

CHRISTIAN ARABIC STUDIES IN GERMANY DURING THE LAST 150 YEARS: A SHORT SURVEY

Carsten-Michael Walbiner

Orient-Institut der DMG, Beirut

I think I have first to explain what I mean by Christian Arabic literature before I describe the contribution of German scholars to our knowledge about that matter. In short, I am thinking of all literary products written by Christian Arabs in Arabic between the 8th and the early 20th century which include also translations from other languages¹.

The beginning of Christian Arabic literature dates back to the 8th century. During the course of time thousands of books were written which belong to this genre of Arabic literature².

Oriental Studies in Europe were for a long time nothing else than a complementary science for Christian theology and its apologetical and polemical grappling with Islam. Thus German theologian-orientalists of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries often used Christian Arabic authors to deal with Arabic language and history³.

The situation changed, when Johann Jacob Reiske, who is considered as the initiator of a scientific based Orientalism in Germany, "went ahead with the opinion that the Christian Arabic literature could not cope with that of the Muslims" as Johann Fück put it in his well known treatise about Oriental studies in Europe (Fück 1955: 123).

¹ This contradicts somehow the opinion of Georg Graf who wanted to exclude "the non-religious, as regards the subject matter neutral writings of Christians" from what he defined as Christian Arabic literature (Graf 1944: I, 3). But as most of the Christian Arabic authors produced religious and profane works as well, they considered themselves and their works as part of the intellectual life of their religious communities. This becomes evident reading prefaces, introductory formulas or final remarks. So it is very difficult to make such a division. And even Graf himself was not able to exclude the profane writings from his dealing with Christian Arabic literature.

² On the Christian Arabic literature in general cf. Graf 1944-53: V. On the Melkites cf. Nasrallah 1979-1989 and on the Maronites Breydy 1985.

³ Cf. Fück 1955: esp. 45-47, 58, 91f. As it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide the reader with a comprehensive bibliography of the research done by German scholars on Christian Arabic literature here and in the following notes only some examples are given. For the 18th century one might add to the titles mentioned by Fück *op. cit.*, the dealings of J. Fr. Rehkopf with the history of the patriarchs of Alexandria, then dedicated to Severus Ibn al-Muqaffa': *Vitae patriarcharum Alexandrinorum quinque. Specimen primum. Arabice edidit latine vertit notasque adiecit*, Lipsiae 1758; *Specimen secundum...*, Lipsiae 1759; *Animadversiones historico-criticae ad vitas patriarcharum Alexandrinorum saeculi primi et secundi*, Lipsiae, n.d. (cf. Graf 1944: II, 304). On the many publications of J. H. Callenberg (also 18th c.) see Bobzin 1995: 14-22.

In the mid-19th century when German orientalism had developed as an independent scientific subject, the opinion of Reiske was generally prevailing in dealing with Arabic literature. This becomes obvious if you turn over the leaves of the volumes of the first three or four decades of the *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* (*ZDMG*) which was for a long time the only professional journal of German orientalism and reflected — in the words of Carl Brockelmann — for nearly 40 years faithfully its whole development (Brockelmann 1922:12).

And yet the beginning was — from the point of view of those who regard the Arab culture not one-sided as an Islamic one — quite hopeful. Volume 1 of the *ZDMG*, which appeared in 1847 in Leipzig, gave way to a proper dealing with the Christian Orient. Friedrich Tuch made some “Explanations and corrections to Oriental authors”, including the Christian historians Barhebraeus (Abū l-Faraġ) and Eutychius (Saʿīd Ibn Batrīq) (Tuch 1847:57-65) and the famous Heinrich Leberecht Fleischer informed “About a Greek-Arabic Codex rescriptus of the Leipzig University Library” (Fleischer 1847:148-160). In his examination of the Arabic passages of the manuscript, which “contain fragments of a legendary vita of four monastic saints of the Greek church” (*ibid.*:150), Fleischer pointed to the grammatical, orthographic, syntactical and lexical peculiarities of “the Christian Arabism” (“des christlichen Arabismus”) (*ibid.*:155-160). Thus he gave a first and thoroughly appropriate analysis of the post-classical form of Arabic which is today commonly known as Middle-Arabic. In Volume 8 of the *ZDMG* it was again Fleischer who dealt with Christian Arabic literature by presenting a short description of the Christian Arabic manuscripts which Konstantin von Tischendorf had brought from the Orient to Leipzig in 1853 (Fleischer 1854:584-587).

But the new impulses given by Fleischer for a more detailed study of the language and literature of the Christian Arabs were not followed by other German orientalists. While Syrian studies had a permanent platform in the *ZDMG* during the first four decades of its existence and occupied a considerable space, not a single contribution was made in the same period on the Christian Arabic literature, besides the articles by Fleischer which I mentioned above. And also the “Annual report on the Oriental studies [in Germany] in 1880” makes clear, how this side of Arab culture was almost completely neglected. While a whole chapter is dedicated to Syrian studies, the “field of the Jewish and Christian history and literature on Islamic territory” is only shortly mentioned by eight lines within the chapter on Arabia and Islam (Kuhn & Müller 1883:176). Moreover most of the works quoted there are dealing with Jewish literature.

