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# From Handmaiden of Theology to Handmaiden of Area Studies: Philological Approaches to Arabic-Islamic Studies in Norway

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**ABSTRACT**

This article presents the history of Arabic-Islamic studies in Norway, within the wider framework of Scandinavia and Europe. While Semitic studies reach well back into the sixteenth century in Sweden and Denmark, it was only in the early nineteenth century that the study of Arabic was introduced into Norway with the establishment of a university in 1811. From their inception, Arabic and Semitic studies were instrumental in reaching out into the world as well as in defining the national self-identity. I discuss these developments and the role and function philology played in various studies, programmes and disciplines, taking into account the shifting historical and socio-cultural contexts. Issues of relevance and utility value as well as diverse political and economic concerns have throughout history formed the structural frameworks. Simultaneously, however, I demonstrate how individual motivation and impetus has continued to be of vital importance to the development of the fields. Finally, I discuss some of the current challenges and prospects for philological studies, and argue for the continued relevance for these methodological approaches.

**Keywords:** Philology; Arabic; Islamic studies; Islam; Middle East; Scandinavia; Norway

## Arabic-Islamic philological studies

In Norway, just as in Sweden and Denmark, Islamic studies has not been a well-defined academic discipline in its own right. Islam, here broadly defined as a religiously grounded tradition and civilization,[1] has been studied and researched within such frameworks as oriental studies, Arabic studies, history of religion, theology and Middle Eastern studies. Several universities offer Islamic studies subjects, but these are yet to be developed into fully-fledged study and research programmes. An Islamology programme was established in the early 1980s at the University of Lund with the intention of studying contemporary developments among Muslims within a descriptive framework and using anthropological and sociological methods (see Otterbeck and Stenberg 2012). There are currently efforts at the Department of Theology at the University of Uppsala, the Faculty of Theology at the University of Copenhagen and the Faculty of Theology at the University of Oslo (Leirvik 2010; Leirvik 2011) to establish programmes in Islamic theology, focusing on the foundational sources, Qur'an, Hadith, *sīra* and *tafsīr*, including issues such as social ethics, pastoral care and interreligious relationships.[2]

These cases evoke the thorny question of defining 'Islamic studies', an ambiguous and contested notion in terms of content, approach, purpose and intent. Whereas medieval Muslim scholars typically would uphold a division between normative (*sharʿī*) and non-normative knowledge (*ghayr sharʿī*),[3] pertaining to different subject matters, sources, methodologies and scopes, the label Islamic studies (*al-dirasāt al-islāmiyya*) in the current Muslim world and beyond, tends to include not only the explicitly normative or prescriptive subjects such as theology (*uṣūl al-dīn*), jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh* and *fiqh*) and ethics (*akhlāq*), but also disciplines like history and culture. It may be argued, that all scholarly activity is grounded in a set of values or interests, and as such it entails not only descriptive claims about empirical and analytical soundness, but also normative claims about whether the unearthed reality is legitimate

[1] See Ahmed (2016, esp. 113–297), for a discussion of Islam as a historical, theological and analytical concept.
[2] See also discussions in Johansen (2006) on the possible tension between confessionality and secularism.
[3] In Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's (ca. 1058–1111) scheme (al-Ghazālī 1993, 1: 25–26) normative knowledge emanates from the prophets, while non-normative knowledge is rational or experimental.

according to certain standards (Kalleberg 2005).[4] However, in non-confessionally bound institutions all these subjects are, ideally, treated descriptively and analytically.

The focus of this article is the textually oriented studies of the production, history and reception of Arabic written material related to the traditions and civilization of Islam. I outline the early history of this field in Scandinavia and more specifically in Norway, taking into account the shifting socio-cultural contexts and the shifting conceptions of the immediate or long-term utility value of the academic output. With reference to this historical outline, I discuss some of the challenges and prospects for the field today, arguing for its continued justification and importance. In a narrow sense, philology may refer to an academic practice of elucidating the literal meaning of verbal documents. It was in the capacity of a thus auxiliary discipline that philology in early European scholarship came to be regarded as an, admittedly honoured, handmaiden of theology, a trope famously coined by Erasmus of Rotterdam (d. 1536) (Rummel 1985, 18). A philological commitment to the text and to the language as manifested in text is indispensable to the theologian, but I contend that philology also produces independent knowledge. I shall argue that the philologist, with a library of attitudes, programmes and methodological considerations at her disposal, is well equipped to make sense of language and texts as indispensable windows onto the lives and thoughts of others, to bring out their arguments as well as their social condition. Philological engagement with language and text entails a quest for meaning, in philosophical and in historical terms. Thus the relevance of philology for both theology and the descriptive study of religious thought and practice is obvious, not least in the case of the Islamic traditions, in which language and text are pivotal as the vehicle of divine and of human communication. Moreover, the philological quest for meaning extends to the plurality of human experience as well as to the philologist's own life. However, to this end, it is necessary to look beyond what Michael Carter (2012, 108) calls the utilitarian reasons for studying Arabic: commercial, evangelical, political and military, even if such utilitarian reasons have been, and will probably continue to be, dominant.

In contemporary trends towards renewed interest in philology, it may simply be defined as 'the study of what is written' (Dayeh 2016, 404), and it is outlined in a broad sense as a way

[4] See, for instance, on-going discussions on the ethical guidelines from the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committee, on their website https://www.etikkom.no/en/ (accessed 31 August 2018).

to understand historical written works and concepts based in, but also beyond, a strict concentration on language, to include a wide range of contextual matters that may help elucidate the text, including sources, political and socio-economic conditions, writing processes, materiality, religion and culture, author, intention and more. Sheldon Pollock (2009, 951) has suggested that philology is a tripartite venture, in search of textual meaning, contextual meaning, and the philologist's meaning, as 'balancing in a critical consilience the historicity of the text and its reception, adds the crucial dimension of the philologist's own historicity'. Thus, due consideration is given to the genesis of the text, the text as materialized, read and interpreted in history, and the text as read and made relevant by the philologist scholar in his or her thought. In the newly founded journal *Philological Encounters*, Pollock (2016) sets out to make a case for philology on philological grounds and argues for philology as an independent form of knowledge. He points to the potentially liberating force of philology as critical self-reflection, made possible by a real command of language and a real care for interpretation: careful reading and rereading of texts as a way to transform relations of knowledge and power. To paraphrase Islam Dayeh, philological competence makes possible critical historical scholarship in that it provides those powerful historical and hermeneutic tools that not only make it possible, but which are necessary to challenge facile constructions as well as to resist the 'constant temptation to use supposedly philological methods in order to construct and maintain cultural exclusivity' (Dayeh 2016, 405)

