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ISLAM &  
SOCIETY  
SERIES

# WHY ARABIC?

Petra M. Sijpesteijn

LUP

LEIDEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

**WHY ARABIC?**

**HOEZO ARABISCH?**

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**WHY ARABIC?**  
**HOEZO ARABISCH?**

*Petra M. Sijpesteijn*

LEIDEN Publications

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# Contents

Preface	7
Why Arabic?	9
What is Islam?	23
Reading the Revolution	33
Hoezo Arabisch?	43
About the Author	57



## Preface

This book contains three essays on recent developments in the Middle East and the reactions they have generated, from the perspective of an Arabist and historian specialised in the formative period of Islam from the seventh to ninth centuries.

The chapter 'Why Arabic?' was presented in Dutch on the occasion of my inauguration as professor of Arabic language and culture at Leiden University on 9 April 2009. It appears here in its original Dutch version and in a slightly adapted English translation.

The second chapter, 'What is Islam?', considers the place of Islam in Western societies. It was written against a background of increasing anti-Muslim antagonism in Dutch politics and a hardening of attitudes all over Europe. More and more, Islam is defined according to its supposedly irreducible otherness, with the once hallowed principle of multiculturalism being repudiated by one European leader after another, David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy having declared it a failure, Angela Merkel an 'utter failure' (*absolut gescheitert!*). Left to its own devices, the message now seems to be, Islam is always going to float in insoluble lumps, indigestible by the Western body politic. Major shifts in social attitudes and government policy, in other words, are afoot. What are we to make of this?

The final chapter, 'Reading the Revolution', briefly discusses the paradoxes thrown up by the Arab Spring, when the vexed question of what Muslims want was suddenly shown to be very much more complicated than the traditional stereotypes and assumptions allowed. I make the case for why, in our current environment, when so much of what passes for expert analysis is informed by little more than opinionated guesswork, it is so important that Arabists and scholars of Islamic history and culture are on hand to provide guidance. I use my experiences as a papyrologist to explain how this is so.

My main objective in writing these three pieces has been to show how essential it is, when dealing with the Muslim world, to be equipped with an historical understanding and a knowledge of the relevant languages – and the consequences when this is not the case. The conscious continuity of traditions, language and culture and the crucial role history plays in the Arab arena are offset and complexified by endless change and upheaval. To understand the lives and goals of the people living through these changes, however, requires an active and thorough engagement with their

language, culture and history. Only by doing so do we any have a chance of really appreciating the dynamic, complex and ever-evolving nature of Islam and the world of Muslim believers.

This book, short as it is, would not have been written without the support and advice of Léon Buskens, Alexander Schubert and Lennart Sundelin. I would also like to thank Nico Kaptein and Rudolf de Jong for their comments. My thanks are also due to Yvonne Twisk of Leiden University Press for pushing me to update the initial “oratie” into this expanded publication, and to the Press for including it in their Leiden University Centre for the Study of Islam and Society series. Any failure of fact or interpretation remains, however, my own.

Abbreviations of papyrus editions follow those of the Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets ([www.library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/papyrus/texts/clist.html](http://www.library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/papyrus/texts/clist.html)) and the Checklist of Arabic Documents ([www.ori.uzh.ch/isap/isapchecklist.html](http://www.ori.uzh.ch/isap/isapchecklist.html)).

Leiden, 25 January 2012

## Why Arabic?

The English artists Gilbert and George like using Arabic in their works. Their *Ginkgo* series features Arabic words and phrases marching rhythmically across wall-sized panels. The extraordinary visual beauty of the Arabic script, with its unique marriage of lithe and sinuous expressiveness and rigorous, black-on-white austerity, offers remarkable aesthetic opportunities, which these paintings exploit to very powerful effect. But the force of Arabic – and this is the point – extends far beyond its aesthetic potential. For the artists, the analogy is the ‘tagging’ of urban graffiti – a language that is highly familiar and yet simultaneously enigmatic and threatening, a voice from beyond our zone of comfort. Similarly, it is the peculiar and paradoxical fate of Arabic to be at once instantly recognisable and unsettlingly alien. ‘We used even a lot of Arabic writing,’ explains Gilbert Proesch, ‘because we don’t understand what they mean, like we don’t understand what the tags mean, but it creates an amazing feeling. The tagging or the writing of an Arabic newspaper creates an amazing fear in Western people.’<sup>1</sup>

The language is charged in a way, and with a voltage, that, I would suggest, few others can match. Over the course of 1,400 or so years of stimulating but also highly fraught engagement, it has served as a peg on which a vast and endlessly proliferating array of associations, connotations, prejudices and problemata have been hung. Languages do not tend to travel light, but the sheer quantity of luggage that Arabic has accumulated on its journeyings through the consciousness of the West is, I would argue, unusual. It is this extraordinarily dense store of associations that Gilbert and George’s ginkgo murals are accessing. It is not the *content* of the texts that is relevant – for all they know, or indeed care, they’re verses of pacifist poetry (or are not even Arabic, but Persian or Ottoman) – it’s what they *signify*, the images and associations that they spontaneously and involuntarily activate in their viewers’ heads. It is the tragedy of the West’s current relationship to Arabic that this complex and intricate cargo is now characterised above all by crude fear. For those of us professionally committed to Arabic, this presents a very important challenge. It is a theme I will return to.

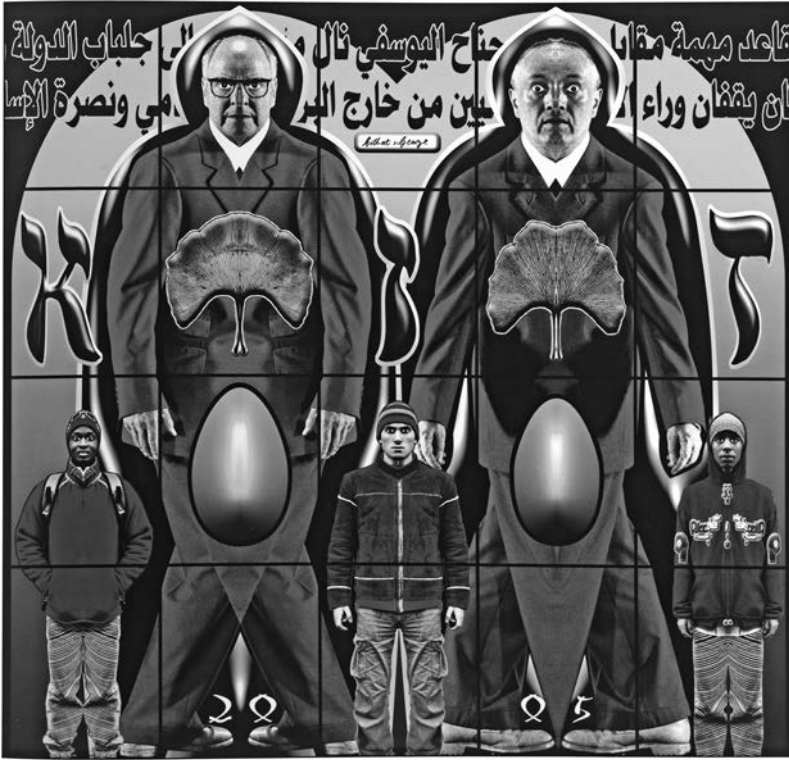


Illustration 1 Gilbert & George Kit 2005 (Gilbert & George. *The Complete Pictures 1971-2005*. With an Introduction by Rudi Fuchs. New York 2007, p. 1183)

These Gilbert and George paintings are, for me, interesting because they play with ideas that also zigzag through the materials with which I work. My specialist field of expertise is Arabic papyrology, the study of texts written on papyrus, mostly from the seventh to tenth centuries AD, and the history of the mediaeval Middle East that we can derive from them.

