

FOSTERING MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN SAVANTS FROM EGYPT AND EUROPE IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

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The French invasion of Egypt was primarily motivated by a desire to strike a blow at British trade and British interests in India and thus prepare the way for the conquest of Britain. On July 2, 1798 Napoleon Bonaparte landed in Alexandria; three years later, in 1801, the French were defeated by British and Ottoman troops and Egypt came within the British sphere of influence. The beginning of the modern period of Egyptian history is usually linked with the French invasion. Orientalist historiography has asserted that the French occupation was an act of creative disruption that jolted Egypt out of centuries of somnolence: “without Bonaparte, modern Egypt is inconceivable.” But Egyptian and Arab nationalist historiography has seen the occupation as the first intrusion of Western imperialism and a violation of *Islamic* Egypt’s cultural authenticity.¹ Be it as it may, after 1798 Europe and Europeans were a reality that the Egyptians had to take into account and live with.

Napoleon’s aim was to gain the goodwill of the indigenous Egyptian population, especially of their true leaders, the *shaikhs* of al-Azhar. He chose ten *shaikhs* to form a *dīwān* with the Rector of al-Azhar as presiding officer. Like most members of the theocracy they were not, however, willing to accept the rule of an unbeliever and some of the *shaikhs* formed a counter-committee at al-Azhar to arm and incite the population against the French. After heavy fighting and looting of al-Azhar – with five of the professors executed – the French were able to restore order in Cairo and, thanks to the savants accompanying the army, establish social connections with some of the scholars at al-Azhar; in fact, only four are mentioned by name. Of these, two deserve to be mentioned: al-Jabarti

¹ Dykstra 1998: 115. Bonaparte’s proclamation to the people of Egypt that he was coming to replace the evil rule of the Mamluks with a new régime of justice sounds familiar to those of us who still care to remember the occupation of Iraq in the spring of 2003.

(1753–1825/6), the main historian of the period and chronicler of the French occupation, and *shaikh* Ḥasan al-‘Aṭṭār (1766–1834), who studied enough French to interpret European culture to the Egyptians.² When the French were forced to evacuate Egypt, al-‘Aṭṭār’s situation was precarious and, fearing the consequences that his close friendship with the savants might have, he thought it wiser to leave the country for a while, and in 1802 he went to Istanbul and Syria, where he lived for over eight years.³ One reason hampering more cordial relations between the French and the *shaikhs* was the *mission civilisatrice* that the occupants considered themselves to have, in the words of E.-F. Jomard (1777–1862) to “porter les arts de l’Europe chez un peuple demi-barbare et demi-civilisé.”⁴ So, in the end, and in spite of the number of French savants, the occupation in itself had little intellectual effect.

After the French evacuation interest in all things European kindled during the occupation gained new impetus when the Albanian Muḥammad ‘Alī took over as the ruler of Egypt. During his time several Egyptian ‘*ulamā*’ of the early nineteenth century had exceptionally close relations with European scholars visiting Egypt. Among them were especially Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar al-Tūnisī (1789–1858), Rifā‘a Bey al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (1801–1873), Muḥammad ‘Ayyād al-Ṭaṇṭāwī (1810–1861), and Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī (1811–1883). A matter of interest from a Finnish point-of-view is that Georg August Wallin (1811–1852), the Finnish Arabist and intrepid explorer of the Arabian peninsula, knew all four of them.

Before briefly introducing them we may say some words about the reason why Wallin was in Cairo in the 1840s. In those days, when Finnish academic circles, inspired by Romanticism and an awakening national spirit, were almost exclusively interested in Siberia, Georg August Wallin received a travel grant to enable him to further his studies of Arabic dialects and acquaint himself with the doctrines of the nineteenth-century fundamentalists, the Wahhabites, who dominated the form of Islam practised on the Arabian peninsula. So it happened that Wallin was in Cairo in 1844 introducing himself as ‘Abd al-Wālī, a Muslim from Bukhara in Central Asia. Before leaving for the Orient, Wallin had studied medicine for a year to be able to pose as a doctor, and his diaries and letters make frequent reference to his giving treatment to his Muslim friends and acquaintances.⁵

² Dodge 1974: 107–110.

³ Marsot 1968: 273.