**Shifting orientations in Arabic and Islamic studies**

As suggested by the title of this article, I claim that there has been a movement in the role inhabited by Arabic and Islamic studies in Norway, as in other Western universities, from the early predominant emphasis on theology, to a contemporary predominant emphasis on area studies. The auxiliary status of philology has somehow persisted, or rather re-emerged in recent years. Since the 1970s, the general interest for both studies and research in topics pertaining to Islam and Muslims has increased, but the philological approach has been challenged. Gunvor Mejdell identified a decade ago three general developments in Arabic studies in Scandinavia, defined as the reorientation from classical to modern Arabic, from written to spoken language, and from philology to area studies integrated with social sciences. The developments are interrelated, as philology has conventionally been associated with older textual material. On the other hand, language training remains a prerequisite for area studies and as Arabic studies has

reoriented towards understanding and communicating with the Arabs of today (Mejdell 2006, 8), oral mastery has become a more pronounced, and appropriate, goal.

Currently, programmes in Arabic language studies are offered at two universities in Norway (University of Oslo and University of Bergen), and there is in addition a programme of professional study at the Norwegian Defence Intelligence School (Solberg 2013). The universities in Bergen and Oslo have centres coordinating research activity, the Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies in Bergen (1988–) (Vikør 2001) and the Centre for Islamic and Middle East Studies in Oslo (2011–) (Utvik 2011). Both university libraries have comparatively substantial collections of classical and modern Arabic literature as well as some manuscripts. Subjects related to the Middle East and to Islam are also taught and researched in a number of other universities, colleges and independent research foundations. With regard to the study of Islam within the framework of history of religion, Kari Vogt remarked in a presentation at a conference in 2008 that increased immigration has led to more focus on local issues of Islam and Muslims in Norway.[5] Today, many disciplines contribute to the field of study, informed by a plethora of analytical approaches and frameworks. Nevertheless, as contemporary conceptions in Islamic discourse often relate to shifting historical discourses in a number of ways, I would hold that Carl W. Ernst and Richard C. Martin have a valid point in seeing 'solid training in the languages, texts, and history of premodern Islam […] as a necessary basis for the discourse about Islam and Muslims today' (Ernst and Martin 2010, 13).

In the following I shall flesh out the historical movements or reorientations, tracing the development of Arabic-Islamic philological studies in Norway from its inception, and situating it within the broader frame of Scandinavian and European scholarly traditions in the field.

## Arabic philology and biblical studies in Scandinavia

The enduring, albeit shifting, history of philological Arabic-Islamic studies in Scandinavia may be traced to the seventeenth century. With the Reformation in Northern Europe, biblical studies and translation of the Bible became important religiously and politically (Malmberg 2007, 2). At the University of Uppsala, professor in theology Nicolaus Olai Bothniensis (ca. 1550–1600) was

[5] The research conference *Islam i Norge: status for forskningen, blinde flekker?* Organized by Culcom with the Faculty of Theology, 26–27 May 2008. http://folk.uio.no/leirvik/Forskingskonferansen_Islam_i_Norge_2008.htm (accessed 31 August 2018).

given the responsibility of teaching Hebrew. Hans Tausen (1494–1561) became the first Hebrew teacher at the University of Copenhagen (Løkkegaard 1992, 481), and from 1557 a separate professorship in Hebrew was established (Garstein 1953, 137). Among the Hebraists in Copenhagen was the Norwegian Cort Aslakssøn (1564–1624) from Bergen, who had studied with Semitists in Copenhagen as well as on the continent and who wrote a much used Hebrew grammar (1606) (141). In Heidelberg, Cort Aslakssøn studied with the mathematician and linguist Jacob Christmann, who not only knew Arabic but who wrote the first Arabic textbook in Germany: *Alphabetum Arabicum cum isagore scribendi legendique Arabicae* (1582) (94). As suggested by Løkkegaard (1992, 488), Aslakssøn had probably also studied Arabic.

In 1626 in Uppsala, the then already established professorship of Hebrew was reconstituted as *professor linguarum orientalium*, Professor of Oriental Languages, to work with Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac and Arabic (Malmberg 2007, 9–10),[6] a professorship devoted to the biblical world and closely related to theological studies. Philologist, botanist and theologian Olof Celsius (1670–1756), who held the professorship from 1715, took a special interest in Arabic. For his 1694 thesis, he had studied the language and culture of the Arabs, and he offered insights into comparative linguistics as well as using Arabic in interpreting passages from the Old Testament. Thus, he has been credited with giving Arabic importance as an exegetical language and a subject in its own right (16). Hebrew, Greek and Latin were considered necessary linguistic tools, while Arabic came to be considered a *desideratum* due to its closeness to Hebrew.[7] In Denmark, the Professor in Oriental Languages at the University of Copenhagen, Johan Christian Kall (1714–1775) published an Arabic grammar and textbook in Latin in 1760, *Fundamenta lingvae Arabicae*, in which he emphasized the usefulness of Arabic both for biblical studies, and for the study of the Qur'an (Rasmussen 2012). This statement suggests that there was an independent interest both in the Arabic language and in the Qur'an. However, Kall was criticized for teaching a language that was just for 'mental and intellectual pleasure', but with no real utility value (Løkkegaard 1992, 494). Latin had been the predominant academic language,

[6] Later, in 1874, this professorship was redefined as Professor in Semitic Languages. Malmberg's (2007) presentation of these first few generations of scholars shows that it was quite common for a professor of Oriental languages to move to a professorship in theology.

[7] See also Roling (2017, 97–101), who holds that this importance was attached only to the pre-qur'anic language. The decline and cultural breach started in their view with the Prophet Muhammad, and re-emerged as a scholarly language only when the Arabs served as guardians of the classical tradition under the ʿAbbasids.

but from the early nineteenth century the vernacular languages came into use. In Sweden, Professor Anders Svanborg (1770–1812) published the first book of exercises and Arabic grammar in Swedish: *Övningar i arabiskan* (1802) and *Första grunderna i arabiska språket* (1804) (Malmberg 2007, 20–21).

