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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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Societas Orientalis Fennica
c/o Department of World Cultures
P.O. Box 59 (Unioninkatu 38 B)
FI-00014 University of Helsinki
FINLAND

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Hannu Juusola
University of Helsinki

To Kaj Öhrnberg, one of the few who have tackled Orientalism in Finland.

FROM ORIENTALISM TO MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES

In addition to specific disciplines such as history, linguistics, and political science, the Middle East has been studied within two broader and distinct research traditions. The first is the so-called Orientalist research tradition, which has a long-established history, especially in the European universities. The heyday of Orientalism was the nineteenth century, when research in the field went through a period of great expansion. At its core, Orientalism has involved the philological research of mainly ancient and mediaeval texts based on methods developed in Classical and Biblical studies. Oriental studies and Biblical studies have been particularly closely related. In addition to Semitic and other "Oriental" languages, religion has been very much at the centre of this research tradition, so much so that religion and culture have often seemed to be synonymous with each other. In particular this has been true in terms of Islam, which has typically been understood in the broadest possible sense, more as a culture or even civilisation than as a religion. By reading and analysing classical texts, Orientalists could "translate" the essence of "Oriental or Islamic culture" for Westerners. The modern "Orient" has played a much more limited role in this tradition than its predecessors. Sometimes the modern Orient has been relevant only to the extent that it has reflected ancient heritage in general and Biblical heritage in particular.[1]

The other main research tradition related to the Middle East is so-called Middle Eastern studies, which developed first in the USA and later also in Europe as part of area studies. After the Second World War, Middle Eastern studies have increasingly replaced Orientalism as the main tradition of studying the Middle

1 On the history of Orientalism, there are now a number of good general introductions. For details, see, for instance, Lockman 2010.

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East. While Middle Eastern studies have followed the Oriental research tradition in many respects, the emphasis has moved from culture and religion to area and society. The methodology has also expanded from philological analysis to a much broader range, with Middle Eastern studies being linked to a number of specific disciplines within the humanities and, notably, the social sciences. This has become even more evident after the so-called "area studies crisis" in the 1990s, when Middle Eastern studies along with other area-based studies were heavily criticised for their lack of methodological sophistication and unwillingness to contribute to general theoretical development. With the development of Middle Eastern studies, the living reality of the region has become much more important than in the Orientalist tradition.[2]

In Finland, research on the Middle East goes back to the establishment of the chair of *Linguarum orientalium* at *Academia Aboensis* (Turku) in 1640 as one of its first professorships. In line with general classical Orientalism, Middle Eastern research in Finland has focused on the philological study of ancient and mediaeval texts, whereas the modern Middle East has always received much less attention. There have always been important exceptions, however, such as Georg August Wallin (1811–1852), professor of Oriental Literature at Helsinki University. Wallin was one of the early European explorers of the Arabian Peninsula and a pioneer of Arabic dialectology.[3] German influences have also been especially evident in the classical Finnish Orientalist research tradition in terms of choice of research topics, methodology, and even theoretical constructions.[4] What Edward Said wrote about German Orientalism is very much true of the Finnish tradition as well:

> Moreover, the German Orient was almost exclusively a scholarly, or at least classical, Orient: it was made the subject of lyrics, fantasies, and even novels, but it was never actual, the way Egypt and Syria were actual for Chateaubriand, Lane, Burton, Disraeli, or Nerval.[5]

Not surprisingly, alongside their actual "serious" philological or linguistic work, from early on Finnish Orientalists have had a habit of writing more popular articles and books about the history, religion, literature, and art of their specific

2 For the development of Middle Eastern studies and the relationship between Middle Eastern studies and various other disciplines, see Teti 2007; Valbjørn 2004; Tessler, Nachtwey & Banda 1999.

3 On the history of Finnish research on the Middle East from various angles and discipline backgrounds, see Palva 2001; Sakaranaho 2010; Karttunen 2011.

