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TRAVELLING THROUGH TIME

Essays in honour of Kaj Öhrnberg

EDITED BY

SYLVIA AKAR, JAAKKO HÄMEEN-ANTTILA
& INKA NOKSO-KOIVISTO



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Edited by Sylvia Akar, Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila & Inka Nokso-Koivisto
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KAJ ÖHRNBERG: A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Harry Halén

Family backgrounds. Kaj's great-grandfather, the commercial accountant Alexander Sebastian Öhrnberg, moved in March 1883 from Gamlakarleby to Himango. On 8 September 1883, he married Maria Rosalie Andersson (*3.9.1853 Björneborg), the daughter of Carl Gustaf Andersson, a customs official. In November 1892, the family settled in Vasa.

Their son, Kaj's grandfather Mauritz (Mauri) Alexander (*11.9.1884 Himango – †2.6.1931 Ekenäs), matriculated from the Vasa Finnish Lyceum in 1903 (Ostrobothniensis, later of the Vasa nation) and graduated in 1910, majoring in Russian with minors in Nordic History (cl), Geography (cl), and Art History (a). Upon entering the University, he immediately joined the Students' Union's Singers (Ylioppilaskunnan Laulajat) as a first tenor. He worked as a teacher at the Jämsä Finnish mixed school in 1910–1914 and continued at the Svenska samskolan in Kristinestad, teaching Russian in 1914–1918 and Finnish from 1918 onwards. Finally, in 1929–1931, he served as a master of Russian at the Ekenäs Swedish mixed school. His pupils greatly appreciated him and regarded him as an excellent teacher. His wife was Bertta Wilhelmina Sundqvist.

Mauritz Öhrnberg's son and Kaj's father, Herman Alarik Öhrnberg (*15.12.1912 Helsinki – †30.3.1955 Helsinki), graduated as an architect from the Technical University of Helsinki in 1946. During the Finnish Continuation War, he served as a reserve lieutenant on the Hangö Front, where the Soviets had a formidable military base on the peninsula not far from Helsinki. Later he worked in a company that did asphalt and cement casting (asfalt- och cementgjuteriet).

Kaj Krister Alarik Öhrnberg (*30.9.1943 Helsinki), the son of Alarik and Astrid Ulrika Vilhelmina Öhrnberg, née Bergman (*10.8.1908 Idensalmi), attended the Swedish Lyceum (Svenska Lyceum, "Revan") in Kronohagen, Helsinki, quite close to his home on Sjötullsgatan 17 A. His curriculum included even French, although he greatly regretted that he could not instead choose Russian, which would later be much more useful for his university studies. Russian courses were not available in that school. The traditional name "Alarik" in his family was later determined to be pure Arabic: *al-'arīq*, meaning 'of noble descent'.

Military service. Kaj did his military service in 1963–1964 in the Nyland Brigade in Dragsvik near the coastal town of Ekenäs, where his grandfather had lived until his death. He was first conscripted into an artillery company, but

soon commanded to kitchen service under Master Sergeant Torsti Keskiylä, who was a tough veteran of the Finnish wars (1939–1944) but very civilian-like in his manners and outer appearance. I remember well seeing Kaj at the main entrance of the garrison's lunch room, reviewing the arriving companies with a stern look. Later I was slightly surprised to see him again, still a total stranger to me, walking near the University, this time wearing a dark moustache. It did not last long, however. "Well, eh, you know, all Arabs wear moustaches, so ...", he later explained.

Student years. Kaj has stated that if one gets one's hands on the right books at a young age, it can have a decisive impact on a future career. He found his own path at the age of eleven when he became fascinated by C.W. Ceram's well-known work *Gods, Graves, and Scholars: The Story of archaeology* (Finnish transl. 1951). He planned to become an Egyptologist, but as that field was still non-existent at the University, he started with Assyriology instead. But alas! The elementary course in Arabic during the first semester changed his plans and he chose Oriental Literature, particularly Arabic Studies, as his major. His minor subjects included General History (the Swedish language chair) and Comparative Religion.

