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van Dalen, D.; Wieggers, G.

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Wise Men from the East

Dorrit van Dalen and Gerard Wiegers

“Father, you do not know what is happening in the world with the wars between Christians, one against the other. Ask some of the merchants, who will tell you about the present situation. A foreigner cannot travel between countries with different languages and dialects if he does not carry an authenticated document of certification and attestation, and [even] if he possesses the document of certification, when war has broken out between the nations, it is no help, because the soldiers do not know or do not look at it, but speak roughly. All these wars are caused by differences of religion. [...] God willing, I will come to you this summer, without fail, because we have heard that the Venetians have made peace with the Turks, and if that is so, travel by sea will be possible, which costs less, but is still a great hazard.”¹

That is what Niqūlaūs ibn Būṭrus wrote in July 1646 to his father in Istanbul. Ibn Būṭrus, a Christian from the Ottoman capital, had already spent four years in the Republic of the United Netherlands, where he copied and amended dozens of Oriental books for various linguists. Arabic was his mother tongue, and he also wrote and read Persian and Turkish. He was one of the native speakers who made a significant contribution to the study of Eastern languages in the Republic, and to the collections of Oriental manuscripts in the university libraries at Leiden and Amsterdam in particular. A number of these are described in this article. They are also highlighted in this digital exhibition, which comprises a selection from the exhibition “Wise Men from the East”, which itself can be seen from 24 June to 18 September in the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam.

Exchange and rapprochement

Ibn Būṭrus did want to go home again after four years—but that was not easy. The Thirty Years' War, gangs of marauding soldiers and numerous privateers on the Mediterranean made travelling between Europe and the East a risky business. Still, a lot of travelling was done, especially to the Republic, which was experiencing its Golden Age. As a centre of trade in Europe, Amsterdam attracted numerous merchants and diplomats, including from the Middle East and North Africa. Some of them came into contact with scientists who were studying Arabic, Persian, Armenian or other eastern languages.

Thanks to this personal exchange, Dutch scholars developed a more realistic view of the Middle East and the world of Islam. The common image at the beginning of the seventeenth century came from the time of the Crusades and was informed by a mixture of fear and wonder. The stereotypes about the “Saracens” or “Mahometans” often contradicted each other. The “Mahometans” were supposed to be, fabulously civilised, horribly cruel, wise and ridiculous, and upstanding and unreliable—all at the same time. It was also taken as a given that their religion was irrational and had been founded by an imposter. Thanks to the increasing contact, such prejudices underwent adjustment in the course of the seventeenth century. In 1705, an orientalist from Utrecht, Adriaan Reland (1676-1718), published, in several languages, his “Discourse on the Religion of the Mahometans”. In it, he examined why Islam had so many followers and what its inner logic was. He based himself on Arabic and Spanish sources, which he had read in the original.

¹ Letter from Niqūlaūs ibn Būṭrus. Persian manuscripts 913-112. John Rylands Library, University of Manchester. Translated by Hilary Kilpatrick and Gerald J. Toomer, 'Niqūlāwus al-Ḥalabī (c.1611-c.1661): a Greek Orthodox Syrian copyist and his letters to Pococke and Golius', *Lias. Journal of Early Modern Intellectual Culture and Its Sources*, vol. 43 no. 1, 2016

The growing interest in Eastern languages in the Republic had everything to do with trade and politics. Ottoman merchants (often Jews and Armenians) sold their silk and raw materials here, while Dutch ships sailed to the East with dyed cloth and other products. In international relations, the Protestant Republic and the Ottoman Empire had a common enemy in Catholic Austria-Hungary and Spain. With an eye on their mutual interests, the Moroccan sultan Zidan al-Nasir signed a “treaty of friendship and free trade” with the Republic in 1610. The Ottoman Porte in Istanbul did the same in 1612.