4 Isotalo 1994; 1995.

5 Said 1978: 19.

area, as well as translating literature from their target culture into Finnish and Swedish.[6]

One of the main characteristics of the Finnish research tradition has been its evident conservatism. The shift from the Oriental research tradition to Middle Eastern studies has been notably slow. In this respect, the situation differs from other Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, and Denmark), where specific and often inter-disciplinary Middle Eastern studies programs have been established in recent decades. In Finland, of course, the Middle East has been studied within various other disciplines, such as anthropology and political science, but in the only academic institute in the country where one can concentrate solely on the Middle East,[7] emphasis has been strongly placed on philological studies. In the training of new scholars, the reading and analysis of classical texts and cultural (i.e. religious) studies still play a major role. There have even been more or less conscious attempts to exclude sociological and anthropological research from proper Orientalist research on the Middle East. For instance, Hilma Granqvist's (later classic) study on Palestinian marriage conditions was excluded from the field in the mid-1930s when its scientific value was denied by then-Professor of Oriental Literature, Dr Aapeli Saarisalo. Consequently, Dr Granqvist was not granted a Docentship at the University.[8]

Regarding the nineteenth-century European Orientalist tradition, Lockman notes:

> For Sacy as for many of the new breed of modern Orientalist scholars who came after him, the key to scholarly understanding of the Orient (as of other civilizations) was philology, the historical analysis and comparison of languages, pursued largely through the study of written texts, which, it was believed, could yield unique insights into the timeless essence of a civilization.[9]

He further points out:

> Indeed, philological training was often deemed all that was necessary to achieve a profound understanding of what this subset of Orientalists regarded as their object of study: Islamic civilization. As a result, the methods and approaches forged by emerging new disciplines from the mid-nineteenth century onward, including anthropology, sociology, economics, and "scientific"

6 See also Kantokorpi 1984a: 59 ff.

7 The current name of the institute is the Department of World Cultures (University of Helsinki), which also includes other non-European cultures. Earlier it was named the Institute for Asian and African Studies.

8 Isotalo 1995; Kantokorpi 1984a: 58; Isotalo 2009: 31–32.

9 Lockman 2010: 68.

> history, were often deemed irrelevant, even misleading, when applied to this segment of humanity.[10]

These words could largely describe Finnish Middle Eastern studies much later than the nineteenth century, probably even today. This, of course, does not mean that the research has not been of high quality.

THE ORIENTALISM DEBATE IN FINLAND OR LACK OF IT

The Orientalism debate began many years before 1978, when Edward Said published his classic study *Orientalism*, which considerably stimulated the debate and made it much more widely known both within academia and outside it. The early critiques came primarily from the political-economy perspective. As would be the case with later critiques, the main objection was the assumption that Islam is a meaningful unit of historical and sociological study that defines everything in terms of "Islamic civilisation".[11] In general, it is safe to say that the Orientalism debate has mainly bypassed Finland, at least in terms of Middle Eastern studies; the entire discourse has very much been ignored within the Finnish Middle Eastern studies community. The majority of researchers in Finland have gone on with their work as if nothing has changed. It is revealing that Said's *Orientalism* was only translated into Finnish in 2011, more than 30 years after its original publication. It has been argued that the Orientalism debate also did not reach Sweden, even though Said's book was translated into Swedish already in 1993.[12] Even though both countries have long-established traditions in classical Oriental research, it was not felt that such criticism applied to the Nordic field of Orientalism.

In his extensive history of Asian studies in Finland, Professor Klaus Karttunen touches upon the question of Orientalism only in passing and explicitly leaves "post-colonial" discourse outside of the focus of his work. According to Karttunen, Said found signs of clashes between cultures and worldviews when they were, in actual fact, more of a question of prejudices related to social classes. He further argues that tracking Orientalist features in the history of earlier research is tantamount to a "trendy man-hunt", even though Said's criticism was also necessary in its own time.[13] Karttunen's comments probably reflect a common attitude among Finnish scholars. Saidian criticism may have been relevant in its time, but it is

10 Lockman 2010: 68.
11 For the Orientalism critics before Said's *Orientalism*, see Lockman 2010: 149–182.
12 Hübinette 2002: 5–6.
13 Karttunen 2011: xi–xii.