Kaj started his university studies in the autumn term of 1964 as a member of the students' club Nylands nation. His main teacher in history, Professor Jarl Gallén, a mediaevalist and ardent book collector, grew to be like a scholarly ideal for him. The same can certainly be also said of his teacher in Arabic, Professor Jussi Aro, the incredible polyglot from Ostrobothnia who guided Kaj deep into the rich heritage of the Orient. At that time, Aro's textual courses were attended by only three students and Kaj was the only one at the interpretation exercises. Later he would state, "The both others became professors, but I deceived the bunch by remaining a mere Lic.Phil."

Kaj's studies lasted slightly over ten years, which meant that at the end when graduating he was registered as a so-called over-age "black-book student". This was caused by the necessity of having to take paying jobs during his student years. His final term would be phenomenal, however: he received his BA in September, his MA in October and his Lic.Phil. in December of the same year.

For his MA, Kaj majored jointly in General History and Oriental Literature with a thesis on the Arab conquest of Egypt *Futūḥ Miṣr*. This lengthy study, with appended translations from Arabic sources, focuses upon the enigmatic figure of al-Muqaqis, the leader of the Copts and Greeks. This thesis was accepted for the degree of a Lic.Phil. (doctoral candidate) in the same year. According to the official statement, in English translation it would have sufficed for a PhD thesis.

To this, Kaj responded laconically, “Well, it is not possible to critically study the history of the 600s from sources written in the 800s.”

In his work, he had actually tried to critically evaluate the reliability of Arabic historiography in general and to determine possible criteria for verification of traditionally presented facts, but his conclusion seemed to be that one must either accept or reject it all. The oldest existing sources give the impression that Islam was born as a ready-made system, but they only reflect the conditions prevailing at the end of the 700s and early 800s. In any case, one can only penetrate the past as deeply as allowed by the written sources.

Kaj is slightly sceptical of ever finishing his doctoral thesis (planned originally for 1985, entitled *The Enigma of al-Muqauqis: Studies in the Arab conquest of Egypt*, I), as he has been working on it by now for more than forty years. “This topic is an inexhaustible well, so that a single lifetime is not enough to master it”, he explains. The proposed second volume would deal with the actual conquest and the third volume with the Arabization and Islamization of Egypt. He wanted to tackle the problem of whether the Prophet’s mission was meant for his own people only or universally. Kaj has published several studies on this topic (e.g. on Arabic historiography and on the story of Muhammad’s Egyptian concubine Mariya and their son Ibrahim, in which he attempts to demonstrate how it is just a transposition of the older story about Abraham, Hagar, and Ismail). In 1983, he published a related monograph with genealogical tables entitled *The Offspring of Fāṭima: Dispersal and ramification*.

The value of Arabic studies was long considered to be on par with the business of tramps, but after the oil crisis in 1974 many stated how far-sighted students in that field had been.

Teaching activities. Kaj was appointed part-time teacher already in the autumn term of 1973. His first course, on the history of Arab countries, was primarily intended for students of General History. From 1978 onwards, he regularly lectured on the history of Islam, particularly on the rise and early period of this new religion. In 1978–1979, he taught on *mu‘allaqāt* poetry and the next year on selections from the Qur’ān. He also lectured on the civilizations of the Great River Valleys from 1974 until 1982. In 1981, he offered a special course about the problems of Arabic historiography to students of General History.

In his courses, Kaj would also boldly discuss actual controversies between the Islamic and Western world, not hesitating to analyze even the most delicate questions of the day. The Rushdie case and other conflicts connected to actions by the West perceived to be provocative were elucidated from the point of view of Islamic concepts and its sphere of tolerance, even as objective research whose

results were felt to be insulting by adherents of Islam was becoming more and more difficult. In the face of a possible future in which only Muslims would be allowed to do research and give courses on Islamic topics, Kaj responds, “Your taboos are yours, not mine.”

