

PŪRVĀPARAPRAJÑĀBHINANDANAM
EAST AND WEST, PAST AND PRESENT

**Indological and Other Essays
in Honour of Klaus Karttunen**

EDITED BY

BERTIL TIKKANEN & ALBION M. BUTTERS

STUDIA ORIENTALIA 110

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GEORG AUGUST WALLIN: AN ORIENTALIST BETWEEN NATIONAL AND IMPERIAL ORIENTALISM

Kaj Öbrnberg

The “*East*” – what can this word mean, seeing that the world is round? Perhaps it is the same as the “*Orient*”, defined as the land to the east of the West. This is a problem in European history and, even more so, in the context of Russia. Where did Russia belong? Was it “*East*”? Was it “*West*”? Or was Imperial Russia (and why not the Soviet Union) its own “*Orient*”? The Romanticist Russian writer Alexandr Bestuzhev-Marlinskij (1797–1837) spoke of Russia as a two-faced Janus, simultaneously looking toward Europe and Asia. Definitions like these are of some consequence because, as Oliver Richon has stated:

The Orient and the Occident are then not just words but names, proper names constructing identities which become territories. The Orient becomes what lies East of the dividing line. It is a differential term which defines what is not Western. It defines the West negatively, so that the Occident as a category cannot exist without the Orient. Inversely, the Orient will then only exist from a Western vantage point. The Western surveying gaze somehow constitutes itself as Western when looking at the Orient, at the Other.²

Russia acquired Finland from Sweden in the war of 1808–1809. In March 1809, Finland was established as an autonomous Grand Duchy united with the Russian Empire. This opened Russia to the Finns; several Finns moved to pursue Oriental studies in the main seats of Oriental scholarship in Russia – Saint Petersburg, Kazan, and Moscow. One of those benefiting from Finland’s new position was Georg August Wallin (1811–1852). Born in the Åland Islands, Wallin studied Arabic, Persian, Turkish and classical languages at the Imperial

1 Sylvain Lévi as mentioned by Schwab (1984: 1). Lewis & Wigen (1997: 58) notes that “*East* is a broader and vaguer term than either *Asia* or *Orient*.” We have to conclude that speaking of the “*East*” is to speak of a more or less imaginary geography.

2 Oliver Richon as quoted by Gil Bardají (2008: 184).

Alexander University of Helsinki from 1829 to 1836 and in Saint Petersburg from 1840 to 1842. His first intention was to be enrolled at the Institute of Oriental Languages of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where diplomats and civil servants for the Russian empire were schooled. Wallin was not a tactful person; he was outspoken and undiplomatic. And the Institute decided not to accept him as a student. In the end, he was allowed to listen to lectures at both the Institute and at the University of Saint Petersburg. A key figure for his future travels was his Arabic teacher in Saint Petersburg, Shaikh Muḥammad ‘Ayyād al-Ṭanṭāwī (1810–1861), whose stories about Egypt and the Arabs aroused in Wallin a powerful desire to become acquainted *in situ* with the Arabs and Islamic culture. In 1841, Wallin was awarded a travel grant from the Imperial Alexander University in Helsinki to enable him to further his studies of Arabic dialects and acquaint himself with the doctrines of the nineteenth-century fundamentalists, the Wahhābīs, who dominated the form of Islam practiced on the Arabian Peninsula.

So it happened that in the 1840s, when Finnish academic circles, inspired by Romanticism and an awakening national spirit, were almost exclusively interested in Siberia – “the colony of Finnish humanistic disciplines”³ – one head-strong individualist would travel across the Arabian Peninsula on a camel, seeking in one Bedouin camp after another the “Noble Savage” of the Romantics.

In July 1843, Wallin set sail from Helsinki. He arrived in Egypt in December of the same year. Using Cairo as his base, he made three journeys into the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula and Sinai, during which time he established a reputation as a linguist and explorer. Throughout his stay in Cairo and during his journeys, the Nordic scholar assumed a Muslim identity – first under the name of ‘Abd al-Wālī and then, during the third journey, ‘Abd al-Maulā – as a subject of the Russian Czar hailing from Bukhara in Central Asia.