**Studying 'the others'**

While in the seventeenth and eighteenth century the rationale for academic Arabic and Islamic studies had been Christian theology and scripture, in the nineteenth century the study of Arabic, Turkish and Persian, Middle Eastern history and Islamic belief and culture started to develop into an academic field in its own right (Malmberg 2007, 23; Rasmussen 1996, 263). Nevertheless, the personal motivation of scholars could often be related to their Christian faith, and it was commonplace academically to combine Arabic philology with Christian theology.[8] Besides exegesis of the Bible and apologetics vis-à-vis Islam, there was however also a demand for practical knowledge of oriental languages and cultures from missionaries, colonizers and various economic and political interests (Rüegg 2004, 442). With Swedish and Danish trading relations with the Ottoman Empire and Morocco, linguistic studies in Arabic and Ottoman Turkish increasingly gained practical relevance. Several Scandinavian orientalists went on expeditions to the Middle East and brought back many kinds of material for scientific investigation,[9] including inscriptions and manuscripts.[10] With few exceptions, philologists devoted most of their scholarly efforts to historical issues, but among the first to take an interest in contemporary matters was the Danish Arabist and Turkologist Johannes Østrup (1867–1938), for whom an extraordinary professorship in Islamic culture was established in Copenhagen in 1918 (Rasmussen 1996, 287).

**Studying 'ourselves'**

[8] For instance, Professor of Arabic Literature at the University of Lund, Carl Johannes Tornberg (1807–1877) was a theologian and priest in the Church of Sweden until he stepped down in 1861, while Henrik Gerhard Lindgren (1801–1879), who had been appointed temporarily as Professor of Oriental Languages in Uppsala, left the academic scene to take up ordained ministry (Toll 2007, 210).

[9] The most famous of these shorter and longer expeditions is the expedition to Southern Arabia 1761–1767, from which Carsten Niebuhr (1733–1815) was the only one to survive and return.

[10] See an overview of manuscripts brought back to Denmark in Rasmussen (1996).

Nineteenth-century oriental studies in Europe was in many ways born out of colonial ambitions, with European powers competing for local dominion seeking legitimizing arguments against a background of perceived local stagnation. Scholarly exchange was instrumental in generating the growing orientalist archives. Moreover, the philological endeavours not only generated knowledge about 'the others', but also prompted research and generated knowledge about the world in general and about 'ourselves' in particular. A distinct case is the late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century introduction of Arabic texts as possible sources for medieval Russian and Scandinavian history. This field had prompted a growing interest arising from a self-assertive interest in the past, but indigenous written sources were few and archaeologically based research with numismatics and runology was still in its initial stages.

In his four-volume universal history, the Danish-French geographer and journalist Conrad Malte-Brun (1755–1826) emphasized the usefulness of the oriental sources, among them al-Masʿūdī (ca. 896–956), Ibn Ḥawqal (d. after 978), Idrīsī (1100–1165), and Ibn al-Wardī (1291/2–1348/9), notably for Russian and Scandinavian history and geography (Malte-Brun 1812, 359–381). When turning to the Arabic sources, Malte-Brun's observations exemplify a relatively more positive, not to say romantic, view of the Arabs as a people who, in contrast to Malte-Brun's own contemporaries, nurtured 'the holy fire of science': 'Abandonnons pour quelques moments l'Europe, devenue le siége [sic] de l'ignorance. D'autres peuples ont hérité du feu sacré de la science; d'autre parties du monde offrent un nouveau théâtre à l'esprit de découvertes.' (359)

Malte-Brun also refers to the Danish Professor J. L. Rasmussen (1785–1826), who wrote the study *Om Arabernes og Persernes Handel og bekiendtskap med Rusland og Skandinavien i middelalderen* (About the Arabs' and Persians' trade and relations with Russia and Scandinavia in the Middle Ages; 1814), which was to a large extent based upon al-Bakāwī's (d. 1413) *Kitāb talkhīṣ al-athār wa-ʿajāʾib al-malik al-qahhār* in M. de Guignes translation (1789), but with reference to and discussions of the vocabulary in the Arabic text as well.[11] Malte-Brun credited the German Professor August Ludwig von Schlözer (1735–1809) with being the first to realize the potential of these sources, along with his pupil and colleague Gustav von Ewers (1779–1830). Von Ewers included several Arabic sources in his materials for Russian history, such as for instance Ibn al-Wardī's (1291/2–1348/9) *Kharīdat al-ʿajāʾib wa-farīdat al-gharāʾib*, which had

[11] Rasmussens text was translated into several languages, see Wikander 1974.

been edited and translated into Latin in a thesis by Andreas Hylander (c. 1750–1830) in Lund: *Specimen operis cosmographici Ibn el Vardi ex lingua Arabica in Latinam conversum*. Likewise Danish philologist Vilhelm Thomsen (1842–1927) used Arabic sources in his published Oxford lectures *The Relation between Ancient Russia and Scandinavia* (1877). Between 1870 and 1894, many of these sources were edited by M. J. de Goeje (1836–1909) in the grand Brill series *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicum*. Another German scholar, Johann Gottlieb Buhle (1763–1821), who, like von Schlözer, had been educated at Göttingen, likewise referred to numerous Arabic sources in a similar work (Buhle 1810, 352–369), including Ibn Ḥawqal, Idrīsī, but not, it seems, Ibn al-Wardī. This is an indication that these scholarly works were not mere copies of each other, but parallel endeavours inspired by a broader trend. Ibn Ḥawqal's work *Ṣūrat al-arḍ,* which had already been translated into English by the British orientalist William Ouseley (1797–1866) in 1800, was based on the works of al-Istakhrī (d. after 977) and al-Balkhī (850–934), but also on his own extensive travelling, just like his even more famous contemporary, Ibn Faḍlān (tenth century) ([Ibn Ḥawqal] 1800).