⁴ As quoted in Solé 1997: 39.

⁵ Öhrnberg, 2003: 1265–1267; Öhrnberg, “Wallin, Georg August (1811–1852)”, *The National Biography of Finland*, The Finnish Historical Society, www.histseura.fi/biografia

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Muḥammad al-Tūnisī was born in Tunis in 1789; after studying at al-Azhar he made his way to the Sudan, where his father had been employed at the local court. Subsequently al-Tūnisī moved back to Cairo and entered the service of Muḥammad ʿAlī. He became chief reviser of translations of European medical works, cooperating with the French scholar Dr A. Perron (d. 1876), after 1839 Director of the Qaṣr al-ʿAin medical school. Besides aiding Dr Perron in translating medical works from French into Arabic, al-Tūnisī wrote two comprehensive works about his experiences in the Sudan, works later translated into French by Dr Perron.⁶ Alfred von Kremer (1828–1889), who came to Egypt in 1850, speaks warmly of al-Tūnisī as one of his teachers of Arabic.⁷

In his diary for February 18, 1845, Wallin has an interesting passus about Dr Perron and al-Tūnisī:

... fick mig en åsna och begaf mig på väg till hospitalet vid Kaṣr el-ʿein [...] der jag fann en gammal ärevördig sherif shekh, sittande på en diwan med en Turkiskt klädd effendi. Denne sednare var mudiren för hela hospitalet D:r Peron [sic], den förre var shekh Moḥammad Eṭṭunsi [sic]. De voro sysselsatta med en Arabisk öfversättning af något Franskt medicinskt verk. [...] Hvad som här mest satte mig i förvåning, var det sätt hvarpå de unga Arabiska läkarena talade om sin religion och sin profet m.m.d. De talade nemligen ej blott med största vanvördnad, utan äfven med onyttigt och otjenligt gäckeri; shekhen sjelf, en hvitskägig, kanske 70 år gammal gubbe, instämde deri med dem, i stället för att nedtysta dem. [...] För öfrigt har jag knappt hört någon Europé tala Arabiskan så väl som Peron; ty han hade stor lätthet både att finna rätta ordet, och att uttala det.⁸

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Rifāʿa Rāfiʿ al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was born in 1801 into a family of prominent scholars in the Upper Egyptian town of Ṭaḥṭā. In 1817 he came to Cairo and enrolled in al-Azhar. It was his fortune to study under Ḥasan al-ʿAṭṭār who had a lasting influence on him. Through this friendship Rifāʿa Rāfiʿ al-Ṭaḥṭāwī also became

⁶ On al-Tūnisī see Streck, “al-Tūnisī, Muḥammad” in ¹¹²*Encyclopaedia of Islam*; Крымский 1971: 158–159.

⁷ von Kremer 1863 II: 324–325.

⁸ Wallin 1864–66 III: 35–37. The gist is: Wallin went to the hospital where he found Perron and al-Tūnisī translating a medical work from French into Arabic. Wallin was surprised because the students were speaking so irreverently about their religion and their prophet, something al-Tūnisī wholeheartedly joined in, despite his age of approx. 70. In Wallin’s opinion, Perron spoke Arabic better than any other European he had met so far.

acquainted with secular subjects not yet taught at al-Azhar as well as with European thought. Between 1822 and 1824 *shaikh* Rifā'a occupied a teaching position at al-Azhar. When, in 1826, Muḥammad 'Alī Pasha sent a mission of 44 students to France, *shaikh* Rifā'a was chosen as one of the four *imāms* accompanying the mission. In Paris, Rifā'a studied French in order to be able to read works in history, geography, philosophy and literature. His object was to translate the books that he read into Arabic. During his stay he made friends with leading French Orientalists, such as A. I. Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838) and E.-F. Jomard. They made him aware of the new discoveries of Egyptology and of Western values and culture in general.