not something one need track in the history of Finnish research, and there is no need to seriously re-evaluate Orientalist research in light of the criticism. In this context, it is important to bear in mind that the area studies crisis also did not induce a major re-evaluation among the Finnish Middle East scholars community. In general, it has been typical of the Finnish Orientalist tradition to refrain from discussing the theoretical basis of the studies.[14]

Another important reason for the omission of Orientalist criticism in Finland is probably the fact that Edward Said asserted that Orientalism is mainly but not exclusively a "British and French cultural enterprise".[15] Given the fact that the Finnish research tradition has been closely linked to the German tradition, it may have been felt that criticism is not related to Finnish Orientalism. The absence of a colonial history in Finland may have further strengthened this attitude. Here again, it is interesting that also in Sweden, scholars have maintained that Sweden was an exception (with a nonappearance of Orientalist attitudes).[16]

There are, however, some exceptions to the general avoidance of the Orientalism debate in Finland. Notably, in his 1981 book entitled *Lähi-idän solmut* ("Middle East knots"), Jussi Aro (Professor of Semitic Languages 1965–1983) briefly notes Edward Said's *Orientalism*. According to Aro, *Orientalism* is highly subjective and it is written in a disordered style; therefore it has been easy for critics to demonstrate flaws in it.[17] Nevertheless, Aro also admits that Said had good reason to be resentful of clearly racist ideas that appear in classical Orientalist discourse.[18] Importantly, Aro understands Orientalism criticism rather narrowly: the question is only about negative, culture-imperialist or racist attitudes towards Islam and Islamic peoples. In line with the general Orientalist tradition, which is very much preoccupied with religion, Aro does not discuss its essentialism. As explored below, however, several scholars have analysed Orientalist themes in the writings of Finnish Orientalists.

ORIENTALISM IN FINLAND

There are relatively many studies on Orientalist research history in Finland, but surprisingly little has so far been written about the topic in terms of Orientalists' attitudes towards the "Orient". The main focus has been on the history of academic

14 This was already noted by Kantokorpi 1984a: 58.
15 Said 1978: 4.
16 Hübinette 2002: 5–6.
17 Aro 1981: 192–193.
18 Aro 1981: 193–198. Mikko Vehkavaara (1994) has also analysed the Orientalism debate in an article written in Finnish. His article is not specifically related to Finnish Orientalism, however.

research as such, whereas popular writings, itineraries, and the like have received little attention. Hanna Pirinen has analysed Palestine descriptions (both literary and artistic) by Finnish Orientalists from the mid-nineteenth century until 1917, when the British first occupied Palestine.[19] In her study, Pirinen convincingly shows how the writings typically follow general European Orientalist models, including descriptions of romantic scenery and lamentations about the current state of decline from a historically great past. As is common elsewhere, these writers nevertheless admit that the land could be more productive if it were cultivated with modern techniques. In other words, European colonisation is needed to restore the previous glory of the Holy Land.[20]

Otso Kantokorpi has analysed the popular writings of two seminal figures in early Finnish Orientalism, the Assyriologist Knut Tallqvist (1865–1949) and his student Harri Holma (1886–1954), in light of general Orientalist criticism. In line with his well-known European colleagues (such as Theodor Nöldeke), Harri Holma utilised then-common theories of national character and spirit in his analysis of "Semitic peoples". According to Holma, the national character of Semitic peoples also manifests itself in the syntax of Semitic languages.[21] He also subscribed to the standard Orientalist notion of Islam as an essentialist entity that is immune to progress, which leads to the fatalism and submission of the Muslims.[22] Not surprisingly, this is linked to the etymologies of relevant Arabic terms, such as *muslim* from the verb *aslama* 'resign oneself' (to the will of God).[23] Such ideas were commonplace at the time, and it is no wonder that they are encountered with Finnish Orientalists, too. More surprising, perhaps, is the fact that Holma's main book on Islam was used as a university course book even into the 1980s. By contrast, Knut Tallqvist's popular writings give a more nuanced and less-stereotyped view of the Orient.[24]

Other scholars who have analysed classical Finnish Orientalism include Kaj Öhrnberg, Anniina Palomurto, and Riina Isotalo. Öhrnberg has written repeatedly on Orientalist themes, especially the idea of the "Noble Savant", in the writings of the great Finnish explorer Georg August Wallin (1811–1852).[25] To my knowledge, Öhrnberg is also the only person in Finland who has lectured on the Orientalism