After the premature death of Professor Jussi Aro in 1983, Kaj shared professorial duties with three others, completing the unfinished courses in April and May of that year. In 1990–1991, during Heikki Palva’s leave of absence, Kaj answered for ninety percent of the Chair of Arabic (Prof. Tapani Harviainen was responsible for the remaining ten percent). This one-year professorial experience was, however, not a very pleasant one. Administrative duties and additional business was quite far from his research and teaching interests.

Kaj’s long and renowned career as a teacher of early Islam and the Islamic world in general was rewarded during the University’s annual festival in 2008 with the Eino Kaila Award, which is given to excellent pedagogues. He was warmly characterized by the Board as a teacher with exemplary and vast cultural views, many-sided expertise and a deep love for his field of learning. Kaj says that this was a complete surprise for him and that, of all the University awards, he has considered this one to be the most esteemed. He was chosen from among nine candidates and finally nominated by the rector.

Further achievements. Kaj’s long and at times adventurous friendship with Sahban Mroueh, a Lebanese poet who also worked with Jussi Aro, has yielded an Arabic translation of the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*. First, Kaj made a rough equivalent in Arabic of songs 1–25 and Aro of songs 26–50. These were then polished by Sahban into a final artistic version. Their joint work resulted in *al-Kālifālā: malhamat al-ša‘b al-finlandī. Tarğama Sabbān Ahmad Muruwwa, murāğā’a Yūssī Arū wa Kāy Ūrnbarī*. In spite of the great cultural value of this work, the Finnish Foreign Ministry did not consider it in its sphere of interest, even though it had promised to buy 300 copies for the sake of the country’s international PR. After this bitter course of events, the book was finally published in Beirut in 1991 by Dār Dānāy. Naturally, not a single copy was handed over to the Ministry.

Another most remarkable collaborative achievement, produced together with Jussi Aro and Sahban Mroueh, caused a revolution in the knowledge of the mediaeval Islamic art of cuisine. In 1987, four years after the unfortunate death of Jussi Aro, they were finally able to publish their edition of al-Warrāq’s *Kitāb al-tabīkh*, a manuscript found in the Helsinki University Library at the end of the 1970s. It turned out to be the oldest preserved Arabic cookbook hitherto known (the original was compiled in the 900s, but this copy dated from the 1200s).

Later an additional manuscript of the same work was located in Istanbul and a third in London. The Helsinki version had first been erroneously ascribed to the well-known poet Kushājim (d. AD 961 or 971), because his name was written on the title page. It did not take long, however, before Kaj and his colleagues began testing some of the thousand-year-old recipes, which turned out to be refined and elaborate fare from the epicurean Iranian upper-class and court.

An English translation with an introduction and glossary by Nawal Nasrallah, entitled *Annals of the Caliph's Kitchen: Ibn Sayyār al-Warrāq's tenth-century Baghdadi cookbook* (Islamic History and Civilization 70), was published by Brill in Leiden in 2007. The emended Arabic text was edited by Kaj and Sahban. It is the most comprehensive work of its kind, with more than 600 recipes and numerous anecdotes and poems, forming a thorough survey of the period and its food culture. This key resource, which is now available in English, fills a gap in the cultural history of mediaeval Islam.

In 1987, Kaj took part in a radio feature about Islam. Parts 1–4 were done by Sahban Mroueh, Harri Huhtamäki, and Otso Kantokorpi; Kaj wrote the manuscript for part five.