While still in Paris *shaikh* Rifā'a wrote his *magnum opus*, *Takhlīṣ al-ibrīz ilā talkhīṣ Bārīs*, which has been translated into French, German and English.⁹ J. Heyworth-Dunne was of the opinion that this book was the only human document of the age by the only writer of this period to have produced anything readable.¹⁰ Donald Malcolm Reid expressed this perhaps even more to the point:

In 1834 the government press at Bulaq published *Takhlīs*, the first of three landmark books of the decade in which Egypt and the West took each other's measure. Lane's *Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* followed in 1836 and Wilkinson's *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians* in 1837. Lane's and al-Tahtawi's books made an obvious pair; al-Tahtawi might even have called his work *The Manners and Customs of Modern Frenchmen*.¹¹

After his return from Paris in 1831 Rifā'a was employed as a translator of French books and in 1837 he was made head of the newly-founded School of Languages. In 1842 Rifā'a became the editor of the official newspaper *al-Waqā'ir al-Miṣrīya*; so it was quite an influential person that Wallin became acquainted with.¹²

Rifā'a was the first Muslim writer to see Egypt as something historically continuous and he tried to explain this vision of an Egyptian nation in terms of Islamic thought. His *Anwār taufīq al-jalīl fī akhbār Miṣr wa-tauthīq banī Ismā'īl*, published in 1868, was a real turning point in the Egyptians' self-awareness as a nation. *Anwār* treated the ages of the ancient Egyptians, Alexander the Great, the Romans, and the Byzantines, and it ended where Egyptian history written by Arabs had usually begun – the Arab conquests.

⁹ Into French by Anouar Louca as *L'Or de Paris* (1988), into German by Karl Stowasser as *Ein Muslim entdeckt Europa* (1988), and into English by Daniel L. Newman as *An Imam in Paris* (2003). It had been translated into Turkish in 1839/40, and had a wide circulation.

¹⁰ Heyworth-Dunne 1937–39: 964.

¹¹ Reid 2002: 52.

¹² On Rifā'a see Chemoul, "Rifā'a Bey" in ¹*Encyclopaedia of Islam*; Крымский 1971: 164–170; Öhrnberg, "Rifā'a Bey al-Ṭaḥṭāwī" in ²*Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

Without question, however, Rifā'a's most important work was as a translator and supervisor of translators. In this capacity he was one of the most important figures in the growing Arab awareness of the West in the nineteenth century.¹³ Rifā'a reminded the Arabs that the sciences now spreading in Europe had once been Islamic sciences: Europe had taken them from the Muslims in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and in taking them back they would only be claiming what was their own.¹⁴ All in all, it has been calculated, Rifā'a Bey and his fellow translators translated some two thousand works from European languages.¹⁵

In his diary for June 26, 1844 Wallin wrote:

[...] Vid *maghrib* då jag kom hem från shekh 'Alī, kallade mig *Khalīl* till sin bod för att se på en carierad tand, som plågade *Rifā'a effendi*. Jag var högst generad af hans bekantskap, men kunde ej undgå den. {Jag blef dock sittande blott en liten stund och gick min väg.} Knappt hade jag åter hunnit upp i mitt rum, så kom han, jemte en af mina bekanta Araber, upp till mig. Han hade dock ej mod att låta mig rycka ut tanden, utan tycktes vara mycket pjåkig och sensibel, som han sjelf sade. Han var högst frågvis och jag var oförsigtig nog att låta honom veta för mycket; jag fruktat verkligen ledsamma följder af denna bekantskap. Vi talade mest Franska och det förundrar mig att han ej kan tala detta språk bättre än han gör. Sedan han gått bort, [...].¹⁶

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Shaikh Muḥammad 'Ayyād al-Ṭaṭṭāwī was born in 1810 in Nijrīd near Ṭaṭā in Egypt. At the age of thirteen he was able to move to Cairo and continue his studies at al-Azhar, where one of his fellow-students was Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī. Among his teachers at al-Azhar was Ḥasan al-'Aṭṭār who had as lasting an impact upon al-Ṭaṭṭāwī as he had earlier had on al-Ṭaḥṭāwī. Ḥasan al-'Aṭṭār encouraged his students to maintain contact with European scholars.¹⁷

¹³ Abu-Lughod 1963: 46. On the translations movement in general see Abdel-Malek 1969: 129–143; the author has dedicated his excellent study to the memory of Rifā'a Rāfi' al-Ṭaḥṭāwī.

¹⁴ Hourani 1970: 81.