## ■ Papyrology

For the better part of four thousand years, until it was finally superseded by paper in the tenth century, papyrus documents were *the* repository of literate culture in the Mediterranean world, recording almost every kind of human action or activity imaginable. The range they cover, to give just a smattering of examples, includes literary culture – poems, histories, religious texts; official documents – edicts, proclamations (those issued by the authorities as well as those clandestinely appealing for resistance against them, such as a letter from a certain Samuel calling for a meeting to

organise a protest against tax-collectors);<sup>2</sup> letters and petitions (for example, from a wife whose husband was beaten so severely in prison that she could hear him scream even from outside the prison walls);<sup>3</sup> the business of government and order – lists of tax-payers,<sup>4</sup> converted Christians,<sup>5</sup> orphans and the poor entitled to alms payments,<sup>6</sup> or prisoners and the crimes they have committed (stealing a cow, trespassing and assaulting a woman in a house, getting into a bar brawl or burning the tax registers).<sup>7</sup> They encompass legal documents, including property transfers, marriage contracts, divorce settlements, testaments, deeds, pleas and suits;<sup>8</sup> scribal exercises and reading-texts;<sup>9</sup> amulets;<sup>10</sup> commercial records, such as ledgers, invoices, bills of lading, customs papers, work permits and salary stubs;<sup>11</sup> as well as an almost inexhaustible supply of incidental jottings, from shopping lists and IOUs to invitations for parties, love letters and Post-it-style ‘notes-to-self’.<sup>12</sup> ‘The Nile reached Wednesday a height of two fingers below 16 cubits’, ‘pay to the servant his monthly salary in oil’, ‘record of what I exported to Mecca of acacia leaves’<sup>13</sup> – the innards of another world, in all their colour and complexity, laid open before our eyes, typically mundane, frequently frivolous, but endlessly fascinating.

We have these texts in such abundance thanks to a peculiar climatological quirk. The vast majority of what was written in the mediaeval Middle East, then as now, was discarded when its specific and limited functions had been fulfilled. Given the perishability of organic matter such as papyrus, this meant, of course, immediate and irrevocable destruction. But in Egypt, the rubbish bin of choice, quite naturally, tended to be the expanses of empty desert that bounded the ribbon of cultivable and inhabitable land abutting the Nile. The bone-dry sands of these deserts provide about as perfect a natural preservative as it is possible to get. In these conditions, assuming it can avoid coming into contact with water, or being dug up for fuel or fertiliser, a papyrus text has a very good chance of surviving pretty much indefinitely. Thousands of them have – and those are just the ones we know about; thousands more no doubt still lie buried awaiting discovery. The conservation of the extraordinary resource that the papyri form constitutes one of the most remarkable of the Nile’s many gifts – as my father called it, paraphrasing Herodotus’ famous formula, in *his* inaugural lecture on *Greek papyrology* this week 41 years ago.<sup>14</sup>

Leaving aside what is admittedly often a fair degree of wear and tear, what these papyri give us are the texts *as their writers wrote them*. It is the thing itself, a unique message, shot arrow-like (albeit, of course, inadvertently) 1,400 years into the future, a tiny, breathing particle from another world. The exhilaration it engenders in those who handle such documents is utterly addictive. Johan Huizinga’s description of this mysterious and compulsive thrill will resonate with any papyrologist: ‘work with handwritten material has an attraction that can become an obsession, almost incomprehensible to the uninitiated... you very often have the overpowering

feeling that you are in contact with the living past – hence the craving to catch further glimpses of it.<sup>15</sup>

What makes the thrill so thrilling is not just the excitement of handling an original artefact, but the aperture it provides onto a long-ago age – the sense of having stumbled uninvited, illicitly even, into the lives and minds of another world. The papyri capture ephemera that were never meant for circulation, never mind publication, unguarded by literary artifice or convention. And reading them offers all the escapist pleasure of over-hearing the conversations of strangers on a bus or in a café, but without the social opprobrium of being caught eavesdropping. No matter how banal or predictable or posturing the conversation, it is life as actually lived.

But I should add: papyrology is more than merely a recondite form of voyeurism – there is, despite the pleurability, a serious historical point. By listening to the chatter ‘on the ground’ we can check, qualify and measure the pronouncements from above. We are no longer helplessly dependent upon official news feeds from the caliph’s palace: we can hear the talk on street corners, in private homes, in the caravanserai and in the souk. We can control our information rather than be controlled by it. This is crucial.

### Alternative histories

‘The fellah,’ Rudyard Kipling was told during his travels in Egypt, ‘has been trained to look after himself since the days of Rameses.’<sup>16</sup> One small but suggestive example from my period nicely illustrates the point. We know from the narrative histories of Egypt that in 362/973 the Fatimid caliph al-Mu‘izz (r. 341-65/953-75) issued a decree that henceforth the very sensitive information about the level of the Nile during the inundation season was to be a royal secret. We might assume on the basis of this that the level of the Nile was therefore, well, a secret. But we also happen to have a piece of paper from about the same time (*after* the decree was issued) with, written quite plainly upon it, the level of the Nile on a specific day in the inundation season, which seems to be intended for public dissemination.<sup>17</sup> We do not know who or what this text was for, but it seems to undermine the official decree and is, in any case, in direct contravention of the narrative sources. It is, therefore, a tiny window onto a parallel narrative, a piece of untidy and independent-minded practice running apparently quite counter to the images of order and obedience propagated from the centre. Without this window, we would have no alternative but to believe what we were told, with an enormous loss to our understanding of the reality of life in mediaeval Egypt.

## ■ The human dimension

Central to these parallel narratives that the papyri permit us to glimpse is the human dimension, also largely lacking from the chronicles. We can begin to answer Bertolt Brecht's challenge to historians in 'Questions from a Worker Who Reads':

'Caesar beat the Gauls  
Did he not at least bring a cook with him?  
Philip of Spain wept when his armada  
Went down. Was he the only one to weep?'<sup>18</sup>

From an Arabic papyrus now in the University of Pennsylvania collections, we have the only eye-witness account of the terrible attack by the Byzantine fleet on the Delta town of Damietta in AD 856. 'O, Abū Ḥafṣ if only you could see the confusion and stress in which people here are now. They [the Byzantines] grab anyone they can lay their hands on . . . I ask God for relief by His mercy!'<sup>19</sup> The writer is clearly traumatised, the tears almost audible. This letter was cut into small pieces three years later and used for a tax receipt. It illustrates the enormous serendipity that enlivens the field of papyrology.