Of all the Arabic and oriental sources, Ibn Faḍlān's account of his travel along the Volga in 923 was to become the most cited source in historical research and in popular culture in the nineteenth and twentieth century.[12] Until the late twentieth century, extracts from the text were an unquestionable part of the Arabic curriculum at the universities in Oslo and Bergen. Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue, with ethnographic and comparative notes, was first edited and translated by the head orientalist and librarian at the Russian Academy of Science in St Petersburg, Christian Martin Frähn (1782–1851), who had extracted relevant material from the 500 Arabic manuscripts procured in 1819 for the Academy (Malte-Brun 1824, 283). In line with his contemporaries, Frähn 1823, IV–V) argued for the usefulness of these sources because the Arabs were knowledgeable and, being travellers and traders, had based their knowledge on empirical material.

In 1869, Norway's first Professor of the Eastern Languages C. A. (Christopher Andreas) Holmboe (1796–1882) translated some parts of Ibn Faḍlān's accounts about funerals in a small booklet (Ibn Fozlan 1869, cf. Wikander 1974, 9). This and other early sources were to form the basis for the ground-breaking work of the Norwegian Professor of Semitic languages, Alexander

[12] On Ibn Faḍlan's travelogue and its role in historical research, see Montgomery (2000); Duczko (2004); Hraundal (2013).

Seippel's (1851–1938) collection, systematization and edition of passages from Arabic historical and geographical works concerned with the Nordic peoples and lands in the two-volume *Rerum normannicarum fontes arabici* (1896–1928). This beautiful and thoroughly annotated edition was revised and expanded in a Norwegian translation by Professor Harris Birkeland (1904–1961): *Nordens historie i middelalderen etter arabiske kilder* (1954), which became a standard reference for research on Norse history.[13] Alauddin I. Samarrai (1959) provided in 1959 an English translation of Seippel's collected excerpts.

The Norse field has received its fair share of attention; from mainstream nation-building ideologues to supporters of more dubious ideals. Birkeland's translation initiative came about in occupied Norway during World War II, at the Institute for the Translation of Medieval Letters. The institute was initiated by the Norwegian pro-Nazi political party Nasjonal Samling, led by Oscar Albert Johnsen (1876–1954), and was designed to serve the needs of the Nazi programme for university ideology and pedagogy (Fure 2011, 149, 308, 314). Although the envisaged nazification failed, this incident provides a cogent example of the potential consequences of the embeddedness of predominantly descriptive philological work in social and political realities at institutional and ideological levels. While Birkeland was later reproached for having ignored the obvious implications of this cooperation, he was not held directly responsible, unlike Johnsen, who was forced to resign from his position at the University and expelled from the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters because of his Nazi sympathies during the war.

**Early beginnings of Arabic philology in Norway**

Oriental studies in nineteenth-century Scandinavia was closely tied in with the continental academic traditions.[14] A basic training in the Arabic language was offered in Sweden and Denmark, and it was customary for students pursuing academic careers to spend time at universities on the continent, notably in Germany or France. The French influence became important for including a wider spectrum of texts – not only the foundational texts of Islam or

[13] Mikjel Sørlie (1944) shows that there was an interest in this geographical knowledge in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

[14] Generally, German universities were something of an ideal prototype (Collett 2011, 468). Generally the Prussian model played a decisive part in modernizing the old universities in Copenhagen (from 1477), Uppsala from 1479) and Lund (from 1668) and in the foundation of new ones, such as the University of Oslo (Chrisiania), Det *Kongelige Frederiks Universitet*, from 1811 (Rüegg 2004, 66).

linguistically interesting literature, or texts testifying to the Arabic contribution to the practical disciplines that had gained popularity in earlier centuries (Iversen 1962, 82), but also poetry, various prose genres such as *maqāmāt*, and, not least, *Alf layla wa-layla*.[15]

Up to the eighteenth century, students in Denmark–Norway such as the above-mentioned Cort Aslakssøn had travelled to Copenhagen and the Continent for university studies. When the first university in independent Norway, Det Kongelige Frederiks Universitet in Christiania (Oslo),[16] welcomed its first students in 1813, it had four faculties (Theology, Law, Medicine, and Philosophy). Philology, primarily Classical and Semitic, was of vital importance to the new university. Professor George Sverdrup (1770–1850) was responsible for Latin and Greek in the Faculty of Philosophy, while Professor of Theology and Hebrew Sven Borchmann Hersleb (1784–1836) was responsible for teaching Hebrew in the Faculty of Theology. In 1822, C. A. Holmboe took up teaching Semitic languages at the newly founded oriental section at the Philological Seminar established in 1818 in the Faculty of Philosophy (Mejdell 2006, 5; Skaare 2009; Kyllingstad and Rørvik 2011, 146, 348; Elstad 2011, 298; Collett 2011, 262–263), in a teaching programme that was primarily part of the preparatory training for the students of theology. Holmboe had studied theology and oriental languages with the illustrious Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838) in Paris, and in 1825 he was appointed as the first Professor of Eastern Languages (1825–1876) at the young university. He taught several languages including Arabic, was a staunch defender of classical philological studies, and was engaged in building up the new university library together with Georg Sverdrup. In addition, he contributed to numismatics at the Christiania University Coin Cabinet, which housed some Arabic coins. He also published a work of Islamic theology, *Tyrkisk Katekismus* by Birgivi Mehmed Efendi (d. 981/1573).[17]

**Between the Faculty of Theology and the Faculty of Philosophy**

With Carl Paul Caspari (1814–1892), Professor of Theology, the university became host to an internationally recognized orientalist. A German Lutheran theologian educated in Leipzig,

[15] J. Th. Zenker's (1811–1884) *Bibliotheca Orientalis* (1846) testifies to the breadth in scholarship.

[16] In the period between1624 and 1925 Oslo was called Christiania/Kristiania. The Royal Frederick's University was renamed the University of Oslo in 1939.