In April 1845, ‘Abd al-Wālī set out on his first desert journey. He became the first European to reach al-Jauf and Ḥā’il, whence he intended to continue to the Persian Gulf. However, circumstances (i.e. lack of money) forced him to return to Cairo via Mecca and Medina – of all places, these forbidden cities for non-Muslims. ‘Abd al-Wālī’s second trip began in December 1846. This time his destinations included the monastery of Saint Catharine in Sinai and pilgrimage sites in the Holy Land commonly revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

3 The dissertation of Timo Salminen (2003), which studies Russia and Siberia in Finnish archaeology 1870–1935, was titled *Suomen tieteelliset voittomaat* and has been translated by the author himself as “scientific lands of conquest.” The expression was coined by Johan Reinhold Aspelin (1842–1915) in 1887 (Salminen 2003: 80, 276).

His third and last desert journey began in December 1847. Travelling via Taimā' and Tabūk, 'Abd al-Maulā got as far as Ḥā'il. Here he was again forced to change his plans: instead of proceeding to Oman and Aden as intended, he had to turn north to Baghdad. Proceeding then to Persia, he visited Kermanshah, Isfahan and Shiraz before returning via Baghdad and Damascus to Egypt.

Wallin returned to Helsinki in June 1850. Following his appointment as Professor of Oriental literature, he enthusiastically began preparations for a new and even more ambitious journey to the Arabian Peninsula. He viewed his earlier journeys into the desert as mere preparations for future expeditions. The idea was that the Royal Geographical Society in London and the Imperial Russian Geographical Society in Saint Petersburg should share the costs. Problems arose when the Russians – with definite political and military goals to achieve in the 1850s – wanted Wallin to visit Kandahar, Ghazni, Kabul, Herat, Balkh, Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva in Central Asia. Wallin, however, declined this offer, as he explained in his letter in January 1852 to Count Muhlinski.

Da ich die Schwierigkeiten, die speciell mir als Unternehmer einer solchen Reise entgegneten, näher in Augenschein und Erwägung gezogen, habe ich zunächst den Umstand als das grösste Ungemach ansehen müssen, dass mir die in jenen Ländern gesprochene Volkssprache beinahe vollkommen unbekannt ist. [...] Aber es muss einem jeden einleuchten, wie schwierig, um nicht unmöglich zu sagen, es einem sein muss, mit irgend einem Nutzen für sich selbst oder die Wissenschaft ein Land zu bereisen, wo er mit dem eigentlichen Volke nicht verkehren kann, sondern auch die gefahrvoll ihm eine Reise unter solchen Umständen werden muss in Ländern, deren Einwohner vor allen andern Nationen für ihre wilde Roheit und ihren Hass gegen Fremde berüchtigt sind und ohne dies zum Theil in Religionsparteien, Schiiten und Sunniten, zertheilt sind, die sich mit blindem Fanatismus und unversöhnlicher Intoleranz einander feindselig gegenüber stehen.

[...] Auch habe ich durch den Abstecher, den ich im Jahre 1848 nach Persien gemacht, dem abgeschmackten und demoralisirten Perser-Volke, das doch in Denkungsart, Charakter und Lebensverhältnissen die grösste Verwandtschaft mit denjenigen Nationen haben muss, durch welche die jetzt vorgeschlagene Reise gehen würde, nichts als die höchste Verachtung abgewinnen können, so dass ich im Gegensatz zu der Liebe und der Achtung, mit der ich zu den edlen und ritterlichen Beduinen gehe, nur mit Missmuth und Widerwillen den Gefahren und Abenteuern unter rohen Beludschern, Afghanen und Turkomannen entgegensehe. Und wo dem Reisenden die Lust und die Hingebung fehlt, da wird er auch wenig ausrichten.⁴

4 Wallin (1905: 335–336).

While negotiations were still dragging on, Wallin died suddenly at his home in Helsinki on 23 October 1852.