So it is right to say that Christian Arabic studies had not found their place within German orientalism in its phase of consolidation, which was the second half of the 19th century.

For the “true” orientalists — and I put true here in quotation marks — who had chosen the university career Christian Arabic literature was of no or only of minor interest. Carl Brockelmann — perhaps the most famous German orientalist all over the world — may serve as an example for that. Between 1898 and 1902 Brockelmann published the first edition of his legendary “History of the Arabic literature”. But as Brockelmann saw Arabic as “the literary language” and “the common spiritual bond” of the Islamic peoples, he had to exclude two fields “which are not directed to the whole of Arabic speakers, but only to an explicitly limited circle. These are the specific Christian and Jewish writings. These can only be treated in connection with the other Christian literatures of the Orient on the one hand and the modern Hebrew literature on the other hand” (Brockelmann 1898:2).

For the Christian Arabic literature Brockelmann then himself undertook this task. But compared with the more than 1200 pages of his “History of the [Islamic] Arabic literature” the seven and one half pages he dedicated to the Christian Arabic literature in a “History of the Christian literatures of the Orient” (Brockelmann 1909:67-74) are absolutely insufficient and reveal more his disinterest in the problem.

The treatise Anton Baumstark published in 1911 on the same subject hit the target much better⁴. It shows that the state of Christian Arabic studies at the beginning of our century allowed a more thorough dealing with that matter.

Baumstark’s treatise reflects a change which had started at the end of the 19th century. After a long period of neglect, the number of scholars who were interested in the study of Christian Arabic literature had increased remarkably⁵. Many of these scholars were clerics, but some also held Oriental professorships or were academical representatives of general philology. They encouraged the writing of dissertations “which reached into the field of the Christian Orient” (Kaufhold 1989). The formation of dealing with Christian Arabic literature as an independent scientific branch within orientalism had begun.

Important impulses for this development had come from the Near East, especially from Beirut, were the Jesuit Louis Cheikho who was one of the founders of the University of Saint Joseph worked since 1877. As a scholar Cheikho pursued especially one aim: he wanted to wake up the Christian Arabic heritage — which was mostly unknown to his fellow countrymen and European scholars — from its deep, long sleep and to increase its popularity. Therefore Cheikho published the journal *al-Mašriq* starting in 1898. Cheikho acted not only for long years as the journal’s editor, he also wrote countless articles and reviews for it. His bibliography contains the

⁴ “The Christian Arabic Literature” is dealt with on Baumstark 1911:7-36.

⁵ See for example: Steinschneider 1877; Wuestenfeld 1879; Arendzen 1897; Riedel 1900; Westphal 1901; Riedel 1902; Seybold 1904; Graf 1905; 1905a; Goussen 1909; Seybold 1912.

almost unbelievable number of more than 2000 titles (Hechaimé 1978). Many of them has to be considered as pioneer works which gave a steady base for forthcoming studies in Christian Arabic literature.

Cheikho was very well aware of the problematical nature of his task. Thus he introduced an article on Christian Arabic historiography, which appeared in July 1909 in *al-Mašriq*, with words that were not only symptomatic for the standard of knowledge at his time but are — unfortunately — to a certain degree still valid today.

“The Arabic literary productions from among the ancient Christians are still hidden in the corners of forgetfulness and many scholars do not know them at all. However, the recent discoveries brought out a lot of these monuments and even induced some (scholars) to think about the writing of the history of the literary movement among the Arab Christians” (Cheikho 1909:481).

The last remark relates to two German clerics, Georg Graf and Heinrich Goussen, who had recently published two works on Christian Arabic literature⁶.

But Louis Cheikho could not know that one of them, the young Dr. Georg Graf, would continue his own work. With his thorough studies which were based on scientific methods Graf introduced the research on Christian Arabic literature as an independent subject into German and European Orientalism. He was the first who dedicated all his scientific work to that matter. The fruit of his life-long studies is his monumental “History of the Christian Arabic literature”, which appeared in five volumes between 1944 and 1953 in the Vatican City. It is a worthy pendant to Brockelmann’s “History of the Arabic literature” and forms till today the ultimate base for all Christian Arabic studies.