On a tenderer note, via a ninth-century letter to her husband, we can hear a young wife movingly lament her abandonment with a young child in the Fayyūm oasis by her husband who is spending the month of Ramadan with his first wife in the capital, Fustat. 'If I had known you would also want to celebrate the offering feast away from me, I would not have let you go.' And then, plaintively: 'I only let you break the fasts with them [that is, the first wife and her family] on condition that you would celebrate the offering feast with me (*taraktuka tafturu 'indahum wa-tuḍahḥi 'indī*).'<sup>20</sup>

It is through voices such as these that this world becomes intelligible and real. But there is even more going on. Knowing that people in mediaeval Egypt sometimes ignored governmental decrees, or underpaid their taxes, or worried about ill family members, or whatever it may be, is important. We need to know these things. But it also happens that, at this time, a far, far greater narrative is also unfolding, and it too, but for the papyri, would be lost to us.

## ■ The formation of Islam

Arab troops entered Egypt in AD 639, and the spectacular appearance of Islam that set the conquests in motion occurred only some two decades earlier. The seventh and eighth centuries, therefore, are 'prime time' for

Islam's formation and the penetration of Arab and Muslim culture throughout the Middle East.

Let me take the case of Islam first. Arabic chronicles and other written sources do not begin to appear in the Arab world until the ninth century, two centuries after the rise of Islam and the earliest conquests. When the historians and chroniclers pick up the story, the paint, as it were, has largely dried – the scaffolding has come down, the edifice is complete. And that completeness was projected back to Islam's very birth, more or less entirely smoothing out and polishing away the process of its formation and development. The stakes here, as you can imagine, are high.

To give but one example. At the beginning of the twentieth century an Arabic letter written on papyrus around the year AD 730 was found in the Fayyūm oasis, that is to say, less than a hundred years after the death of the prophet Muhammad and eighty years after the Arab conquest of Egypt.<sup>21</sup> Via the highly murky world of the early twentieth-century antiquities trade, it ended up in the library of the University of Michigan, where it remained, unread, for the better part of a century. It is a letter from the district governor of the Fayyūm, Nājīd ibn Muslim, to a lower administrator and it belongs to a dossier of some forty similar letters. But unlike the other letters this is more than merely a written message from one bureaucrat to another. The size of the papyrus and its extremely large script – much larger than that of the other letters – suggest that this letter was designed to be posted in public and that it was intended for the local Muslim community.

It urges the Arabs to pay their taxes, in, as the letter specifies, free-grazing goats, sheep and gold. Up until this time Arab Muslims had been exempt from paying taxes; only the non-Muslim Egyptian subjects paid.<sup>22</sup> The taxes, moreover, are described in the papyrus as *ṣadaqa* and *zakāt*, the terms used to refer to the Muslim alms tax. *Ṣadaqa* and *zakāt* form one of the five 'pillars of Islam',<sup>23</sup> or core duties incumbent upon every practicing Muslim, but were in general considered to be a tax paid at the discretion of each believer him- or herself. That is at least what we read in the legal texts. This papyrus of Nājīd shows, however, a different picture.

In this letter the Muslim audience is informed that its privileged fiscal position was to be no more; and then, that the alms taxes that had hitherto been a matter purely of private negotiation between each Muslim's conscience and purse was now to be obligatory, collected and distributed by the state, no less. The message was not an easy one to convey and Nājīd invokes a host of religious phrases to buttress his demands and coerce his audience into delivering up their taxes, including references to Qur'ānic verses and the role of the Prophet: 'God sent His prophet Muhammad, may God bless him, with the guidance and the true religion and everything that God imposed on his followers. And God imposed on those belonging to the religion of Islam, the true religion, the *ṣadaqa*.'<sup>24</sup> The letter ends

with very precise instructions, similar to those that governed the gathering of other taxes, on how the collection was to proceed.

What we know about tax collection comes from Arabic legal sources. Not only do these date from some two centuries later, but they largely ignore the practical details of tax policy and the daily experience of those living with these rules. They do not mention the push-and-shove between individual tax-payers and state authorities over who was to pay and how much, nor the difficulties raised by those unwilling to pay at all. Without this papyrus we would be similarly blind.

At the same time this papyrus throws interesting light on the early development of a specific 'Islamic' culture. I already mentioned that the *ṣadaqa* was to be paid over free-grazing goats and sheep. This term, *sā'ima* in Arabic, is a technical term: it refers to the legal stipulation that the obligatory alms-tax had to be paid only over those animals that freely find their own food, as opposed to those that need to be fed.<sup>25</sup> This papyrus thus contains evidence that a number of the same elements that we find described in more detail in the later legal texts already existed at this early stage. Although the papyri do not show the complete Islam as we know it from the later narrative sources, they do open here and there a window. And through these windows we see that there was already in the early eighth century a distinctive Islamic body of thought and behaviour present. It is necessary to read and analyse these kinds of papyri so that the whole picture becomes visible. Without new texts, research into the history of this crucial stage of early Islam stagnates, as it has stagnated for a long time while scholars broke their heads on the problem of the narrative sources.<sup>26</sup>

But the letter also offers fascinating insight into the practical solutions for a problem that played a role in the whole of the Islamic empire. At the beginning of the eighth century the conquests had come to a halt – everything that could be conquered more or less had been. The effect on the caliph's treasury was a dramatic decrease in income, just at a moment when the empire's administrative ambition, propelled by the widening scope of responsibilities taken on by Muslim administrators, was accelerating. The Islamic authorities were consequently forced to rethink their fiscal policy.

What we see here then is the adaptation of religious principles into a workable system of government, a process of careful, commonsensical solution-finding within the parameters of Islamic dogma.<sup>27</sup> It is a vital corrective to the temptation to view Islam as fixed and unchanging, whether one sees this in terms of serene perfection or rigid inflexibility.

The question is, of course, whether this image of a developed and advanced administrative system, with its own cultural and religious-legal tradition, such as we seem to see here, can also be found in the eighty years that separate the conquest of Egypt and the writing of this letter.

The answer is Yes.<sup>28</sup> The two earliest Arabic papyrus texts we have date from the time of the conquest itself. They are written in the year 22 of the

Muslim calendar, in AD 643. The first is a receipt for 65 sheep delivered to an Arab army unit, and the second is a request for a tax-payment of two and a half golden dinars.<sup>29</sup> They are perfect examples of the kind of texts that feed colleagues' jokes about papyrologists: buying and selling sheep, fiscal minutiae – what kind of meaningful information can possibly be derived from this? But let's – as papyrologists do – take a closer look at these texts.

Both texts are of an extremely practical nature, belonging to the routine of government, and they show that the Arabs were from the beginning directly involved in the daily administration of Egypt. The texts are written in Arabic and Greek (although the Greek part of the second papyrus is lost), but they are not merely translations of each other. Each piece was not only written by a different scribe (whose names are recorded at the bottom of the text), but uses its own terminology, formulations and relevant information, reflecting independent scribal, administrative and legal traditions. In other words, the ideas, habits and approaches that the Arabs brought with them could deal with the administration of such a highly developed and extensive entity as Egypt. This is not to say that the Arabs upended the whole administrative system upon their arrival, but that in certain limited areas they introduced key changes that they deemed necessary.<sup>30</sup> And this new, composite tradition was thus – also – expressed in Arabic.