It is clear that the Russians expected Wallin to comply with their request. In the words of the great Russian Orientalist V.V. Barthold (1869–1930), it was “the period in the history of Russian Orientalism when needs of scholarly Orientalism were totally sacrificed to the real or alleged interests of the national life.”⁵ As David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye has written, Russian efforts to explore, study, and understand the East have often been linked to imperial aims. Even if it is too much to say that Russian Orientalism was the compliant handmaiden of the state, there were nevertheless intimate ties between the two.⁶ All this must be seen against the backdrop of the so-called “Great Game/Bolshaja Igra” for domination over Central Asia, in which Iran in particular became one of the most important “pieces on a chessboard upon which is being played out a game for the domination of the world.”⁷ The “Great Game” in Central Asia extended to the Arabian Peninsula, with some European Orientalist-*cum*-imperial agents traveling amongst the tribes. While in Cairo, Wallin had met several fellow-students from Saint Petersburg or Kazan who were on more or less official commissions, the most renowned among them being Il'ia Berezin (1819–1896) and Wilhelm Dittel (1816–1848).

It has been suggested that also Wallin was involved in this gathering of information, though surprisingly not for the Russians but for Muḥammad 'Alī, the de facto ruler of Egypt. The British archaeologist David George Hogarth (1862–1927), author of *The Penetration of Arabia* (published in 1904) and head of the Arab Bureau in Cairo during World War I (serving in this capacity as the boss of Lawrence of Arabia and Gertrude Bell, among others), has concocted an imaginative agent-story in which Wallin plays a leading role. According to Hogarth, Muḥammad 'Alī (who had plans for the Peninsula) sent Wallin as his special envoy to find out about the relative strength of rival powers in Arabia led by 'Abdallāh ibn al-Rashīd and Faiṣal ibn Sa'ūd. Hogarth writes: “In view of all the facts, one can hardly doubt that this distinguished scholar, though he had all the curiosity of an explorer who travels for the sake of pure science, was in fact commissioned by [Muḥammad 'Alī] to make a report on the rising power of ['Abdallāh ibn al-Rashīd].”⁸ Wallin kept meticulous diaries, but there is *almost* no evidence for these allegations. Almost none because, in a letter from Cairo

5 Quoted in Andreeva (2002: 175).

6 Schimmelpenninck van der Oye (2010: 9–10).

7 George N. Curzon quoted in Andreeva (2002: 165).

8 Hogarth (1966 [1904]: 161).

dated 29 August 1846, Wallin writes to his teacher in Helsinki, Professor Gabriel Geitlin, about how during his travels in the desert between Maʿān and al-Jauf he was considered to be a spy sent by Muḥammad ʿAlī's son Ibrāhīm.⁹ This can, however, be explained by the fact that anything coming from Egypt (Wallin was introduced to the Beduins as an Egyptian doctor) was suspect because of the known aspirations that the Egyptians had vis-à-vis the Arabian Peninsula.

It is unfortunate that Wallin himself only managed to publish a fraction of the material he gathered on his travels; most of the scientific notes and his travel journals and letters home were left for others to publish. When one is evaluating Wallin's travels, it should be noted that most of his notes, which are in Swedish, have remained inaccessible to scholars interested in the Arabian Peninsula or the exploration of it. Wallin usually made his first version of notes on the spot in the desert, writing in Swedish but using Arabic script to disguise what he was saying. When he later had an opportunity to do it or when he was back in Cairo, these notes were then transferred into his diaries and/or letters sent back home. His early death and the linguistic barrier have relegated him to a footnote in learned studies. The two articles Wallin wrote for the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* are very disappointing for several reasons. For one, they were totally garbled by their "editors". In 1851, Wallin was still alive when his account of the journey made in 1848 appeared. It was a shock; a certain Mr. Frederick Ayrton had furnished the article with simplistic notes and explanations. Wallin's death saved him from another surprise when the second article appeared in 1854. This time Reverend G.C. Renouard had co-assumed with Ayrton the role of expert and editor, with similar results. Fortunately, the article of 1851 can be completely restored from Wallin's original manuscript and the article of 1854 can be partly restored.

As a fulfillment of D.G. Hogarth's wish in 1904 that "one might spare something of his successors' narratives to have more of Wallin's",¹⁰ a complete edition of everything that Wallin wrote (in Arabic, Swedish, English, Russian, German, French, and Latin), as well as English and Arabic translations of his work that directly deals with the Arabian peninsula, is now under preparation by the efforts of Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland (the Swedish Literary Association in Finland). These efforts will undoubtedly raise him to the status of one of the most important nineteenth-century explorers of Arabia. This, of course, does not

⁹ Wallin (1865: 262).