Fields of specialization. Kaj says that the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century AD, with its surrounding empires of Byzantium and Sasanian Persia, has been the central theme of his studies. Since the late 1960s, he has been studying the Arab conquest of Egypt. He often emphasizes the influence of Arab civilization on our Western cultural heritage – something that often goes unnoticed. Eurocentric thinking generally focuses on antique figures from Greece, but we should realize that even that classical tradition comes to us mainly through Arab and other Oriental mediators who, rediscovering the ancient authors, started translating their works and making them available to the broader public. It is somewhat of a paradox that people today who are prejudiced towards their own Western culture and say that they support modern civilization and its superior values (like rationalistic thinking, scientific research, legalistic state, freedom of speech, and democracy) are at the same time ignorant of the fact that we owe most of those things to Arabic-speaking scientists and thinkers, who found and rescued the classical works during the quite unenlightened Middle Ages of Europe.

Kaj's most passionate field of study has been – and remains more than ever – the life and works of Georg August Wallin, the Finnish explorer of Arabia. Already in the early 1970s, Kaj started working with the Wallin materials preserved in the Helsinki University Library manuscript collection. With painstaking care, he collected and analyzed every possible fact he could unearth of the great Arabist's life and production. Supported by Jussi Aro, who himself in

1958 had published a thoroughly descriptive catalogue of the Arabic manuscripts brought back by Wallin, he was able to freely study the contents of the cardboard boxes enshrining the manuscripts, original diaries, letters, and notes which by then had been published only in a selective and heavily censored way. Kaj photocopied the entirety of this huge corpus for his closer personal study, and for good reason, as certain items were later stolen from the collection (before the present strict regulations on the use of manuscript materials were established).

In a project financed by the Swedish Literary Society (Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland), in collaboration with the Egyptologist Patricia Berg and the illustration assistant Kira Pihlflyckt, Kaj is currently editing G.A. Wallin's complete literary heritage. The first three volumes appeared in 2010–2012. They are neatly designed and impressive works with introductory surveys, learned commentaries, and indexes. At least three additional volumes are still to come. Only now are we able to learn in detail about Wallin's life in the Orient, including his escapades with the young girls of Cairo. Wallin's colourful Swedish expressions are also published as is, without any expurgation. Patricia and Kira are indispensable drivers of the project, as Kaj himself has evident difficulties in permitting material to leave his desk.

Although fascinated by the Arabian expeditions of Wallin, Burton, Thesiger, and others, Kaj himself is not fond of traveling. He thinks it should suffice that he has thrice visited Cairo in search of a certain manuscript in a Coptic monastery and once been to Turkey on a compulsory trip with the University. His first visit to Egypt in 1968 and its everyday life was a shocking experience for a man who was prepared for the marvellous world of *A Thousand and One Nights*. However, every autumn he is used to taking a flight to Spain with his wife Tuula, a figure-skating trainer. Lovely Andalusia, with its Moorish cultural tradition, has strong enough appeal. He has also befriended such Spanish Arabists as Mohamed Meouak.

Although well-qualified in the reading of Arabic texts, Kaj has not tried to acquire fluency in its spoken forms. Formerly Arabic and Islamic studies were considered to only be a purely non-profit field for scholars, but nowadays the economic significance of the area has increased the interest of more practically-oriented students expressly wishing to learn the living language.

Another special field of Kaj's interests is Caucasia. He is enchanted by Lermontov, Shamil, Daghestan with its rare Arabic manuscripts, the beautiful mountainous sceneries, and the noble people with their resolute character. When I once visited Caucasia, I brought back for him a Lermontov commemorative medal made of porcelain. The Israeli scholar Moshe Gammer, who received his PhD in London, wrote his huge dissertation on Imam Shamil and visited

Helsinki in connection with this work. Kaj remained in contact with him and, before the war broke out, they planned a joint project surveying unique Arabic manuscripts in Daghestan.

Nor has the fine culture of Ancient China escaped Kaj's keen eye. The lingering splendour of old Peking as described by John Blofeld (e.g. the marvellous world of Robert van Gulik with his lovely gibbons, the mysterious Hermit of Peking, Sir Edmund Backhouse with his incredibly skilful manuscript forgeries, the early Chinese visitor in Kairo in Wallin's time) became one of his special areas of interest quite early, but regrettably it seems that he does not have time enough for it any more.