Against this background, the possibilities to study eastern languages at the new University of Leiden increased. Well-known scholars such as Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540-1609), Thomas Erpenius (1584-1624) and Jacob Golius (1596-1667) dedicated themselves to this study. They helped administrators from The Hague with the translation of letters and messages from the Ottoman Empire and Morocco, but their own interests lay elsewhere. In the beginning, it was for them especially a matter of getting a better understanding of the Bible and its history. They learned Arabic and even Ethiopian in order to gain a better understanding of Hebrew and of two other Old Testament languages: Aramaic and Samaritan. All these languages are mutually related and belong to the Semitic family of languages.

In addition, they were driven by a great curiosity towards Arab writings on algebra, astronomy, philosophy and other sciences, whether or not translated from, or building on, works from ancient Greece. With the help correspondents in the East they found parts of works of Aristotle, Ptolemy, Galen and others that had been lost in the Greek, but that had been preserved in Arabic translation. For someone such as Golius, who was also a mathematician, that was the initial motivation to devote himself to Arabic.

‘Abd al-‘Aziz

How did scholars and students manage to learn a language which was totally unknown here? Initially there were no Arabic textbooks, so they had to make do with Latin translations of the Koran and Arabic translations of some books of the Bible. Comparing originals and translations was the most important method of learning, but that left many questions unanswered—questions that could be answered by native speakers who were staying here.

One of them was Muhammad ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, a young Muslim from Marrakesh, who in 1609 came to Amsterdam as Secretary to an Embassy of the Moroccan Sultan. In November of that year he met there the Mennonite Jan Theunisz there. Theunisz was learning Arabic, and wanted to become a lecturer at Leiden University. Theunisz invited the young man to stay with him all winter, until the return trip by sea would be less dangerous. In those four months Theunisz, by his own account, learned far more Arabic than he otherwise could have done in years.

Among the documents that Theunisz left behind are five big thick books, parts of a list that Theunisz built up of Arabic words and concepts. This was primarily intended for private use, because the translations he drew up are almost as often in Dutch as in Latin. From the different colours of ink it can be seen that the list was constantly being updated. In many cases it still has to be verified that a given explanation comes from ‘Abd al-‘Aziz and has not been taken from the Koran or a dictionary. This is how Theunisz noted down the Arab word *khayma*: ‘Reijstenten. Mooren in Barberien versetten en sloopen van deen in dander plaats tgansche jaar door’. (tents for travel. Moors in Barbary replace [them, DvD] and walk from one place to th’other all year round.) ‘Abd al-‘Aziz thus also passed along to Theunisz some ethnographic knowledge. It seems that in other places ‘Abd al-‘Aziz clarified some things in quite some detail. For example, the explanation of *safaha* is, “met malcander versoenen slaande de handen tsamen” (to reconcile with one another, clasping hands together) and of *daraja*, “hippelen, als de vogels met wieken slaan” (to hop, to flap wings like birds do).

The young Moroccan was also on good terms with Theunisz's friends, who shared his linguistic interests. For two of them 'Abd al-'Aziz made beautiful copies of an Arabic translation of the four gospels (one for the Presbyterian Englishman John Paget, the other possibly for Dionysius Vossius, son of the famous Gerard). For Theunisz himself he copied an Arabic prayer book and in saying farewell he gave him his own Koran. This was quite useful for language study: usually the short vowels, although they are of great importance for the grammar, are not written in Arabic, but they are in the Koran. In addition, the gift served to confirm the friendship between the two men. That friendship is also evident in a book that Theunisz wrote after the departure of his guest about their discussions on the similarities and differences between Islam and Christianity. Each of them was really concerned about the salvation of the other, but respected the other's faith. Theunisz, for example, reproduces with a lot of respect Abd al-Aziz's account of the Prophet Muhammad.

Al-Ḥajarī

Aḥmad b. Qāsim al-Ḥajarī (ca. 1570-1640 or later) or Diego Bejarano, his Christian name, was born in Hornachos in the Spanish province of Extremadura. He was a Morisco, that is, a descendant of Muslims who were forcibly converted to Roman Catholicism. After his flight from Spain in 1599 he served as translator and secretary to Sultan Zaydan in Marrakesh. At the end of his life he settled with his family in Tunisia, where it is thought he also died. Al-Ḥajarī wrote Spanish-language poetry, of which fragments have been preserved. He also translated works about warfare and astronomy from Spanish to Arabic, and acquired knowledge of the holy books of Islam, Judaism and Christianity. He also developed a great interest in the relations among the religions.