[17] This was however an indirect translation via the French translation by Garein de Tassy (1822). Holmboe also published the two translations *Antar* (1881) and *Kalila og Dimna* (1880).

among others, together with the great Arabist H. L. Fleischer (1801–1888), Caspari came to Oslo in 1847. After his conversion from rationally oriented Judaism to pietistic Christianity, Caspari became more engaged in theology than in linguistics (Skarsaune 1993, 2009; Elstad 2011, 311; Collett 2011, 495–497).[18] His main contribution to Arabic studies was the grammatical treatise *Grammatica Arabica in usum scholarum academicarum* (1844–1848), which he began to work on in Leipzig and completed in Oslo.[19] Through a complicated history of translations, transmissions and revisions involving several scholars and languages, this work was to become influential as the backbone of W. Wright's famous reference grammar, *Grammar of the Arabic language*.[20]

At the Faculty of Philosophy, Holmboe was succeeded by Jens Peter Broch (1819–1886) in 1876, now with the title Professor in Semitic languages (Mejdell 2009). Broch had been hosted by Fleischer in Leipzig, and he was the first professor to focus more specifically on the Arabic language and Arabic-Islamic culture. His ambition was to prepare the ground for proper oriental studies in Norway. An internationally acknowledged contribution was his edition of al-Zamakhsharī's (1070–1144) grammatical work, *al-Mufaṣṣal fī ṣanʿat al-iʿrāb* (1859), the first Arabic text to be published in Norway. This edition is acclaimed for its accuracy, and has served as a source for many scholars, including Wright in his expanded and revised version of the above mentioned Caspari's grammar (Larcher 2014, 115).[21]

In addition, Broch translated some odes from the *Muʿallaqāt* of the pre-Islamic poets ʿAmr b. Kulthūm (d. 584) and al-Ḥārith b. Ḥilliza (fifth century). In his introduction, Broch

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[18] Incidentally, he was treated and paid as a professor but could not formally take up his professorship until he had learned Norwegian, which he did within a short period. It was the then student, and later influential theologian Gisle Johnson (1822–1894) who sought to that Caspari applied for and took up the chair at the University of Oslo, to counter the strong Grundtvigian tendency that had influenced the faculty in the early years (Danish theologian N. F. S. Grundtvig, 1783–1872). Gisle Johnson was to become Caspari's best friend in Norway, as portrayed in the autobiographical account of Caspari's son Theodor Caspari (1853–1948) (Caspari 1929).

[19] In Leipzig, Caspari had also reedited and retranslated Burhān al-Dīn al-Zarnūjī's (d. 602 AH/1223) pedagogical *work Taʿlīm al-muʿallim wa-ṭarīq al-taʿallum* in *Enchiridion Studiosi* (1838) (Gilliot 2012, XV).

[20] Pierre Larcher (2014) traces the history of this work and portrays it as a collective orientalist endeavour.

[21] Even Jørgen A. Knudtzon (1854–1917), Professor of Semitic Languages 1907–1917, an Arabist, but primarily known for his contributions to Assyriology, contributed likewise to the development of this grammar, with comments to the 1884 edition (Aartun 2009).

offers some reflections on Arab culture and on translation. He remarks that, although the translation is done with due philological consideration, it alternates between freedom and accuracy. This was in order to best serve the purpose of the work, which was to teach a general audience something about the most outstanding *Aandsfostre* (intellects) of other peoples. However, he also omitted some parts, which he described as offensive yet uncharacteristic (Broch 1846, 19).

As Broch concentrated his academic work on Arabic, the need for competence in Hebrew increased and a separate chair in Hebrew was established in 1879. This chair was located at the Faculty of Theology and was held by Elias Blix (1836–1902) from 1879 to 1884, but in 1888 it was relocated to the renamed Historical-Philosophical Faculty (from 1866 ) (Bull 2009). Blix was renowned for his Bible translations, but he wrote his 1876 doctoral thesis on Semitic etymology: *De vigtigste Udtryk for Begreberne Herre og Fyrste i de semitiske Sprog: Et Bidrag til semitisk Etymologi* (The most important phrases for the concepts Master and Lord in the Semitic languages: a contribution to Semitic etymology), and naturally included Arabic material (Aschim 2013, 6–7). The work was linguistically grounded, arguing for the two consonant theory of the Semitic languages. However, Blix's study evolved around a semantically chosen selection of lexical items, rather than being based on phonological or morphological criteria for selection, and as Anders Aschim (1997, 11) suggests, it may have been theologically motivated and informed).

By now, the Faculty had two professorships, one in Hebrew and one in Semitic languages. With teaching obligations somewhat eased, more time could be dedicated to research, an opportunity seized by Broch's student, and then successor from 1886, Alexander Seippel, who was the first Professor of Semitic Languages not to have an academic background in theology.[22] A champion for a new linguistic norm based on spoken Norwegian dialects, Seippel is, incidentally just like Elias Blix, first and foremost known for his translations of the Bible into this new norm Nynorsk. In his work, Seippel sought to interpret the Orient through a rural Norwegian experience, but he also interpreted Norway through the Orient (Lande, Lomheim and Stubseid 2001, 79). Seippel translated some Persian poetry, wrote his own poetry inspired by oriental texts, and translated selected stories from *Alf layla wa-layla*: *Soga um Sindbad Farmann: Eit Æventyr or Tusund og ei nott* (1900) (Alf Layla wa Layla: The Story about Sinbad the

[22] Seippel also studied in Halle and Leipzig from 1882 to 1884.

merchant; a Fairy-tale or One thousand and one nights), where, interestingly, the many notes do not refer to the Arabic original, but explain the Nynorsk vocabulary. His most important academic contribution was however the above-mentioned *Rerum normannicarum*.

One of Seippel's contemporaries was the orientalist and medical historian at the Ethnographic Museum, Adolf Fonahn (1873–1940). Combining philological and medical knowledge, Fonahn made an important contribution to the global history of medical science with his *Die Quellenkunde der persischen Medizin* (1910), a catalogue of sources listing and analysing 151 works, and with the seminal *Arabic and Latin Anatomical Terminology, Chiefly from the Middle Age* (1922).[23]

**History of religion is established**

Up till this time, the Faculty of Theology had taught Christian religion, while the study of non-Christian religions had been a part of the philological repertoire at the Philosophical-Historical Faculty. But a certain shift occurred when Wilhelm Schencke (1869–1946) was appointed the ngstadfirst Norwegian Professor of History of Religion in 1914. His appointment came after intense disputes over the legitimacy and identity of religion as an academic subject, over university politics and even national politics, as well as over Schencke's personal suitability for the position.[24] Schencke had from an early stage in his career taken an interest in Islam, and had

[23] He also had the good fortune to discover a unique Arabic manuscript by the Persian medical doctor and scientist Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (854–925) (Holck 2009). Fonahn assumed this text was identical to one of al-Rāzī's lesser known texts written for lay persons, entitled by Ferdinand Würstenfeld as *Liber de medicamentis: quae ubique facile inveniri possunt* (Würstenfeld 1940, 45). No Arabic title is given. Fonahn acknowleded that the text had been printed in India in 1886, and hence was known in the Orient, but he held that the manuscript at hand was the only known manuscript in Europe (Fonahn 1908, 685). The further destiny of this manuscript is not known, and I have not found it listed in *Die Quellenkunde* (Fonahn (1910) 1968).

