
van Leeuwen, R.

DOI
10.1086/693330

Publication date
2017

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
History of Humanities

Citation for published version (APA):
In the history of Oriental studies in Europe, between the era of the crusades and the twentieth century, we can perceive at least two major shifts. The first was the relocation of the practicing of Oriental studies from Rome and the Catholic Church to the new northern European centers of learning, such as Paris, Leiden, and Cambridge, from the end of the sixteenth century onward. The second was the more gradual transition from scholarly discourses and visions, which were entwined with religion, toward a more secular attitude in which, in spite of clear religious disagreements, a certain measure of objectivity was strived for and a broader range of religious and nonreligious sources was collected, edited, and explored. These two shifts contributed to the formation of Oriental studies as an autonomous discipline in the course of the nineteenth century and, moreover, to the acceptance of Islam and non-European civilizations as separate fields of scholarly inquiry.

The first shift, from the domination of the church to secular institutions and universities, was related to the emergence of dissident and Protestant scholarly networks in northern Europe, in Germany, Switzerland, the Dutch Republic, and England, which expanded throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These networks no longer relied on Catholic institutions for their text material or on clerical patrons but built their own resources and relationships with each other and with informants and intermediaries abroad. Although the Protestant scholars explicitly countered “papist” discourses of Islam, this did not mean that Oriental studies were dissociated from religion. Protestant scholars, too, denounced Muhammad as a false prophet and even
as the Antichrist; but by propagating a more objective approach, they cleared the way
not only for the recognition of the positive aspects of Islam but also for a vision of the
prophet as a historical figure and a statesman.

The growth of new scholarly interests resulted in the acquisition, publication, and
translation of a more diverse corpus of material, a more systematic interest in lan-
guages, secular history, and belles lettres. Major landmarks were Thomas Erpenius’s Ar-
abic grammar (1613), Edward Pococke’s religio-historical anthology (1650), Adriaen
Reland’s compendium of Islamic doctrines (1705), Antoine Galland’s translation Mille
et une nuit (1704–17), and George Sale’s revisionist translation of the Qur’an (1734).

Although the center of Oriental studies moved to the Protestant countries, the new
trend did not pass by France unnoticed. In fact, it can be argued that new directions
were shown by such religiously dissident scholars as Guillaume Postel (1510–81) and
Isaäc Casaubon (1559–1614), who were teachers of the subsequent generation of Pro-
estant orientalists. At the turn of the eighteenth century the influential reference work
by Barthélemy d’Herbelot was published (1697), and in 1723 John Gagnier published
an edition and translation of Abu al-Fida’s history. At the end of the seventeenth cen-
tury, the French minister of trade, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, initiated an influential proj-
ect for the education of young experts in Oriental languages, the so-called jeunes de
langues, showing a new, pragmatic, interest in Eastern languages.

The various secularizing trends in Oriental studies converged at the end of the eight-
teenth century in the towering figure of Antoine-Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838),
who is often seen as the founding father of modern institutionalized and secular ori-
entalism. The career of Silvestre de Sacy coincided with a more solid institutionaliza-
tion of academic pursuits in France and new philological paradigms, but also with the
Napoleonic era and the French expeditions to North Africa, which gave him the rep-
utation of a collaborator with imperial interests. Silvestre de Sacy was born in a well-
to-do Parisian bourgeois family and from a young age dedicated himself to the study
of Oriental languages. He provided translations for the French expedition to Egypt,
and apparently as a reward in 1795 he was appointed the first director of the newly
established École des Langues Orientales, a post he retained until his death. In 1806 he
became professor at the Collège de France, of which he was appointed head adminis-
trator in 1823. In 1822 he was elected as the first president of the Société Asiatique
de Paris, a new society founded to foster the study of the Orient. Apart from these ac-
ademic posts, he was also deputy for Paris in the Corps Législatif.

All these functions would by themselves justify Silvestre de Sacy’s reputation as the
solid founder of modern orientalism, but his publications are noteworthy, too. In 1806
and 1826/27 he published two editions of an extensive Chrestomathie of Arabic texts
of various kinds, and in 1810 and 1830 he released two editions of an Arabic grammar
that could finally replace Erpenius’s grammar, which was still in use. In 1838 his standard work *Exposé de la religion druze* appeared, which is still relevant today.

Silvestre de Sacy is the subject of a timely collection of essays, *Silvestre de Sacy: Le projet européen d’une science orientaliste*, edited by Michel Espagne, Nora Lafi, and Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn. Apart from brief overviews of Silvestre de Sacy’s life and work, contributions zoom in on particular works and place them in their scholarly context. Some articles highlight biographical issues, such as his Jansenist persuasion, his attitude toward the Jews, and his portrayal by the Egyptian traveler-scholar al-Tahtawi. Others stress his importance for the formation of the corpus of Arabic *belles lettres* and his administrative accomplishments. Several essays show his significance and recognition beyond France’s borders and the role he played in the establishment of modern Oriental studies in Germany, Russia, and Italy. All contributions together reveal a man who understood the importance of language education and literary texts for modern scholarship and relations with the East and who contributed to firmly rooting orientalism in academic institutions. His importance is shown not only by his scholarly work and administrative achievements but most vividly by his many disciples who continued to spread his ideas all over Europe.

*Richard van Leeuwen*