19 Pirinen 2009.
20 Pirinen 2009: 109.
21 Kantokorpi 1984a: 66–67.
22 Kantokorpi 1984a: 66–67.
23 See Halliday 2003: 205–207.
24 Kantokorpi 1984a: 64–65; Kantokorpi has also analysed Finnish itineraries to North Africa (between the 1920s and the 1950s) in light of the Orientalism debate (see Kantokorpi 1984b).
25 See, for example, Öhrnberg 1984; 2011.

debate at the university level. Anniina Palomurto has dealt with the description of the "East" in European Orientalism and, in this context, she has also linked Georg August Wallin's itineraries with the general nineteenth-century Orientalist tradition.[26] Riina Isotalo has written on Finnish Orientalism as it is reflected in the works of anthropologists Edward Westermarck and Hilma Granqvist, as well as more generally in the early twentieth century.[27] In her analysis, "Finnish classical Orientalism seems structurally uniform with European discourse".[28]

The bulk of Finnish Middle Eastern studies done later in the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century consist of philological studies. Only in recent decades has research on the Middle East expanded as part of growing interest in Islam.[29] The great political significance of the Middle East – along with the importance of oil, protracted conflicts, and Islamic radicalism – has also had an impact on Finnish research on the Middle East. While earlier popular writings about the Middle East consisted of romantic itineraries, during recent decades scholars have begun to explain the Middle East and Islam to the wider public. Especially since the 1970s, a number of such books have appeared, while itineraries also reveal writers mostly abandoning the earlier trend towards romanticism and taking a more realistic attitude.

It is interesting that these writings in many regards still attest to the classical Orientalist discourse, even though one very rarely encounters a negative attitude towards the Middle East or its inhabitants. Some exceptions do exist. Notably, Henri Broms has expressed highly stereotyped opinions about Middle Eastern peoples, emphasising the dichotomy between the West and the "East".[30]

The most salient Orientalist tenet of contemporary writings is the frequent "Islamisation" of the Middle East.[31] The adjective "Islamic" is consistently attached to almost any aspect of history or culture(s) of the region, and Islam appears as an important and independent explanatory factor. Furthermore, Islam is still commonly understood in the broadest possible sense. Jussi Aro devotes a whole chapter to "Islamic society" in his 1967 book *Arabialainen kulttuuri* ("Arabic culture").[32] Here one finds several typical elements of the discourse, including the anticipated existence of a single Islamic society. The chapter contains a

26 Palomurto 1992: 238.
27 Isotalo 1994; 1995.
28 Isotalo 2009: 30.
29 See Sakaranaho 2010.
30 See Broms 2003; Wiio & Broms 1991.
31 For this common feature in the Orientalist discourse, see Sami Zubaida's excellent recent book *Beyond Islam: A New understanding of the Middle East* (2011).
32 Aro 1967: 208–230.

highly essentialist description of this society and its inhabitant, "the Muslim". A genuine Muslim is a fatalist, taking everything from the hand of Allah.[33] His attitude towards women ranges between extreme admiration on one hand and exploitation on the other.[34] He lives in an "Islamic city", and as a child he was wont to frolic outdoors, mostly without clothes.[35] It is not particularly surprising to find such points in a book written about ten years before Said's *Orientalism*.

At least to some extent, however, similar ideas have outlived the Orientalism debate of the past few decades. Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, the current Professor of Arabic and Islamic studies at the University of Helsinki, writes: "Striving for beauty is clearly visible in Islamic society [...] In the media, this worship of beauty in Islamic society is blurred by the more stricter forms of Islam."[36] In addition to the concept of Islamic society, one encounters here a romantic picture of a society specifically striving for beauty, which is apparently different from other societies in this respect (?). Furthermore, the striving for beauty in Islamic society is implicitly explained a few lines below by the fact that Islam does not have a negative attitude towards beauty and pleasures.