[24] Beside the fact that Schencke was an outspoken opponent of theology as an academic discipline, it was argued that he had not yet sufficiently documented his academic qualifications (Finnestad 2001, 246; Halden 2007, 157–173).

studied Arabic in Göttingen in 1898.[25] As a research fellow at the Faculty of Philosophy, he lectured on the Qur'an in 1902. His academic production was not very extensive, but he lectured over many years on various subjects in early Islamic history and conveyed knowledge in popularized forms in newspaper media and radio (Halden 2007, 192–196). One of Schencke's successors from 1953 was Herman Ludin Jansen (1905–1981). He was a philologically and theologically trained historian of religion with a broad field of interests. He had originally focused on Gnosticism, but a growing public interest in Islam made him turn towards the Middle East in later years, and he wrote the popular *Islam, hengivelsens vei* (Islam, the path of devotion; 1973) (Hjelde 2009). This book was not based on philological studies, however, and so it represented a new trend among historians of religion.[26]

**Philology and area studies at the Semitic Institute**

When Seippel stepped down from his post in 1922, its title was changed to docent (lecturer) and given to Assyriologist Arthur G. Lie (1887–1932) from 1923–1931. From 1931 it fell upon university librarian Jens Lindberg (1893–1950) to teach Arabic, Syriac, Ethiopic and Akkadian, until 1943 ([Amundsen] 1961, 1: 472–473).[27] Subsequently, Harris Birkeland, who had been at the Faculty of Theology from 1933, took up the position in Semitic languages, from 1946 as docent and from 1948 as professor (Mejdell 2012). Birkeland laid the foundations for a Semitic seminary library, and in 1956 the Semitic Institute was established. From having had a theological focus, his research interests took a turn towards linguistic studies of classical and spoken Arabic, and towards Arabic texts, notably the Qur'an and its exegetical traditions. He received international acclaim both in dialectology with studies such as *Altarabische Pausalformen* (1940), *Growth and Structure of the Egyptian Arabic Dialect* (1952) and *Stress Patterns in Arabic* (1954), and in qur'anic studies with *Old Muslim Opposition against Interpretation of the Koran* (1955), *The Lord Guideth: Studies on Primitive Islam* (1956), on the

[25] One of his predecessors in the field of religious studies, Simon Michelet (1863–1942), had studied Arabic in Leipzig, but had not made it a topic of academic investigation (Halden 2007, 46–48; Kylli and Rørvik 2011, 172).
[26] See also on this general trend in Hjelde (2000); Gilhus and Jacobsen (2014).
[27] Lindberg had studied with both Seippel and Schencke, and contributed to numismatic studies (Knirk 2003, 348–350). He had an extensive private collection, including two grammars printed in 1636 in Roma og Amsterdam, which were donated to the University Library in Bergen (notice in *Nordisk Midtaustenbulletin* 12 December 1994).

*tafsīr* of suras 93, 94, 105, 106, and 108, and *Muslim Interpretation of Surah 107* (1958). Besides his academic production, Birkeland wrote a large number of popular books and articles on language, history, theology and religion, among them the popular *Muhammed, Allahs sendebud* (Muhammad, Allah's messenger; 1942).

As we have seen with Seippel's *Rerum Normannicarum*, Birkeland not only published widely, he also revised, translated and edited some of the works of his teachers and colleagues. When Schencke died, it was discovered that he had worked extensively on the Qur'an, and had translated the whole text into Norwegian as well as commenting upon a large portion of the text with reference to classical *tafsīr*. Birkeland revised and published some of this material in 1952. As he remarked in the foreword, he regretted that it had been impossible to publish the whole manuscript, although he thought it would mostly be of interest to specialists (Schencke 1952; Lien 2012).[28] But the second half of the twentieth century saw a growing public interest in Islam, and academics took part in meeting that interest, as testified by both Schencke, Lundin Jansen, and not least Birkeland's community outreach activities. A complete Norwegian translation of the Qur'an was, however, not published until 1980, by lecturer Einar Berg (1921–1995).[29] There had for some time been only one position in Semitic languages,[30] when in 1970 Berg took up a new position dedicated to Arabic and with a partly modern focus (Mejdell 2006, 7). Berg was a lecturer in Arabic language until 1991, with research interests and teaching responsibility in both the classical and the modern language and literature. In 1990, the Semitic Institute was incorporated into the Institute for East European and Oriental Studies, which was reorganized from 2005 into the Department of Cultural Studies and Oriental Languages, with Arabic studies constituting part of Middle East studies. As noted by Gunvor Mejdell,[31] from the 'seventies and 'eighties geopolitical concerns resulted in an increasing interest in Arabic studies, and a reorienting towards area studies and contemporary language and literature, although the classical language and literature has to a certain extent continued to be part of the general curriculum (Beck 1991; Mejdell 2006). One position, last held by Professor Michael G. Carter until 2004,

[28] Birkeland had applied for Schencke's position after the latter stepped down in 1939, but after some complications due to World War II, he remained in his own position.
[29] For an overview of translations of the Qur'an into Norwegian, see Eggen (2017).
[30] The position was held in held in 1966–1996 by Ebbe Egede Knudsen (b. 1932). Kjell Aartun (b. 1925) had taught Arabic from 1961–1966 (Mejdell 1984, 11).
[31] Gunvor Mejdell has herself been a research assistant at the Institute from 1981, associate professor from 1988, full professor from 2006, and emerita from 2017.

was dedicated to classical Arabic,[32] but since then this field has been covered by several members of the academic staff in the section for Arabic studies at the Institute.[33] From 2017, the MA in Arabic was merged into the MA in Middle Eastern studies.