¹⁵ Chemoul, "Rifā'a Bey" in ¹*Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

¹⁶ Wallin 1864–66 I: 400. The sentence within {} emended from the original manuscript at the Helsinki University Library. The gist is: Wallin had been called to Khalīl's shop to take a look at a carious tooth that was bothering al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (*Rifā'a effendi*). He came up to Wallin's lodging but did not have the courage to let Wallin extract the tooth. Wallin and al-Ṭaḥṭāwī discussed in French and Wallin expressed his surprise that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's French was not that good.

¹⁷ On al-Ṭaṭṭāwī see Kratschkovsky, "al-Ṭaṭṭāwī" in ¹*Encyclopaedia of Islam*; Крачковский 1929, also in Крачковский 1955–60 V: 229–299; Крачковский 1946: 100–106, also in 1955–60 I: 94–98; Крымский 1971: 171–185; Öhrnberg, "al-Ṭaṭṭāwī" in ²*Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

To make ends meet, al-Ṭaṭṭāwī taught Arabic to European diplomats and to the specialists summoned by Muḥammad ʿAlī to Egypt. Among his students were E. W. Lane, F. Fresnel, F. Pruner, A. Perron, G. Weil, and the Russian diplomats N. Mukhin and R. Frähn. Lane had a very high opinion of al-Ṭaṭṭāwī. When translating *Alf laila wa-laila* into English, Lane used a manuscript “revised and corrected, and illustrated with numerous manuscript notes, by a person whom I think I may safely pronounce the first philologist of the first Arab college of the present day, the sheykh Moḥammad ʿEiyād Eṭ-Ṭaṭṭāwee.”¹⁸ When J. F. Demanges (1789–1839), teacher of Arabic at the Institute of Oriental Languages of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in St Petersburg, died, the Russians secured al-Ṭaṭṭāwī’s invitation to St Petersburg as Demange’s successor in 1840.

The first seven years in St Petersburg al-Ṭaṭṭāwī taught at the Institute but in 1847 he became the third occupant of the Arabic Chair at the University of St Petersburg, a position that he held almost until his death in October, 1861. Among his students at the Institute and the University the following may be mentioned: P. S. Savel’ev, V. V. Grigor’ev, and G. A. Wallin, with whom al-Ṭaṭṭāwī established a close friendship. While still in Cairo, al-Ṭaṭṭāwī had learnt French by exchanging lectures with Fresnel; in St Petersburg he used the same method with Wallin when studying German. He also had some knowledge of Russian. al-Ṭaṭṭāwī had one more Finnish scholar as a student, namely Herman Kellgren (1822–1856), who, after the death of Wallin, wished to qualify for the now vacant Arabic Chair at the University of Helsinki.¹⁹

Of al-Ṭaṭṭāwī’s literary output, two works either related to Europe or intended for Europeans may be mentioned: his *Traité de la langue arabe vulgaire*, published in Leipzig in 1848, one of the most interesting sources for our knowledge of the Arabic of Egypt in the nineteenth century; and his travelogue *Tuḥfat al-adhkiyāʾ bi-akhbār bilād al-Rūsiyā*, the Introduction of which is an account of his journey from Cairo to St Petersburg, the rest a history and description of the Russian Empire compiled from Russian sources. The autograph manuscript, dated 1266/1850, was dedicated to Sultan ʿAbd al-Majīd and is preserved in Istanbul.²⁰

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Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī was born in Dasūq in 1811. After completing his elementary education he attended lectures at al-Azhar and after a short teaching spell there

¹⁸ Lane 1979–81: xii. This manuscript is now deposited in Cambridge University Library (Adv.b.88.78-9); see Roper 1998: 253 n. 14.

¹⁹ Крачковский 1950: 116–117, also in 1955–60 V: 83. For the correct date of Kellgren’s arrival in St Petersburg, see Castrén 1945: 374.

