 1920s that was interrupted in the following years by the death of the scholars involved and the events leading up to and

during World War II, the only perspective left is a modest attempt to continue Nöldeke's and Bergsträsser's work today – more than seventy years later. Even if the story sounds intriguing, no Da Vinci Code scenario or Qumran fever will make things easier. The study of old manuscripts and Muslim oral tradition requires a lot of time and patience. Until today, each and every hypothesis of a “new text”, a “different text” or a completely new historical scenario of the genesis of the text remains a hypothesis based on scarce material evidence and looks very unlikely. This is valid for the hypotheses of Luxenberg, Ohlig, Wansbrough and other spectacular “new readings” of the Qur'an. Scholarly work has of course to take place in isolation from religious claims of any sort, which simply belong to another discourse. (That does not mean that one has to subscribe to the religious dogma that the Qur'an is an inspired text or that it has a divine origin). The metaphysical question of the text's origin cannot be answered by science and philology. What can be studied are the textual beginnings of the Qur'an as they are manifested in manuscripts and in the Muslim tradition across the centuries.

The Berlin project that started in 2007 under the title “Corpus Coranicum”, sees itself as the attempt to collect documents on the Qur'an systematically and transparently. The rich material of the Bergsträsser collection offers a solid basis for a documentation of the text of the Qur'an in history. On the other side, it also refers to the achievements of a scholar who came from the German speaking philological school and was fully aware of the importance of studying Arabic sources and exchanging ideas with his Middle Eastern colleagues. The project, based at the Berlin Brandenburg Academy of Sciences, was developed by Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and the author in 2006. Angelika Neuwirth's more than thirty years' experience in Qur'anic scholarship can be described as an approach that is based on a careful study of the text itself, combining material from the Islamic tradition with modern text hermeneutics. In the framework of Corpus Coranicum this is a perspective which no single scholar would ever have been able to pursue alone but one which unquestionably requires the cooperative work of researchers from diverse specializations. The project group studies the Qur'an as a text that has a history in Late Antiquity; Hebrew, Syriac, Greek and Ethiopian source texts about the theological debates contemporary with the emergence of the Qur'an are collected and made available in a database structure (*Texte zur Umwelt des Koran* = “Texts on the Environment of the Qur'an”), in order to reconstruct the milieu that the

text addressed. Every text enters a world where there are earlier texts in existence. The Qur'an addressed listeners from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. Charitable reading of the Qur'an means undertaking the attempt to reconstruct the way the text was received by the earliest community. If the 112th Sura is read against the background of the most important Jewish credo ("Shma Israel"; Deuteronomy 6,4) and the Nicene Creed (of the First Council of Constantinople in 381 CE), the relationship – the message of the text seen against the background of two other Late Antique texts – can be described in the sense that the Qur'an addressed people in a given context.

By studying overlaps with Late Antique traditions, the originality of the Qur'an in its context becomes evident. The idea of a text emerging in a context sounds trivial, but in the case of the Qur'an investigating it requires the unearthing of the achievements of a whole (mostly German speaking) tradition that is very little studied today, not least as a result of the decline in German language skills among scholars. The above mentioned Jewish Reform Movement founded by Abraham Geiger in the 19th century produced numerous studies on the Qur'an and its context. These scholarly achievements are almost forgotten today and were only continued in miniature after World War II. The tragedy of neglected scholarship in this field has contributed to the deplorable current situation of Qur'anic scholarship. For the study of the Qur'an as pursued by the Corpus Coranicum project, two traditions have to be revived, one is the "Lost Archive", the other could be classified as "forgotten books". Both are seen as necessary and have to be brought together in an integral scholarly effort, combining philology of manuscripts with knowledge about Late Antique reference material in order to allow us to see the Qur'an in the context of human history.

Any examination of the time before the Qur'an does entail the need to include Islamic history in a wider framework of Middle Eastern history of Christianity and Judaism. Hereby the concept of an exclusive vision of a Jewish-Christian identity has to be questioned. If Judaism and Christianity, religious traditions that emerged from the same region, can be accommodated in Europe or the United States, why should the Qur'an and Islamic history be seen as separate. By showing and documenting that the discourse of the Qur'an addressed a Late Antique milieu where Judaism and Christianity was known, the Qur'an and the history of the Muslim community can be freed from their current connotations of

exotic (“non-European”) otherness. Comparisons between Jewish and Muslim legal traditions not only show similarities but show also how a new discourse can enter into a rivalry with an existing one. At the same time, dogmatic debates reflected in the Qur’an point to the fact that the text is situated in a region where six centuries of Church history not only produced harmony.

The Qur’an project is conscious of the fact that exchange and debate is necessary. The approaches of the Corpus Coranicum project are the subject of debates with Muslim scholars. After lectures and discussions held in Morocco, Iran, and Turkey the opinion that a “critical project” on the Qur’an is tantamount to a suicide project, does not coincide with my own (albeit limited) experiences. On the contrary, a debate in the city of Qom on the study of manuscripts and the relationship between the uncanonical gospel of the infancy of Thomas and parts of the 3rd Sura turned out to involve a number of Shiite clerics in a discussion of the type of discourse the Qur’an could be described as. The possibility that any of the speakers might not necessarily be a Muslim seen as being relevant was not sensed by the author. Late Antique sources in Syriac or Hebrew language are of course scarcely studied and translated into Arabic or Persian in Muslim countries today, thus hindering discussion of such material. At the same time, many Western scholars of theology, Jewish studies, church history, Syriac etc. have also shown themselves sceptical about discussing the importance of their respective disciplines for understanding the Qur’an. In the end, it is the necessity and the will to discuss an embeddedness of the text in time and space that is at stake. Many scholars have refused to accord the Qur’an its due place in history, the recently begun Corpus Coranicum project has decided to take an opposite approach. Consisting of a mixed group of researchers, the academic target audience is a European one, whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish or other.

By laying the groundwork for a systematic approach to Qur’anic Studies, the outlined research approach is aimed at contributing to a vision of history in which Christian, Jewish and Muslim traditions refer to a shared Middle Eastern heritage. From a European perspective, the Middle East as a point of departure has always been accepted for the age of Antiquity, why should Late Antiquity be treated differently? In a time when the belief seems to be widespread that sacred texts are capable of supplying explanations for the

behaviour of individuals, research on the contexts of a text could contribute towards dissolving an essentialist perspective on a sacred text – something which is still too rarely questioned in public debate and scholarship.

After having read a column in the *Asian Times Online* (15th of January) under the title “Indiana Jones meets Da Vinci Code”, based on the *Wall Street Journal's* article on “The Lost Archive”, I bought hats for our whole research team, our female Muslim colleagues now wear them on top of their headscarves.

(Berlin/Potsdam, 16.1.2008)