But Arabic is older than Islam. In the period directly preceding the conquests, pre-Islamic, Christian Arab tribes had been completely integrated into the Byzantine administrative and governmental structure. They lived in Byzantine towns and cities where they built churches and other monuments. They not only played an important role in the defence of the Byzantine empire, they were also responsible for such fundamental administrative tasks as collecting taxes and tolls. The many Arabic and Greek inscriptions that they left behind speak to their high degree of integration into the Byzantine bureaucratic system, but also to a well-developed and confident sense of self-identity.<sup>31</sup> With the rise of Islam, this Arab identity received a hugely powerful religious charge. God had, after all, spoken to Muhammad in Arabic. It was the language of the God who had led the Muslims to victory over the ancient empires of Byzantium and Persia, the language of triumph.

## ■ Arabisation

This brings us to another story that took place during these two centuries, namely the spread of Arabic culture and identity amongst Islam's subjects. This process was so successful that, in retrospect, it can seem like a foregone conclusion. But through the papyri we can begin to apprehend the slow and by no means inevitable stages by which Arabic language and

culture replaced a centuries-old tradition of Greek and a millennia-old tradition of Egyptian and, more latterly, Coptic. But the papyri tell us that Arabic percolated through Egypt rather than inundating it, a process which did not take place everywhere at the same pace; Arabisation is by no means the juggernaut that might be assumed. Its remarkable success, however, can be appreciated all the more if we set aside the *Greek* occupation of Egypt: after a thousand years of Greek presence, Egypt was still not Greek-speaking. Or consider the Mongols, who, after their spectacular conquest of much of the Muslim world in the thirteenth century, quickly took up Persian. Linguistic switches can never be taken for granted.

What drove this process forward was surely also the attraction that the rulers' language exerted over the ruled. At the beginning of the eighth century we already find Egyptian Christians who use Arabic when corresponding with Muslims, but also amongst themselves. We hear it also in the lamentations of the writer of the tenth-century *Apocalypse of Samuel of Qalamun*, bemoaning the use by more and more Egyptian Christians of Arabic at the expense of Coptic: 'Disaster, double disaster! In these times they [the Copts] imitate the Muslims. They give their children Muslim names... and they do something so terrible that your hearts will definitely fill with sadness if I tell you about it: they abandon the beautiful Coptic language ... teaching their children from an early age to speak Arabic.'<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, Greek continued to exist as a living and dynamic writing culture at least up to the end of the eighth century.<sup>33</sup> And Coptic continued to be used by converts and Egyptian Christians at least into the eleventh century.<sup>34</sup>

It should be clear from these examples that Arabisation and Islamicisation are two distinct processes. There are now, of course, also large Christian minorities which are completely Arabised. Seven centuries after the conquest of Egypt, the majority of its population was still Christian. The turn-about came only under the large-scale persecutions of the Mamluk rulers in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.<sup>35</sup> While the astute pragmatism of the Arab rulers made sure local identities were not needlessly squashed, the complexity of Arab administration made the model eventually irresistible.<sup>36</sup>

As a symbol of the new rulers and their triumphant religion, Arabic was everywhere present. As I mentioned, it was already in use in the two oldest documents. Also, the Arabic in the letter we saw before, imposing *ṣadaqa* taxes on Muslims, functioned as a synecdoche for the Islamic state, which extended through it to the smallest village in the Fayyūm. At the same time these texts emphasised that the Islamic state trod in the footsteps of the literate, bureaucratic empires that preceded it. These papyri show how the Arabs could exploit the symbolic power of the language – how Arabic functioned, in the parlance of Gilbert and George, as a 'tag'.

The messages that underlie and surround the written word form an indispensable dimension to the understanding of the texts, an understanding that can only be fully experienced through the texts themselves in the language itself. I want to give one more example. In the earliest Arabic papyri from Egypt, administrative titles and technical terms are often represented by Greek words, transcribed into the Arabic. The Greek *meizoteros*, translated as ‘paymaster’, the one receiving tax-payments and writing receipts for it, became in Arabic *māzūt* and even resulted in a typical Arabic ‘broken’ plural form, *mawāzīt*, which is also found in the papyri.<sup>37</sup> It reflects the situation in post-conquest Egypt, when most of the local administrators were the same Christian Egyptians who had served under the Byzantines. Their functions, including the Greek terms used to describe them, continued to exist with them.

Some fifty years after the Islamic conquest an Arabic term, *qabbāl*, literally ‘the receiver’, was introduced, but the Greek term continued to be used occasionally.<sup>38</sup> In the ninth century the caliph in Baghdad attempted to increase his control over Egypt and sent a large group of Persian administrators (with soldiers) to the country. With the administrators arrived also a new term for paymaster, *jahbad*, derived from the Persian.<sup>39</sup> The names of the officials whom we encounter in the papyri at this time point also to a Persian ethnic background. The changes in terminology reflect a movement of people and an ethnic and linguistic shift in the administration of Egypt – a development that would have remained unnoticed but for its traces in the language.

This is the essential point: not everyone has to be able to read and understand Arabic, just as not everyone needs to be able to speak Cantonese, Tamil or Tagalog. But we do need a cadre of dedicated specialists who are able to transfer their knowledge so that texts – that is to say, the totality of cultural association and meaning, grounded in the mechanics of the language – are understood and their significance captured and shared. The reputation of Leiden as a pre-eminent centre of this kind of activity stretches back 400 years and is one only a very few other institutions can match. Even a subject as seemingly obscure as papyrology touches upon the biggest questions in Islam and the evolution of a marginal tribal society in the Arabian Peninsula into a culture that spans dozens of countries and hundreds of millions of people. But almost any attempt to enter this world from whatever side will be rewarded. The richness of this culture is endless and continues to surprise us. We have nothing to fear – not even Gilbert and George.

## ■ Thanks

When I first came to Leiden as an undergraduate, I lodged with my great aunt in De Goejestraat. It wasn’t until some time later, when I started to

study Arabic, that I learned who Michaël Jan de Goeje was. He was, in fact, my predecessor in this chair and one of the very greatest figures ever in the field of Arabic studies. But he was not alone. This university has produced more great Arabists than perhaps any other institution in Europe. It is a tradition, as they would say in America, 'to die for.' For me, to be standing on the shoulders of such giants induces its fair share of vertigo. But I am determined to see that this tradition is preserved and handed on.

It is no secret that politics, the media and the public are in need informed opinions about current Islam and the modern Middle East, a demand that this university also wants to respond to in different ways. I do appreciate that the university maintains a wider vision of this field, in which the rich multiplicity of the Arabic cultural area and its historical depth continues to play a role. But the classical period is more than merely a background to our understanding of the current Middle East. This is not only because Arabic, the language anchored in the Qur'ān, is extraordinarily stable. It is because this special period of scientific and literary flourishing is an integral part of the daily experience in the region. The Middle Ages live and are relevant in a way that we in the West can hardly imagine. It would be as if the news in the Netherlands were to be read in the language of P.C. Hooft or taxi drivers could cite Vondel.