²⁰ Крачковский 1946: 103, also in 1955–60 I: 96.

entered the employment of the state. His knowledge of Arabic philology led him to be appointed *bash-muṣaḥḥih*, chief reader, at the government printing office in Būlāq.²¹

When Wallin arrived in Cairo one of the first things that he did was to look up al-Dasūqī, for whom he had a letter of recommendation from al-Dasūqī's friend and fellow-student at al-Azhar, al-Ṭanṭāwī. In Wallin's opinion, "Shekhen var en oändligt treflig och präktig man, med något tycke af Tantavi, icke "fanatiqué", som han sjelf sade. Dock Tantavis like har jag ännu ej funnit. Han gaf mig mycket beröm för mitt språk, det var faṣīḥ &c."²²

Edward William Lane (1801–1876), author of the classic *Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, was in Cairo for his third and last visit to Egypt from 1842 to 1849, i.e., much the same time as Wallin. Wallin had hoped that making the acquaintance of al-Dasūqī would open doors for Lane, whose teacher and collaborator al-Dasūqī was. But Lane lived in Cairo as an Arab avoiding the local community of Europeans, in fact something Wallin also did, so these two never met in person. Orientalist scholarly interest in al-Dasūqī is ultimately based on his co-operation with Lane. It was the French Arabist Fulgence Fresnel (1795–1855) who recommended al-Dasūqī to Lane for the task of assisting in collecting, transcribing and collating the materials from which the *Arabic-English Lexicon* was to be composed.²³ Even after Lane returned to England al-Dasūqī continued to assist him by sending him extracts for the dictionary. Furthermore, al-Dasūqī composed a memoir for 'Alī Mubārak's *al-Khiṭaṭ* describing Lane's life in Cairo, a most important document for the life of Lane. There we can read:

Among those who came to us from the distant country, ... to find some of the books of lexicography and translate them into English, was the sagacious, expert and quick-witted littérateur, a man of gracious character linked with sweet virtue, distinguished among his own kind for his brilliant intellect, the outstanding Mansur Effendi, of the gentle temperament, known in his home town, London, as Mr Lane. ... on his tongue there was no solecism (lukna) nor defect ('ayb) ... [he was] eloquent as though he were an 'Adnani or Qahtani ... that he had achieved such eloquence, in spite of being a foreigner, aroused the utmost admiration.²⁴

21 On al-Dasūqī see I. Goldziher, "al-Dasūqī" in ¹⁺²*Encyclopaedia of Islam*; Крымский 1971: 156–158.

22 Wallin 1864–66 I: 292–293. The gist is: Wallin liked al-Dasūqī very much, he reminded him of al-Ṭanṭāwī. al-Dasūqī did not consider himself a fanatic, something Wallin heartily acknowledged. Nevertheless, Wallin had not so far met anyone who could be compared with al-Ṭanṭāwī. al-Dasūqī complimented Wallin on his correct Arabic.

23 Lane 1968–80 I: v.

24 Quoted in Roper 1998: 248. See also 'Ukāsha 1984 2: 324–345; Nūr 1973.

Besides Lane, al-Ḍasūqī also had as his pupils Friedrich Dieterici (1821–1903), Alfred von Kremer (1828–1889), and two Russians, Wallin's fellow student from St Petersburg, al-Ṭanṭāwī's pupil Timofejev, who had entered the diplomatic service, and N. I. Ilminskiy (1822–1891) from Kazan. According to von Kremer, "der Scheich Ibrahim-ed-Deisūki [sic], ist einer der grössten jetzt lebenden Kenner des Arabischen."²⁵ He was also wellknown for being ill-tempered and avaricious.²⁶

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At least some of the scholars of the early nineteenth century, be they Muslims or Europeans, knew how to appreciate knowledge irrespective of its sources, showed remarkable tolerance of beliefs and practices differing from their own, and were able to establish lifelong friendships across cultural, religious and political nuisances. Words penned by al-Kindī (died shortly after 870) a thousand years earlier still reverberated:

We ought not to be ashamed of appreciating the truth and of acquiring it wherever it comes from, even if it comes from races distant and nations different from us. For the seeker of truth nothing takes precedence over the truth, and there is no disparagement of the truth, nor belittling either of him who speaks it or of him who conveys it. [The status of] no one is diminished by the truth; rather does the truth ennoble all.²⁷

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²⁵ von Kremer 1863: 325.

²⁶ Wallin 1864–66 I: 381, 387; Lane 1968–80 V: xxxiv.

²⁷ al-Kindī, *Fī al-falsafa al-ūlā*, translated by A. L. Ivry in *Al-Kindī's Metaphysics*, Albany 1974, quoted in Gutas 1998: 158–159.

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