¹⁰ Hogarth (1966 [1904]: 171).

imply that the material already published is of no significance. Wallin was one of the first scholars to make observations on Bedouin dialects and to collect their oral poetry. Furthermore, his views on Arabic phonetics have enjoyed acclaim well into the 20th century. His third desert journey, which made Wallin the first European to cross northern Arabia, earned him respect and honours from European learned societies.

Volume one of this edition has already been published.¹¹ All altogether, it is expected to comprise at least six volumes, each comprising about 500 pages. When we have this text-critical edition of Wallin's writings in our hands, we will be able to translate into English, Arabic, and Persian portions of interest to different audiences. Interest has been voiced from Iran and especially Saudi-Arabia, where some texts are already in the process of being translated into Arabic.

Today Wallin enjoys great esteem in the Middle East. In his descriptions of Arabian conditions and geography, he was often the first – and often even the only – scholar to give references to individuals, tribes, and localities. This has earned him a high reputation in Saudi-Arabia in particular. And unlike many travellers to the region in his time, he was not a spy sent by European powers. It is also firmly believed by Muslims in the Arab world and Iran that Wallin genuinely embraced Islam and did not merely pass himself off as one of their number.

The time has come to put Wallin in his rightful place as one of the most important explorers of the Arabian Peninsula, on par with the nineteenth-century John Lewis Burckhardt (1784–1817) and Charles Montague Doughty (1843–1926), not to forget the twentieth-century paragon of Arabian travel Wilfred Thesiger (1910–2003). While Carsten Niebuhr (1733–1815) and Burckhardt wrote about the Bedouins before Wallin, he was the first European actually to get to know them and their way of life, and to live among them for a considerable time.

How then does Wallin fit with the ideas of Edward Said concerning imperialism in modern Orientalism? Although Wallin was not an imperial scholar travelling and publishing in the interests of an empire, he was still doing what he did for Europe's learned societies, giving voice to those who *had* to be represented. To give just one example, Wallin wrote in January 1851 to Dr. Norton Shaw, the Swedish-speaking secretary of the Royal Geographical Society. In a long letter, he told him that to return to the Arabian Peninsula was his supreme goal in life.

¹¹ *Georg August Wallin. Skrifter 1: Studieåren och resan till Alexandria*. Utgivare Kaj Öhrnberg & Patricia Berg. (Skrifter utgivna av Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland 730: 1) Helsingfors & Stockholm: Svenska litteratursällskapet & Atlantis 2010.

This may be realized in two different ways, and I may return either to examine as an European traveller in order to ascertain in a scientific point of view the terra incognita of the Arabs and to present the results and details of my researches to the learned people of the Occidental world and principally to the scientific societies of London; or for my own pleasure and satisfaction to seek a refuge in the wilds of the Desert from the oppressive atmosphere of Europe and to find rest and quiet from the vanities and conventional stiffness of the Inhabitants of the West and thus live as a free Beduin and at last die among the free sons of the Desert.¹²

This is quite comparable with what Edward Said wrote: “The Orientalist can imitate the Orient without the opposite being true. What he says about the Orient is therefore to be understood as description obtained in a one-way exchange: as *they* spoke and behaved, *he* observed and wrote down. His power was to have existed amongst them as a native speaker, as it were, and also as a secret writer. And what he wrote was intended as useful knowledge, not for them, but for Europe and its various disseminative institutions.”¹³

What then about the title of this paper, “Georg August Wallin: an Orientalist between national and imperial Orientalism”? The Russians wanted Wallin to play a part in their imperial Orientalist agenda; he could expect grants for his travels only if he complied with the wishes of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society and travelled to destinations that were considered to be of importance to the Empire. In Finland, there simply was no national Orientalism to speak of. As late as 1835, it was voiced at the University of Helsinki that the only Oriental language of any importance was Hebrew. There was even some consideration to abolish the chair of Oriental literature. To some of his colleagues, those who had problems understanding how good money could be given away to such enterprises, Wallin was seen as a freak and a no-good adventurer. As often happens, however, his sudden and unexpected death changed attitudes, making Wallin a national hero for some and, for me personally, a breadwinner.

12 Letter dated 13.1.1851, here presented in the translation of Dr Shaw. Wallin-archive in the National Library of Finland (not catalogued).

13 Said (1978: 160), italics in the original.

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