In 1611 al-Ḥajarī made a trip to France, where he met the Leiden-based scholar Thomas Erpenius, and in 1613 he spent a few months in the Republic, probably at Erpenius's house. He noted down his impressions in a travelogue from 1637, under the title "The voyage of the meteorite to meet its loved ones." That work has been lost, but fortunately he made a summary entitled "Kitāb nāṣir al-din 'alā 'l-kāfirīn al-qawm" ["The book of the ones that the religion successfully defends against the Jews and Christians"]. The emphasis is on his discussions with Christians and Jews in Spain, France and the Republic, but in addition he outlines a colourful picture of manners and customs, and of his own ups and downs. That is how a French girl fell in love with him, and it cost him a lot of trouble to resist what he, as a pious Muslim, must have seen as a forbidden love. He admired the beauty of Amsterdam and had sympathy for the Dutch, who just like Muslims turned against the Catholic "worshippers of images". He rejected the belief in the holy trinity, and he had trouble with the dogs that ran freely around in the churches.²

Al-Ḥajarī discussed Islam with Erpenius and other European scholars, and imparted to them his knowledge of the Arabic grammatical tradition. He copied many Arabic manuscripts that can now be found in libraries at Leiden, Cambridge and Oxford. He probably stayed a few months with Erpenius at Leiden, where he spoke with numerous scholars, including physicians. At the court of Marrakesh there was at the time a keen interest in European science, and that led to the translation into Arabic of a number of works. Al-Ḥajarī was part of that movement.

In Leiden al-Ḥajarī met various scholars. In any case, after returning to Marrakesh he was good friends with Golius, Erpenius's successor as Professor of Eastern Languages. The university library at Leiden says their relationship came about thanks to a copy of the *Book on the Making of Medicines* by the 12th-century Jewish physician Yunus b. Isḥāq b. Biklarish al-Isra'ili, who put in alphabetical order the names of hundreds of substances—mainly plants, but other materials, too—classifying

² Pieter S. van Koningsveld, Qasim al-Samarrai, Gerard A. Wieggers (eds.), *Aḥmad b. Qāsim al-Ḥajarī. Kitāb nāṣir al-dīnālā 'l-qawm al-kāfirīn (The supporter of religion against the infidel)*. General introduction, critical edition and annotated translation. Reedited, revised, and updated in the light of recent publications and the primitive version found in the hitherto unknown manuscript preserved in Al-Azhar. Madrid, CSIC, 2015.

them and indicating their medicinal uses. Al-Hajarī went to quite some trouble to get hold of a copy for Golius and, with the help of another copy, added to it some pages that were missing. He also added the Spanish names of many plants. Golius paid in such cases for the purchase of the book, but nothing in the letters indicates that al-Hajarī asked for any money for his efforts. It was a matter of scientific cooperation between equals. For his part, al-Hajarī wrote to Golius: “You mentioned that you have a text about the declination of the sun. If it is possible for you to translate that into Arabic or Spanish, then that would give me great pleasure.”³

Conics

“From the comments of the historians it is well known that for the Arabs and Saracens it was sometimes the studies of the fine arts that shone forth, and sometime the mathematical fields.” Thus wrote Friedrich Risner, who in Basel in 1572 published a Latin edition of an eleventh-century Arabic manuscript on refraction.⁴ This conviction was fed by all the Arabic works that Western scholars were reading. It is in this connection that Golius made a discovery that was of great significance for European mathematicians. In 1626, just after he was appointed Professor of Arabic and Mathematics at Leiden, he was granted leave by the University trustees to go to Aleppo as chancellor to the Dutch consul. He would be away until 1629, and during that time he also stayed in Istanbul. The generous policy of the University enabled him to improve his Arabic and scour Ottoman book markets.