**Arabic studies at the University of Bergen**

At the University of Bergen, Arabic studies were introduced in 1984, with the appointment of Joseph N. Bell (b. 1938) as Professor of Arabic. The motivation for offering Arabic at the university was primarily to strengthen and serve the active Middle East and East Africa anthropologically and historically oriented research community, which had emerged around Professors Fredrik Barth (1928–2016) and Sean O'Fahey (b. 1943) from the 1960s and 1970s (Mejdell 2006, 7; Roll-Hansen et al. 1996, 691; Vikør 2001). With the introduction of Arabic at the University of Bergen, a philologically oriented research milieu came into existence, also in cooperation with researchers from the study of religion and Middle Eastern history. Bell was a co-founder of the *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* (1995–), an important publication channel for Arabic-Islamic philological studies.[34] After Bell stepped down in 2008, the professorship was held by Professor Shabo Talay (2011–2014), but is currently vacant.[35] Until 2017, the professorship in Arabic was also vacant, but then it was withdrawn and MA programme was discontinued. Currently, Arabic studies at the BA level is based in the Department of Foreign Languages, while students aspiring to an MA must relocate to the study of religion or history of the Middle East situated at the Department of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion.

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[32] From 1992 to 1994 held by James E. Montgomery as assistant professor and from 1996–2004 by Professor Michael G. Carter (b. 1934).

[33] Semitic: Elie Wardini senior lecturer 1996–2002; Edzard Lutz professor 2002–2016 and professor II 2016–. Arabic: Gunvor Mejdell; Janet Watson visiting fellow 2004–2005; Friederike Pannewick associate professor 2005–2007; Albrecht Hofheinz associate professor 2004–; Stephan Guth, associate professor from 2007, full professor from 2009–; Teresa Pepe associate professor 2017–; Jacob Høigilt associate professor 2018–.

[34] Other relevant Scandinavian journals are *Babylon*, *Chaos*, *Dīn*, *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* and *Tidsskrift for islamforskning*, all with different orientations but also including philological approaches.

[35] There are currently two associate professors of Arabic at the University of Bergen: Ludmila Ivanova Torlakova (1995/2000–) and Esmira Nahhri (2014–). Frank Weigelt was appointed temporarily in 2016–2017.

**Challenges for Arabic-Islamic studies**

This historical outline demonstrates that engaged scholars of Arabic, Islamic and Middle Eastern studies in Norway have contributed to several philological or philologically associated branches. Among them are the traditional core disciplines such as textual criticism and editing; linguistics, lexicography and etymology; literary analysis and hermeneutics; transmission and reception; translation and cultural exchange. However, language-based research contributes to a number of fields, such as history, political history, theology, history of religion, ethnology, numismatics, history of science, cultural history, and not least conceptual and intellectual history.

When it comes to historical texts, what is possible to infer is most often only some general ideas about the context into which the texts were born and the contexts in which they worked. Consequently, philologically oriented studies entail the perennial methodological textual, linguistic and hermeneutical challenges of 'getting inside of the process of language already going on in words and making it disclose what may be hidden or incomplete or masked or distorted in any text we may have before us,' as Edward Said (2004, 59) aptly described it. On the other hand, scholars are faced with the dilemmas and challenges of navigating intellectual or academic interests within structural frameworks that are governed by university politics, and by national and global politics. Individuals and research groups need to address the normative claims involved in the choice of subjects, in methodological approaches and in conceptual and analytical frameworks, besides the possible ideological and political implications of our work, scholarly cooperation and institutional affiliation.

The debates on conceptualizations of Islam in academic studies are on-going, and in the increasingly tense public discourse scholars are constantly pulled into normative debates about what is or is not 'authentically Islamic'.[36] For scholars engaged in philological studies, this raises the question of the ownership of the textual universe, as well as the more general question of interpretational authority and hermeneutic privilege. To what or whom is the academic commitment, to whom do we give a voice, and on what terms? In the vibrant and growing field of qur'anic studies, this dilemma is played out in a particularly illustrative way, with the emergence of two distinct but not mutually exclusive trends: One, although not indifferent to Islamic traditions, concentrate its activities on the text in its perceived Late Antiquity historical

[36] See recent discussions addressing the conceptualization of Islam in modern academia in Jung (2011) and Ahmed (2016).

context (textual history, subtexts, literary approaches), while the other, although not uninterested in intertextuality and historicity, focuses on the reception of the text (textual history, *tafsīr*, translation studies).[37]

Most of the early scholars presented in this article were able to conduct their research at a happy distance from people with a religious commitment to the texts and/or identifications with the cultures and histories that constituted their objects of study. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, increased attention to the intrinsic power structures of academic work, not only at the institutionalized level but also at the level of discourse and ideology, coupled with a persistent Arab and Muslim response and increased contribution to Islamic studies in the West, fostered new discussions on academic approaches and ideological presuppositions (not least with thinkers such as Edward Said and Talal Asad). Moreover, while the critique of orientalism has helped raise crucial awareness of asymmetrical power structures, the post-orientalist discourse may also have contributed to a continued construing of these issues within a simplistic insider–outsider binary, fostering in turn neo-orientalist currents. While public discourse is increasingly framed by identity politics, heated debates in academic circles over theoretical and methodological outlooks, often articulated in terms of academic versus activist activity, or true scholarship versus non-true scholarship, suggest that confessional or national identity are far from being the only identity issues at stake.[38]

The challenges to philology's ability to release its full emancipating potential are in the present situation both ideological and structural. As Ruth Mas (2012, 389) holds, what is most crucially at stake for the academic is 'to locate a position of political freedom for the critical study of Islamic tradition'. In her article 'Why Critique?', Mas observes that a critical outlook, in the sense of discernment and deliberation, has yet to realize its full potential in our fields of study, and that it should not least include a critique of the profound situatedness of critique. Critique is anything but objective, she says, and thereby it requires a sense of self-reflectivity on an individual level as well as on the organizational and disciplinary level. As Mas holds, critique

[37] See for instance a collection of Angelika Neuwirth's articles (2014) compared with a special issue of the *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 17/3 (2015) on translation.