After having portrayed the widespread disinterest of German orientalists in the Christian Arabs and there heritage it is not astonishing that Georg Graf did not belong to them. He was a cleric who had not studied Orientalism. Michel Breydy characterized him absolute rightly as an “outsider” and “self-made man” (Breydy 1995: 175). It were the publications of the St. Joseph University and particulary the works of Louis Cheikho which attracted Graf’s attention towards Christian Arabic literature (Engberding 1956:138). As most of the works concerned were still lying unedited in the libraries in East and West, Graf had to undertake several journeys which led him to Rome, Paris, Cairo, Jerusalem, Beirut and some monasteries in Lebanon and Syria. In Europe he worked as a priest in Germany and in the Vatican, later on he became honourary professor at the university of Munich. Graf was also for long years co-editor of the *Oriens Christianus*, a scientific journal for the promotion of knowledge on the so called Christian Orient. It was founded in 1901 at the Campo Santo Teutonico the German clerical college in Rome, and then in 1911 transferred

⁶ See above, note 5.

to Germany, were it appears till today⁷. Although the edition of Christian Arabic texts was an explicit aim of the *Oriens Christianus* the first numbers saw scarcely a contribution to this regard. The situation changed when Georg Graf began to publish in the journal in 1911. Up to volume 38 he contributed more than 20 articles and several reviews and gave Christian Arabic studies a steady place in the *Oriens Christianus*. Furthermore Georg Graf directed the Christian Arabic section of the *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* (CSCO), a collection of scientific editions and translations, published in Louvain in Belgium.

So one can undoubtedly say that through the tireless efforts and considerable scientific results of Georg Graf German Orientalism holds the place of honour amongst those working on the field of research on the literary, cultural and religious heritage of the Arab Christians. Normally this should have been both: legacy and duty.

But even if the dealing with Christian Arabic literature experienced a distinct vitalization and legalization through the work of Georg Graf, no German scholar was able or willing to follow his footsteps after his death in 1955.

Thus Ernst Hammerschmidt could only dedicate a very small passage to Christian Arabic studies in his article on "The study of the Christian Orient within German Orientalism", published in 1964⁸. Especially in this period German Orientalism could be identified with studies on Islam. This can be proved by the following quotation from a "Memorandum on the state of German Orientalism" which was edited in 1960 on behalf of the "German Federal Society for the Advancement of research" (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft). In this brochure the Christian Orient is dealt with as a "special sub-discipline" of Semitic and Islamic science. It is characterized as a field of research, "which deals with nearly the same territory as Semitic and Islamic science, but is of secondary importance in comparison with the study of the Islamic world, as Christianity and Christian literary productions have been forced back heavily in the Orient" (Falkenstein 1960:8).

Later on the situation improved slightly. In the course of more generous staff appointment schemes at German universities a few professorships for the research on the Christian Orient were established, but characteristically enough none of them for the studies on the Christian Arabic literature.

And it must be noticed that Christian Arabic studies played only a minor role in the activities of those who occupied these professorial chairs. Nevertheless some important contributions were made for example by Julius Assfalg (Assfalg 1955; Assfalg

⁷ On the history of the *Oriens Christianus* cf. Kauffhold 1989a.

⁸ Hammerschmidt 1964:1-17; Christian Arabic studies are mentioned on p. 10f.

& Krüger 1975), Peter Kawerau (Kawerau 1976-77) and C. Detlef G. Müller (Müller 1968; 1981).

Beside this, one should not forget that some specialists of the Islamic Orient also dealt with the Christian Arabs, only to mention Otto Spies (Spies & Hoenerbach 1956-57), Bertold Spuler (Spuler 1964), Stephan Leder (Leder 1985) or Gerhard Endress (Endress 1977).

But all in all these sporadic dealings with Christian Arabic literature were far away from being sufficient enough to establish these studies steadily at German universities.

After the death of Michel Breydy, a Lebanon-born scholar, who lived for several years in Germany and worked mainly on the literature of the Maronites and some Melkite historians (Breydy 1985a; 1995), Christian Arabic studies are almost absolutely neglected at German universities. It is more than palliation when the author of a brochure, published on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the *DMG* in 1995, claims that three renowned orientalists would mainly work on that field of Orientalism as none of them did in the last years or is doing recently⁹. More characteristic for the recent situation is the fact that at the German Orientalists' Conference in Leipzig (1995) only one lecture was dedicated to Christian Arabic studies¹⁰.

It is certainly true "that the science of the Christian Orient is stepping forward leisurely", as Hubert Kaufhold puts it (Kaufhold 1989:1). To avoid that one of its subjects be brought to a total standstill, the study of Christian Arabic literature should be a declared aim of all Orientalists and Arabists, who understand their discipline in the sense of the founder fathers of the *Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft* as a comprehensive reflection of all sides of the Orient¹¹.

⁹ *Die Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft. Seit 1845 der Erforschung der Sprachen und Kulturen des Orients, Asiens und Afrikas und dem Verstehen des Fremden verpflichtet*, n.p. 1995, p. 47.

¹⁰ Walbiner, "Makarius Ibn az-Za'im als Historiker: Anliegen - Arbeitsweise - Ergebnisse" (28.09. 1995).

¹¹ On some activities made at the German Orient Institute in Beirut in that direction cf. "Beirut als Standort einer lebendig betriebenen Wissenschaft vom Christlichen Orient", in *Orient-Institut der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Beirut/Istanbul 1995, pp. 14-16; Walbiner 1995:65-70.

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