Scholarly appointments. Kaj received a one-year research fellowship from the Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies in 1978–1979 to work on the literary estate of G.A. Wallin. His aim was to shed light upon Wallin's significance as an explorer of the Arabian Peninsula and as a pioneer investigator in Arabic dialectology. This work is now coming to fruition in the form of the aforementioned publication project.

Kaj held the position of Research Assistant at the Academy of Finland for many years, starting in 1982.

In 1993, Kaj was appointed Sub-editor ("Éditeur associé") of the *Humaniora* series of the Academia Scientiarum Fennica. In this capacity he effectively assisted the Managing Editor Heikki Palva, Professor of Arabic and Kaj's former teacher. Together they painstakingly scrutinized and corrected every manuscript offered for publication. They raised the series to a completely new level from the point of view of content, typography, and a much broader international readership. The working languages included English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese.

Personal characteristics. Kaj's daily routine includes a regular long walk, either starting from the Academic Bookstore and passing several antiquarian bookshops along the way or walking along Brunnsparken's seashore to his habitual destination, the Old Cemetery, where stands the large monument of Wallin. "Just to check that it is still in its proper place", he comments. His practice of walking was initiated during the general strike of 1956, when Kaj learned to his delight that one can manage quite well without trams and buses. Biking is out of question, as there is something wrong with his sense of balance. "I drive straight into the ditch", he says. I wonder if he has ever even used the Helsinki Metro. Walking is enabled by his durable Camel boots. Actual camels are also one of Kaj's well-known interests. Their motif is found on his ties and in many other places, too. While Professor Aro's physiognomy turned more and more

Bedouin-like over time, I don't think Kaj would be opposed to finally resembling a noble and sturdy camel.

It goes without saying that Kaj is a great lover and passionate collector of books. He has immense piles of photocopies stacked in his wardrobes from floor to ceiling. Fortunately he happens to also have a special workroom in his mother's former flat, where he keeps part of his library. He is constantly seen carrying a bag with new acquisitions. "The day is spoiled if no new interesting book is found", he comments. He probably has to smuggle them home and hide them unnoticed on the shelf with the old ones as not to have to explain their necessity. Love for books may also be the basis of his prolific production of scholarly reviews. His *ex libris*, designed by Sahban, is said to represent the great sceptic Abu 'l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī. Kaj's own spacious Kufic-style signature can always be found at the top of the guest book of the National Library.

Football is Kaj's sole – but very dear – interest in the arena of sports. In his youth he used to play goalkeeper, and he continued playing on our students' team for many years. He keenly follows all great football cups, watching TV even into the early morning hours. Water and swimming is for him totally alien, not to speak of track and field. However, in the summertime Tuula takes Kaj along to the Vierumäki college of physical education where she offers figure-skating training courses. Although she is not much younger than her husband, Tuula is still an active player on a women's football team.

Kaj is a veritable gourmet, but so refined in his diet that he has remained one of the slimmest in the field. His enthusiasm for both Oriental and Western cuisine is enhanced by his own excellent cooking skills. A regular special guest coming for weekend care has especially appreciated his well-prepared spaghetti. His sister's sturdy Shar-Pei dog, the late Pedro, with great pleasure gobbled the delicious macaronis down to the last morsel. In addition, Kaj is a veritable connoisseur of wines. One need only pronounce the word "Mukuzani" or "Kakhetia" and he is immediately transported to the Georgian mountains under the starry, dark blue Caucasian sky. Today orders must be made to Spain to fill the deplorable lack of such wine.

Kaj's polite, always friendly and helpful person is still seen on a daily basis at the Institute where he has his own shelves for his work and the books he has currently checked out. His ascetic, sinewy figure tells of his habit of long walking tours, while his somewhat dark complexion reflects the hours spent in the summer with a book on his balcony in Skatudden, basking in the almost Arabian sunshine.