[38] See discussions for instance in journals such as *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, *Numen* and *Temenos*, recently articulated in an on-going debate between Omid Safi (2014) and Aaron Hughes (2014), with several follow-ups in a special issue of the *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* (43/4: 2014) and in Reynolds (2014).

functions within the framework of the modernist ambition of secular state governance, and she points to the paradox that 'The modernist suspicion of religious authority that founds critique is now also directed at those who resist the shift of this authority to secular structures of governance' (393). Thus I shall point to Pollock's notion of academic self-reflection as intrinsic to philological practice (see above), always taking as its starting point and evolving around the language, always committed to the text.

However, the 'position of political freedom' is also connected to what Pollock (2016, 16) calls 'an academic home', a disciplinary and institutional framework. Reframing Mas's notion of the challenge to disentangle critique from its particular historical operation, I thus argue for a disciplinary disentanglement or a renegotiation of the disciplinary hierarchy. If philology in its early days was considered a handmaiden of theology, the weight has since shifted to other forms of utilitarian considerations and the study of Arabic has to some extent shifted from an introduction to a philological research methodology and academic tradition to acquisition of linguistic skills. If disciplinary autonomy is established by a distinctive object of study (in the case of philology: language in text), a theory (interpretation) and methodology (for instance grammatical, text-critical, rhetorical, historical analysis), what philology is currently wanting to be able to release its full potential, Pollock holds, is a distinctive place in the disciplinary division of labour. The disciplinary division of labour may even prove crucial for philology to enter into conversation with and contribute to other disciplines, including theology, history of religion and Middle Eastern studies. As Siegfried Wenzel (1990, 18) has argued:

> [S]cholarship is not an absolute monarchy but a republic, in which the handmaiden, while doing her job of preparing the necessities of life – intelligible texts and tools for their understanding – will also remain constantly watchful and critical of the nobility. [...] Not just an ancillary discipline, philology is an attitude of respect for the datum, for the facts of the text and its contexts, which should be cultivated at all levels of our enterprise to understand and appraise.

**Prospects for Arabic-Islamic studies**

As I have defined Arabic-Islamic philological studies as the production, history and reception of Arabic textual material related to the traditions and civilization of Islam (see above), the object of study goes beyond topics that are of immediate theological relevance, as well as going beyond

what is of immediate relevance to the contemporary political or social situation. Intrinsically an empirical methodology, philological practice nevertheless entails normative assumptions in the choice of objects of study as well as methodological and analytical approaches, not least in the interpretation and translation activities that are essential to philological academic writing. Moreover, as is abundantly clear from our brief historical outline, the object of this particular field of philological study, the textual universe of Islam, is embedded in, but also exceeds the normative, not to say prescriptive foundational sources. Against a positing of philology as a methodologically inadequate and ideologically outdated text-oriented scholarship,[39] or a perceived divide between textual studies and studies of 'lived religion',[40] I argue that text may be treated as documentation of lived reality, as indispensable windows onto the lives and thoughts of historically and geographically distant others, although it is not a mechanical documentation but only captures traces of writerly activity:[41] legal arguments (*fatāwā*) may be studied as ethical reflection mirroring a social reality just as legal practice (*qaḍāʾ*) may be studied as social reality mirroring ethical reflection. Biography may be studied as a narrative framing life in a certain way, but also through and beyond this framing as a source for experience, for social and intellectual history. Poetry may be studied as aesthetic as well as existential reflection and spiritual experience. To be able to bring out of the texts such documentation of religion as practices embedded in everyday life, it may be necessary to call on sources concerned with other topics than formal theological or theological-ethical argument, but the philological practice of reading closely and attentively may result in bringing out authorial voices in quite formalistic genres. Thus, bringing forth the ideas and social realities of the people of the past as conveyed to us in their own writings will provide Muslims with an invaluable historical backdrop as they revisit their past in order to define their future, to rephrase Michael Carter (2012, 114).

[39] See an observation by Olsson and Stenberg (2015, 213) that regrettably 'textual studies are not regarded as being as important as is the study of the religion lived by many'.

[40] See for instance how textual studies and the study of lived religion are contrasted in the statement: 'Schencke's intention was to study lived religion, but he ended mostly up studying texts' (Halden 2007, 19–200). See Ammerman (2016) for a concise appraisal of three decades of 'lived religion' as a distinct field of study.

[41] I borrow this notion from Shawkat M. Toorawa (2005), who developed the term 'writerly culture' to describe the medieval transition from predominantly oral culture to an increasingly written production of scholarly and literary text.

Embedded in divine communication, Islamic theology must start from the philological emphasis on language, text and meaning, as indeed was the starting point in Islamic traditions. Moreover, the philological insight that meaning in the human realm is born out of human engagement with language and text conflates the ethos of Muslim scholars, namely to engage with and vigorously argue on textual evidence, with the profound conviction that God always knows better, *Allāhu aʿlam*. Philological reading of language and text is, in Sheldon Pollock's (2016, 25) words 'to hold in a single thought the multiple interpretations and their own claims to truth'. Thus it entails an impetus to temper any absolutist notion of truth, without abandoning altogether the quest for historical, philosophical and theological validity.

Academic activity is framed by ideological trends, motivated by personal interests and ambition, and is, at its best, stimulated by curiosity, imagination and passion. Although the focus and intensity are changing, the baseline remains the same: Philological Arabic-Islamic studies is not only, maybe not even primarily, the concern and product of academic specialists. It is shaped by political concerns and structural constraints, and it may be called upon to serve a host of interests as well as stakeholders within, for instance, educational administration, integration of minorities or policy making (internal security, geo politics, natural resources), and religious communities. While navigating in these choppy waters, the various methodological tools in the philological catalogue emerge as a potentially liberating double commitment: a commitment to the text and to the act, not to say art, of reading. The profoundly empirical approach in philology provides a solid base for unearthing and analysing rivalling historiographies, to rephrase Mas (2012, 404). In committing to the text, rather than to a particular reading of the text, the philologist may provide a space to critically address what Quentin Skinner (1969, 7) called the 'mythology of doctrine', an approach that is anachronistically forging theories on the pivotal themes of today, and to acknowledge the profusion and diversity of individual voices against a persistent 'mythology of coherence' (12). It is thus not least in conceptual and intellectual history that philological Arabic-Islamic studies has great potential for continued intellectual and societal relevance, beyond otherwise important issues such as theological argument or grappling with political realities.

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