One of the great glories of this university is that Arabic is studied here in the linguistic and geographical context of the whole Middle East, together with Persian and Turkish. This is a fantastically valuable and precious possession, which we should protect very carefully. I am very grateful to the members of the department of Arabic, Persian and Turkish for the warm and caring welcome you have offered me. The department has gone through quite a lot in the last years, but the resilience and potential is enormous, as I have already noticed, and I look forward to making sure together that our programme maintains its reputation in this university, in the Netherlands and in the rest of the world. Especially my predecessor Remke Kruk, but also all my other teachers here in Leiden, I thank you for your encouragement to do extra things during my studies. I hope I will be able to transfer the same enthusiasm for the field and a complete experience of it to my own students. I started my career in Leiden in the history department and while I at a certain time, as my father called it, definitely 'crossed the Witte Singel', I am grateful to be able to work as a colleague next to my teachers. I am especially grateful to the dean, who perhaps 'for old time's sake' has his ear always open and, at least as important, his email always on, for his unceasing support.

Ladies and gentlemen students. More than fifty years ago my predecessor the great Joseph Schacht pointed out from this same spot the responsibility of those in the field to offer objective and trustworthy information about the modern Middle East even if they were only interested in the classical period.<sup>40</sup> You too will be asked constantly to comment on the events

that fill the newspapers, in which the rest – that is, the largest part – of Arabic culture plays no role whatsoever. And so your responsibility will be to mention also those other facets of the Arabic language and culture. It will be my honour and pleasure to be your guide in this exciting landscape.

The two people who should have been here are Sarah Clackson and my father. Both of them stood at the cradle of my career as a papyrologist and they continue to be a great inspiration to me. Fortunately, I encounter them almost daily in my work with the papyri, and I can almost hear their voices as if they still tell me their finds and insights. I know they would have been extremely proud that I stand here today.

I would also like to thank here Alex and Ety. Without the infrastructure and safety net that you offer this would not have been possible. Ety made it possible that I did go and study a year in Eugene, Oregon, after high school. It was the beginning of my international adventures. Alex, I cannot express here how thankful I am for your support along that long road that started somewhere in upstate New York and ended (for the moment) about as far as you can possibly be from your home. Once we arrive in quieter waters, and I have been assured that this will happen, I think we can be very happy here.

Ik heb gezegd.

## Notes

- 1 AVRO Close up: 'Gilbert and George – Art for All', aired 15 March 2009, 6.25pm (1:30:54). See also: "'You see all these Arab newspapers, you don't understand a single word, and that creates some kind of ... tension,'" Gilbert says, referring to the Arab calligraphy that swarms over the mural-like ginkgo works. "Don't you think?" in Gordon Burn, 'It's appalling!' *The Guardian*, 2 June 2005.
- 2 *P.Ness*. no. 75.
- 3 Unpublished papyrus to appear in P.M. Sijpesteijn, *The Voice of the Poor and Needy from Early Islamic Egypt* (in preparation).
- 4 E.g. *P.Cair.Arab.* II nos. 200-14 ; *P.Giss.Arab.* nos. 1-2.
- 5 *P.Giss.Arab.* no. 5; *P.Cair.Arab.* IV no. 260.
- 6 *P.Khalili* I no. 1.
- 7 *P.Horak* nos. 64-6.
- 8 E.g. *P.Cair.Arab.* II.
- 9 E.g. *CPR* XVI no. 35; *P.Hamb.Arab.* I no. 1.
- 10 *P.Hamb.Arab.* II no. 19.
- 11 E.g. *P.Marchands* I-IV; Y. Rāghib, 'Sauf-conduits d'Égypte omeyyade et abbaside,' *Annales Islamologiques* 31 (1997), pp. 143-68.
- 12 For an invitation for a visit, see for example: *P.Hamb.Arab.* I no. 55. For a love letter, see A. Grohmann, *From the World of Arabic Papyri*, Cairo 1952, pp. 182-3.
- 13 These texts appeared in Grohmann, *From the World*, pp. 138, 141-2, 156-7.
- 14 P.J. Sijpesteijn, *Een geschenk van de Nijl*, Amsterdam 1968. Delivered 9 April 1968.

- 15 *Dutch Civilisation in the 17th Century and Other Essays*, trans. A.J. Pomerans, London and Glasgow 1968, p. 271 (= 'Mijn weg tot de historie,' Haarlem 1947, pp. 46-7). Huizinga wanted to study Arabic, but his family could not afford to send him to Leiden. He therefore went to Groningen instead.
- 16 'Up the River', *Letters of Travel* (1892-1913).
- 17 Grohmann, *From the World*, pp. 138-9.
- 18 Cäsar schlug die Gallier.  
 Hatte er nicht wenigstens einen Koch bei sich?  
 Philipp von Spanien weinte, als seine Flotte  
 Untergegangen war. Weinte sonst niemand?  
 First published in Bertold Brecht, *Kalendergeschichten*, 1928.
- 19 Published by G. Levi della Vida, in *Byzantion American Series III*, vol. 17 (1944-5), pp. 212-21. Reproduced in A. Grohmann, 'The Value of Arabic Papyri for the Study of the History of Mediaeval Egypt,' *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Historical Studies*, vol. I (1951), pp. 48-9.
- 20 *P.Marchands II* no. 2.
- 21 P.M. Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State: The World of a Mid-Eighth-Century Egyptian*, text no. 8 (Oxford 2013).
- 22 *Ibid.* chapter 3.
- 23 In the Qur'ān and other early texts *ṣadaqa* and *zakāt* are used interchangeably for the voluntary and obligatory almsgiving. Cf. Th. Weir and A. Zysow, 'Ṣadaqa', *Encyclopaedia of Islam* second edition, vol. 8, pp. 708-16 and A. Zysow, 'Zakāt', *Encyclopaedia of Islam* second edition, vol. 11, pp. 406-22.
- 24 Qur'ān IX:33, 36, 60, 103; XII:40; XXX:30, 43; XCVIII:5.
- 25 Ibn Qudāma (d. 620/1223), *al-Mughnī*, eds. 'A.A. al-Turkī and 'A.F. al-Ḥalw (Cairo 1987), IV, pp. 12, 32.
- 26 The earliest Arabic narrative sources date from the ninth century. At the same time, it is clear that these later narrative sources made use of orally transmitted information and older, not preserved, written sources. In the nineteenth century a source-critical approach to these later written texts led to a sceptical revision amongst, mostly Western, scholars (starting with, especially, Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht). These so-called revisionists considered it impossible to reconstruct the earliest history of Islam on the basis of the later written sources, arguing that the absence of early sources points to a later formation of Islam (e.g. P. Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, Cambridge 1980; G. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, Cambridge 1999; C.F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, Cambridge 2003). Other scholars have tried to analyse the later texts via internal criteria to separate older from newer material (e.g. G.H.A. Juynboll, *Encyclopedia of Canonical Hadith*, Leiden 2007; M.J. Kister, *Society and Religion from Jahiliyya to Islam*, Aldershot 1990). A younger generation of scholars has attempted to interpret the texts with the aid of sources that are independent from the Islamic narrative tradition (papyri, inscriptions, coins, archaeology) (e.g. R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, Princeton 1997). For an overview of this historiographical debate, see F.M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins. The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, Princeton 1998, Introduction. For the most recent developments in the use of documentary sources, such as papyri, see <http://www.ori.uzh.ch/isap.html>.
- 27 P.M. Sijpesteijn, 'Creating a Muslim State: The Collection and Meaning of *ṣadaqa*,' in B. Palme (ed.), *Akten des 23. Internationalen Papyrologenkongresses Wien, 22.-28. Juli 2001* (Vienna 2007), pp. 661-74.
- 28 The following is described in more detail in P.M. Sijpesteijn, 'The Arab Conquest of Egypt and the Beginning of Muslim Rule,' Chapter 21 in R.S. Bagnall (ed.), *Byzantine Egypt* (Cambridge 2007), pp. 437-59; idem 'New Rule over Old Structures: Egypt after the Muslim Conquest,' in H. Crawford (ed.), *Regime Change in the Ancient Near East*