Throughout the material, Islam is presented as a culture that is in line with Western culture. Helena Allahwerdi begins her introduction to Islam *Islamin porteilla* ("At the gates of Islam") by stating that "Islam is a cultural system (*kulttuurijärjestelmä*) that opens the gates to the way of life of approximately one billion people."[37] In his book entitled *Islamin käsikirja* ("Handbook of Islam"), Hämeen-Anttila criticises Samuel Huntington's well-known thesis of the clash of civilisations, and more specifically, his idea of an unavoidable conflict between the civilisations, but not the existence of Islamic culture or civilisation as such.[38]

As opposed to many other scholars, Heikki Palva and Irmeli Perho explicitly acknowledge the problem of "Islamic" in the context of Islamic culture. In a foreword to an extensive handbook entitled *Islamilainen kulttuuri* ("Islamic culture"),[39] they write that many of the cultural traits described in the book (such as astronomy, medicine, music, or bazaars) are not directly linked with Islam. Yet, they argue, it is even more difficult to say which cultural trait is bound to Islam and which is not; therefore, it is legitimate to include them all under the

33 Aro 1967: 229.
34 Aro 1967: 226.
35 Aro 1967: 219, 223.
36 Hämeen-Anttila 2011: 211. Translation mine.
37 Allahwerdi 1992: 15. Translation mine.
38 See Hämeen-Anttila 2004: 230–241.
39 In a foreword to his *Arabialainen kulttuuri* ("Arabic culture"), discussed above, Aro writes that Islamic culture would be a more appropriate term for the book (1967: 7).

rubric of "Islamic". Despite some hesitation, the writers seem to subscribe to the long-established tradition according to which it is indeed Islam that is essential to those regions.[40] By contrast, Western history, art, and so on are very rarely considered "Christian", even though Christian churches have undeniably played a major role in European history and culture and Western art is heavily imbued with Christian themes.[41] It is also noteworthy that other recent handbooks on non-European cultures published in Finland, such as *Japanin kulttuuri* ("Japanese culture"),[42] *Intian kulttuuri* ("Indian culture")[43], and *Kiinan kulttuuri* ("Chinese culture"),[44] are based on geographical definitions rather than religious ones.[45] This is certainly not a coincidence, but reflects a generally held perception that only in the case of the MENA area (Middle East and North Africa) or greater Middle East is it religion that defines the essence of this area, as opposed to other global regions.

All in all, this short analysis of recent Finnish popular writings on the Middle East clearly suggests that Islam is still commonly understood as defining a whole culture and/or society. There seems to be a strange contradiction with this, however. On one hand, scholars nowadays stress that Islamic culture is not a monolithic entity. On the other, they still maintain the concept, even though it is hard to find unity in diversity and the concept "Islamic" adds little to the understanding of distinct phenomena.

The surprising resilience of the Orientalist approach is also reflected by the fact that the current politics of the Middle East are analysed within the frame of Islam. A prime instance is Hämeen-Anttila's *Islamin käsikirja*,[46] which combines present political developments in Iraq, Iran, and elsewhere with a general introduction to the doctrines of Islam, underlying the assumption that in the case of the modern Middle East politics one indeed needs a manual on Islam.

As was shortly noted above, highly negative neo-Orientalist attitudes towards Islam (in line with Bernard Lewis, Martin Kramer, or Daniel Pipes) are practically unattested in the writings of Finnish Middle East scholars. Islam is never depicted as a threat or enemy of the West, and Islamic radicalism is not interpreted as a "return" of an authentic Islam. Instead, most typical has been a

40 See Palva & Perho 1998: 9.
41 See Zubaida 2011: 23 ff.
42 Fält et al. 2006.
43 Parpola 2005.
44 Huotari & Seppälä 1990.
45 The only other non-regional definition occurs with Jewish Culture (Harviainen & Illman, *Juutalainen kulttuuri* 1998). Yet, in that case, the editors of the book have defined Judaism in the Zionist sense as an ethnic group or nation. See Harviainen & Illman 1998: 7–8.
46 Hämeen-Anttila 2004.

sympathetic presentation of Islamic history, culture, and religion. There has been a clear tendency to emphasise moderate tendencies over radical ones. While the essentialist traits of the Orientalist discourse have remained, there is no doubt that this is connected to the absence of a proper Orientalist discourse in Finland.

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