In Aleppo he bought a manuscript whose value he immediately recognised, being a mathematician: books 5, 6, and 7 of *Kitab Ablunius fi-l-makhrutat*, that is, “The Book of Apollonius on the Conica”, in the Arabic translation by Thābit b. Qurra (ca. 834-901). Only the first four books of the original Greek version of the work by Apollonius of Pergae (3rd century BC) on conic sections, ellipses, parabolas, and hyperbolas, had been preserved, and these had been known in Latin for about 60 years. The last four books in Greek had probably already been lost. The eighth book was never found, but in Aleppo Golius discovered a good Arabic translation of the other three. He bought the manuscript and had a copy made there by a certain Aḥmad al-Gulshānī, to which he himself added the geometric figures.

He took both copies to Leiden in 1629. That came to the attention of René Descartes, who lived in the Republic and who approached Golius in 1630 to learn more about the Conic sections. Other mathematicians—Fermat, Pascal and Halley—also benefitted from the *Conica*, even before a Latin translation was available. From their exchange of letters it appears that in the Netherlands Golius also had a copy made by Niqūlaūs ibn Būṭrus, but that has been lost. The copy that he bought in Aleppo is now in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, and the copy made by al-Gulshani is in the university library at Leiden.

ShahinKandi [note: no space in the original]

Golius could also sometimes turn for help in Leiden to copyists who spoke Turkish, Persian or Arabic as their mother tongue or a second language. For instance, Shahin Kandi was an Armenian Christian from Aleppo, who came to the Republic in 1657. If he had come for business, like most Armenians in Amsterdam, then that had gone badly: Kandi was in impoverished circumstances and sought Golius’s help. The Professor negotiated for him a contract with the trustees of Leiden University, and they—“also hy een seer goede hant heeft van schrijven in ‘t Arabisch, Persiaens endeTurckx” (since he has an excellent hand in writing Arabic, Persian and Turkish) decided to commission him to copy “voor de Bibliotheque der Universiteyt eenige considerabele boucken ofte geschriften, die in geene publycque Bibliotheque van het christenrijck,voor sooveel bekend is, gevonden werden’ (for the Library of the

³ Letter from al-Hajarī, 1624. Or. 1228-32, university libraries, Leiden.

⁴ F. Risner, *Opticae thesaurus: Alhazeni Arabislibrisseptem*, Basel 1572. Translation of the book on refraction by Ibn al-Haytham (= Alhazenus, ca. 965-1041).

University some important books or manuscripts, as have not been found in any library of the Christian world, as far as is known).⁵

Although Kandi was far from having beautiful handwriting, he got the very reasonable salary of five guilders a week. Over a period of at least a year, he transcribed many dozens of books, including some substantial tomes.

Ibn Būṭrus and Levinus Warner

As noted above, Niqūlaūs ibn Būṭrus was eager to return to Istanbul in 1646, but he left only in 1647. In Istanbul he met an old friend: Levinus Warner, a German who had studied in Leiden and had departed for the East some years earlier—for good, it would turn out. Warner soon learned how the book market in Istanbul worked, and he knew what various books were worth. After his death he would leave almost a thousand manuscripts to Leiden University, including the most beautiful copies of Eastern books that can now be found in Dutch collections. They were acquired with the help of ibn Būṭrus and other friends, especially Muslims: negotiating the price of books or of the work of copying and correcting work was difficult for Warner as a foreigner. For Turks themselves it was not easy either, by the way.

Ibn Būṭrus corresponded with Golius about the books he was trying to get for him. He wrote to him that he was doing his best, but that things would not go quickly: “You know that the land of the Turks is not like the land of the Christians, where someone answers as soon as you ask a question.”⁶ It is thanks especially to the many years of collaboration among Warner, Ibn Būṭrus and others that the University of Leiden, for example, has a copy of the *Shahname*, the famous Persian royal epic, with dozens of miniature illustrations, and a beautiful Koran with a translation into old-Anatolian Turkish in between the Arab lines of text, as well as illustrations in blue and gold leaf.

⁵ Resolutions of the Trustees, 1657. Ac1 Inv. nr 25. 1228-32, university libraries, Leiden.

⁶ Letter from Niqūlaūs ibn Būṭrus, Persian manuscripts 913, 91. John Rylands Library, University of Manchester