- and Egypt: From Sargon of Agade to the Seljuks. *Proceedings of the British Academy* 136 (London 2007), pp. 183-202.
- 29 SB VI 9576. Y. Rāghib, 'Un papyrus arabe de l'an 22 de l'hégire,' in Gh. Alleaume, S. Denoix, M. Tuchscherer (eds.), *Histoire, archéologies et littératures du monde musulman. Mélanges en l'honneur de l'André Raymond* (Cairo 2009), pp. 363-72.
- 30 See for this Sijpesteijn, 'New Rule ...' note 27. See also the extensive documentation related to Senouthios *anystes* in CPR XXII, no. 1 and CPR XXX.
- 31 M. Kaimio, 'P.Petra inv. 83: A Settlement of Dispute,' in *Atti dell XXII Congresso Internazionale di Papirologia* (Florence 2001): 719-24; R. Hoyland, 'Epigraphy and the Emergence of Arab Identity,' in P.M. Sijpesteijn *et al.* (eds), *From al-Andalus to Khurasan. Documents from the Medieval Muslim World* (Leiden 2007), pp. 219-42.
- 32 J. Ziadeh, 'L'Apocalypse de Samuel, supérieur de deir-elqalamoun,' *Revue de l'orient chrétien* 20 (1915-17), pp. 374-404, esp. 394-5.
- 33 CPR XXII, Introduction.
- 34 The changed style in Coptic documents dating from after the Arab conquest was the subject of a conference in Oxford, 'Beyond Free Variation: Scribal Repertoires in Egypt from the Old Kingdom to the Early Islamic Period,' University College, Oxford, 14-16 September 2009. T. S. Richter, 'Spätkoptische Rechtsurkunden neu bearbeitet (II): Die Rechtsurkunden des Teschlot-Archivs,' *Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 30 (2000), pp. 95-148.
- 35 T. El-Leithy, *Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo, 1293-1524 AD* Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University 2005.
- 36 In the ninth century the majority of the Egyptian population used Arabic and the number of converts started to increase. It is therefore in the ninth century that we can see an Egyptian Muslim identity develop (P.M. Sijpesteijn, *Building an Egyptian identity*, in A. Q. Ahmed, B. Sadeghi and M. Bonner, *The Islamic Scholarly Tradition. Studies in History, Law and Thought in Honor of Professor Michael Allan Cook*, Leiden 2011, pp. 85-106).
- 37 A. Grohmann, 'Der Beamtenstab der Arabische Finanzverwaltung in Ägypten in früharabischer Zeit,' in H. Braunert (ed.), *Studien zur Papyrologie und antiken Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, Bonn 1964, pp. 120-34, esp. 129-31.
- 38 CPR XXI, pp. 119-21.
- 39 First used in a receipt dated 249/863 (A. Grohmann, 'Probleme der arabischen Papyrusforschung II,' *Archiv Orientalni* 6, 1934, pp. 377-98, no. 14). Cf. CPR XXI, pp. 122-3.
- 40 *De Arabieren en de islam*, Leiden 1954.

## What is Islam?

In the study of Islam and Arabic language everything changed with the attacks of September 11, 2001. What had previously been the object of mostly peripheral and fitful attention suddenly exploded into an issue of anguished and outraged concern: what *is* Islam, what is it Muslims believe, and what is it they *want*?

Such question-asking – by policy-makers, security agencies, academics and, not least, the general public – connects to a long tradition of Western puzzlement and consternation at the Middle East and a near-habitual experience of being caught dangerously off-guard. The Arab Spring is merely the latest in a bewildering history of crises and convulsions – from Suez, to the Iranian Revolution, to Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait, to 9/11, along with a host of lesser surprises in between – that have wrong-footed Western governments and commentators. More than a decade after 9/11 and more than thirty years after the Iranian revolution, it is fair to say that we seem to be no closer to coming up a meaningful understanding of the Muslim world and what makes it tick.

This has not been for want of trying. But although there has been much intelligent analysis in the last ten years, the public debate is still heavily infected by unhelpful talk about clashes of civilisations and Islam’s incorrigible defects. In the meantime the Islamic *problematique* has become even more intractable, spawning new complexities and moving into ever more areas of public concern. The ‘war on terror’ to which the 9/11 atrocities gave rise has finally put paid to Osama bin Laden, but his terrorist network continues to menace the safety and peace of mind of tens of millions of people. The war launched in Afghanistan to uproot al-Qaeda and its Taliban protectors is already the longest in U.S. history and shows few signs of ending satisfactorily. As well as causing over three thousand military fatalities and tens of thousands of civilian deaths, it has brought down two U.S. generals,<sup>1</sup> a Dutch government and the president of Germany. More lives and reputations will inevitably follow in its wake.

Elsewhere in Europe and North America the ‘Islam question’ burns similarly hot. In September 2009 Switzerland voted in favour of a constitutional amendment prohibiting the building of new minarets. In April 2010 a bill banning face-covering veils (the *burqa* and *niqāb*) from public places was passed by the Belgian lower chamber, and only missed becoming law

when the government fell before it could be voted on by the Belgian Senate. Three months later the French parliament followed suit with its own anti-*burqa* law.<sup>2</sup> In the Netherlands, the populist right-wing politician Geert Wilders has gone one further, proposing a tax on all headscarf-wearers – the so-called ‘kopvoddentax’ – to offset what he claims is the drain of Muslim immigration on the public purse. Despite widespread condemnation by the Dutch political establishment, Wilders’ standing with the public has if anything grown, and in the June 2010 national elections his party leaped forward to become the third largest in the Dutch parliament. With the subsequent coalition (Rutte I) dependent on his support for its voting majority, Wilders wielded significant influence on the Dutch political agenda and government policy. So it was that one of the conditions of that support, a ban on *burqas* in the Netherlands was duly passed in January 2012 by the second chamber in parliament.<sup>3</sup>

Everywhere, it seems, anti-Islamism is winning votes. In France, Muslim-baiting Front National leader Marine Le Pen was, according to at least one poll, more popular than the president.<sup>4</sup> In Sweden, a platform of trenchant Islamophobia and anti-immigration has seen the far-right Sweden Democratic Party trip the 4% threshold to enter parliament for the first time. Even in the United States, depressingly, anti-Muslim antagonism has contaminated domestic politics, with an ugly row over the building of a Muslim cultural centre and mosque near the World Trade Center ground zero site, and presidential hopefuls competing to talk tough about Islamofascism.

That Switzerland has only four minarets or no more than 100 Dutch women, and even fewer Belgian women,<sup>5</sup> actually wear fully face-covering veils seems hardly to matter. For Geert Wilders, speaking at the ground zero site on the tenth anniversary of 9/11, the proposed cultural centre represented the ‘powers of darkness, the force of hatred and the blight of ignorance’.<sup>6</sup> The visceral panic these symbols of Muslim infiltration trigger, it would seem, is highly resistant to reason and proportionality.

## ■ The truth about Islam

For an Arabist and medieavalist, to have one’s field the subject of such pressing topicality is an exhilarating experience. It is also somewhat daunting, not least because so much of what is said about Islam is not just wrong, but worryingly wrong-headed. If Muslim beliefs and behaviour continue to mystify, if we are no closer to finding an intelligible answer for ‘what do Muslims want?’, if our only solution to dealing with Islam and its believers is to push them away, might we be asking the wrong questions?

In this sense Wilders is exemplary. His trial for inciting religious hatred by comparing the Qur’ān to *Mein Kampf*<sup>7</sup> ended, inevitably, in acquittal.

But not before Wilders' determination to expose 'the truth' about Islam had resulted in the Qur'ān itself joining him in the dock, and combatants on both sides of the debate weighing in with their own close readings of Muslim scripture and what they take to be the well-springs of Islamic values and behaviour.

Oddly, the assumptions about Islam on which his position rested aligned closely with those of Muslim fundamentalism, an irony not entirely lost on Wilders, who tried to summon Muslim extremists as witnesses for his defence. For radicals on both sides of the argument, Islam is a coherent, unitary and fully co-ordinated system of answers, rules and goals that single-handedly accounts for Muslim culture and conduct. Understanding this system is no further away than an uncomplicatedly literal reading of its holiest text, and more than a millennium of interpretation and debate across an enormous variety of culturally and geographically dispersed communities can be blithely waved away. 'I don't hate Muslims, I hate Islam,' says Wilders in his signature refrain.<sup>8</sup> But what then *is* 'Islam'?

We might begin with the Qur'ān itself and what exactly it *does* say. Crystalline transparency in any 1,400-year-old text can hardly be taken for granted, but the Qur'ān happens to be a text of unusual complexity. Almost immediately after Muḥammad's revelations Muslim exegetes were breaking their heads over the meaning and interpretation of Qur'ānic verses, and the rich exegetical literature this generated continues to be added to with numerous new works every year. Not only is the Qur'ān's poetic language extremely difficult philologically, with much that is highly elliptical, if not downright baffling, but its many references to the Judeo-Christian tradition from which Islam sprang – not only as it is preserved in the Bible and Gospels, but also in, for example, Christian apocryphal literature – are often highly allusive. In their attempts to pick apart the Qur'ān's meaning, therefore, scholars have become ingenious in looking beyond the text – at other religious traditions for analogies and antecedents, at other languages – including Hebrew, Ethiopic and Syriac – for word cognates and linguistic parallels, and at the historical and political context generally.<sup>9</sup> All of this would be bad enough, but the Qur'ān that Muhammad left behind him was not a single, neatly bound book, but a disparate collection of revelations experienced over a 23-year period. These revelations were not compiled into a standardised text, according to the Muslim tradition, until twenty years later in 650s, when competing versions were collected and burned.<sup>10</sup> But this authorised version – the *muṣṣhaf* – is itself not without variation and Islamic scholars acknowledge a textual transmission history of the Qur'ān.<sup>11</sup> Although such discrepancies tend to be relatively minor, they continue even into the first printed versions of the twentieth century. The Qur'ān, in other words, is a text that lives and breathes.<sup>12</sup>

What this means in practical terms is that clarity and consistency have to be imposed by means of *interpretation*, and given the intimate and vital role the Qur'ān has played in the lives of hundreds of millions of people in many different countries, these interpretations have, not surprisingly, varied markedly. Every Muslim believer, however orthodox, carries within himself his own personal variant of his religion, his own unique 'take', grounded in his time, place and personality. And Islam's lack of a central doctrinal legislature also allows the believer special latitude in plotting his individual path.

These millions of private inflections may be inaccessible to us, but we should at least take account of their *published* traces, however vast, dispersed and heterogeneous. If the Qur'ān is the foundation of Islam, it is not the entire edifice: around the prophetic core lies a very significant hinterland of more than a millennium of engagement, interpretation and debate. To ignore it is to do extreme violence to our understanding of the Islamic religion and reduce its texture and complexity to an unintelligible caricature. Correcting the simplifications and elisions that have soured the West's perception of Islam, and recovering the history and diversity of the religion, is precisely one of those areas where historians can contribute most.

A related fallacy to Islamic monolithicism that needs to be addressed is the tendency to confuse (seemingly frozen) prescription and actual practice. Religion is not an abstract phenomenon but a human activity, and it is the human experience that crucially determines the form religious practice takes. This may even be especially true in the case of Islam, since the unusually rigorous and totalising nature of the demands it makes upon its believers inevitably invites countervailing pressures from a proportionately large variety of sources. Balancing the requirements of his or her religion against the pressures of daily life and survival is the defining challenge of every Muslim's faith, and each will reach his own *modus vivendi* in his own way. That Islam has historically been quite good at accommodating this kind of variety is one of the reasons behind its success. Indeed, it is precisely Islam's mutability that has kept it so vibrant, and has allowed it, for example, to appeal with equal force to Persian aristocrats in the ninth century and American prison inmates in the twenty-first.

Muslim purists, of course, will argue that all of this is merely tarnish on a once-bright surface, the accumulation of centuries of compromise and corrosion. Beneath it, if we could only access it, lies the 'true' Islam. In the case of the Qur'ān, as we have seen, the original meaning must remain fundamentally conjectural; any attempt to approach this dense and obscure text will have to rely on interpretation and surmise, however well informed. But might there be a phase of prelapsarian *practice* to which we could refer?

## ■ Islam in history

This is where my own research specialty of Arabic papyrology comes in. The systematic study of documents on papyrus is, on the face of it, a stereotypically arcane, mandarin science. A product of the nineteenth-century surge in empirical history, it belongs with micro-disciplines such as epigraphy and numismatics in relying on highly specialised expertise and painstaking application to build a corpus of verifiable data. None of this, in these days of social relevance and economic impact, is likely to set pulses racing.

And yet, it turns out, papyrology holds in its dusty grasp perhaps our best means of apprehending the development of early Islam. The otherwise opaque first two centuries during which this desert sect transformed itself into a world religion, and during which it acquired the outlines of a settled system of practice and belief, is documented in no other body of evidence.

This is exciting, because it is especially this earliest phase of Islam's history that is considered to be its pristine and inviolable centre in an ever-changing world. For Islam's defenders and assailants alike, the prophet Muḥammad, his revelations and teachings represent Islam as it was supposed to be.

But from the records of this period as they are slowly salvaged a somewhat different story emerges. If there is today no one Islam, this was equally true in Islam's earliest period. Even in its infancy, the religion embraced a diversity of views and practices, inconsistencies and even contradictions. These covered not just what we take to be Islam's core practices, such as the requirement to perform *ḥajj*, the pilgrimage that is one of the five duties of every Muslim, but even fundamental theological perspectives on how the world is, and should be, organised. Understanding how these early centuries unfolded, therefore, is a powerful – perhaps definitive – corrective to 'Islamic essentialism', the temptation to see in Islam a transcendent core impervious to innovation and constitutionally averse to improvisation.

This is the value of social history: to show how Muslims 'on the ground' have engaged with their religion, and how that mutability manifest itself in different historical contexts. In my own work, it is through an examination of lived experience in the mediaeval period that I explore the ways in which a Muslim's life was constituted of more than his or her religion. And papyrology, with its high-magnification focus on the life and behaviour of man-in-the-street individuals, offers the perfect keyhole onto the experience of daily life under Islam, bringing the world of Muslims alive, from the highest to the lowest social classes. Without over-simplifying or romanticising the role of papyrus documents, which are, after all, *written* documents (and the refracting power of human mediation applies here too), the possibilities they offer for understanding of the processes of

social, economic and cultural transformation under Islamic rule are uniquely rich. And it is through these documents that we can begin to apprehend, at Islam's very outset, the complex conversation between theory and practice in religious observation and lived experience.

## History now

It is here that the day-to-day experience of a mediaeval Muslim villager begins to connect with life and politics in the twenty-first century. The Muslim Brotherhood's slogan 'Islam is the solution' (*al-islām huwa al-ḥall*) can be found on election banners and graffiti'd on walls across the Middle East. For Muslim zealots such rhetoric exhilarates to the same degree it unnerves Islam-sceptics. The election victories of Islamist parties in Tunisia and Egypt at the end of last year has raised the uncomfortable spectre of narrow religious dogma being set free to suffocate political debate and public life and the imposition of a punitive and backward-looking theocracy. The victory of the Islamic al-Nahḍa party in Tunisia, which has led to censorship in the name of Islam both by the authorities and violence by the public supporting them (al-Nahḍa gained two-fifths of the votes), seems to bear these fears out. The appearance of God in the film version of *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi's story of a young girl's coming of age during the Iranian revolution in 1979, resulted in riots when televised in October 2011. The station's chairman, Nabil Karoui, not only had his house firebombed, but was charged with 'insulting sacred values, offending decent morals and causing public unrest'. In response, however, thousands of Tunisians took to the streets protesting the violent imposition of Muslim values. Karoui was convicted and fined anyway. At stake here are less Manichean confrontations between Islam and secularism, but inter-Muslim disagreements about the role of Islam in politics. And this is only the battle waged in the capital; Tunisians in the countryside have their own ways of interpreting Islam again.

With nearly half its members belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood and almost a quarter to the Salafist party, Egypt's parliament is the first to be dominated by Islamists in the Arab world. In such an environment the call to prayer raised by Mamḍūḥ Ismā'īl, one of the Salafist parliament members, which interrupted a live televised parliamentary debate earlier this month, might have been expected to be received with enthusiastic approbation. In the event, however, the speaker of parliament and a prominent Muslim Brother, Sa'd al-Katātānī, warned Ismā'īl to confine his prayers to a mosque and in future leave parliament for debate, adding, 'You are not more religious than us nor more vigilant in your prayers' (*Lasta aḥsan minnā islāman. Lasta aḥsan minnā ḥirṣan 'alā al-ṣalāt*). The exchange gave rise to a lively discussion about the legality of deferring prayers missed

during the day at some later point, with the Prophet invoked to bolster arguments on both sides.

At an earlier session too *ḥadīths* had been the object of debate when Sayyid ‘Askar, a Muslim Brotherhood MP, expert on Islamic law and head of the Religious Affairs Committee in parliament, protested the indiscriminate and incorrect use of prophetic *ḥadīths* by fellow parliamentarians, warning that many of their citations were based on weak religious authorities. The transposition of this debate to a legislative chamber may be new, but the debate itself is ancient: according to whose authority do you understand the words and example of the Prophet and what do they mean? It is the ongoing exercise fundamental to Muslim exegesis: innovation and revision – within the context of immemorial tradition.

Even amongst Salafists, adherents to a form of Islam which they claim was practiced by Muhammad’s earliest followers and whose clearly recognisable uniform of hairstyle and clothing is designed to project consistency and homogeneity, different interpretations and ideas circulate. A group calling themselves Costa Salafis (*Salafyo Costa*) after the popular coffee chain where the founding members used to meet has become an internet hit thanks to short films such as ‘Where is my shop?’ (*ayna maḥalli?*) spread via YouTube. Their purpose is to show that, although Salafi’s adhere strictly to Muslim values, some also drink cappuccinos, use Facebook and have a sense of humour. This last trait was to the fore when participating in the Tahrīr demonstrations with the slogan ‘we are always the ones to pay for the drinks’ (in colloquial Egyptian: *iḥna dayman illi binḥāsib ‘ala l-mashareeb*)<sup>13</sup> in reply to the accusation current amongst many Egyptians that the Salafis were to blame for the problems besetting post-revolution Egypt. Although adhering to the Salafists’ strict and literalist interpretation of Islam (their films included contributions by Copts and liberals, but without women and – in an even more striking departure from the Egyptian movie tradition – with music completely absent), their presence at the square and more inclusive and ecumenical attitude represented a clear break with the Salafi orthodoxy.

So while many Muslims in the Middle East still look to Islam for solutions to the challenges of political organisation and personal ethics, they do not necessarily expect unitary and clear-cut answers. Instead, Islam offers a language with which to think through these puzzles. Throughout Islam’s history Muslims have struggled with questions of how to be a good Muslim, what a Muslim should do and not do, and how to derive guidance from the Qur’ān. This process not only continues but, under the weight of advancing technology and relentless globalisation, has even intensified. Social media and the internet, with the democratisation of knowledge and huge proliferation of new and unregulated sources of authority that they have brought, have radical implications for Islam. How Muslims respond

to these trends and how the debate develops within these widening parameters, will be one of Islam's core challenges. We can only observe with curiosity and interest the discussion it creates.

## Notes

- 1 In May 2009 David McKiernan, coalition commander in Afghanistan, became the first U. S. general in 50 years to be removed from his post during wartime. Highlighting how contentious the war in Afghanistan had become, just over a year later his successor, Stanley McChrystal (after a much-publicised disagreement with President Obama), became the second (M. Hastings, 'The Runaway General', *Rolling Stone*, 18-22 July 2010, pp. 1108-9).
- 2 An extension of the 2004 prohibition of *hijābs* (headscarves) in state schools. Headscarves have also been banned among public service employees in Quebec (since March 2010) and several German states.
- 3 *Burqa*, a full body cover from one piece of cloth with a gaze for the eyes is hardly, if at all, worn in the Netherlands, but the word became the popularly used reference for the more common *niqāb*, a cloth wrapped around the head and face leaving the eyes uncovered.
- 4 *Le Parisien*, 6 March 2012.
- 5 The proposed penalties in Belgium ranged from fines of € 15 to 25 or a seven-day jail sentence. The largely symbolic nature of the ban only serves to emphasise the confused emotionalism of the debate. The proposed fin in the Netherlands is € 380. Annelies Moors ('Gezichtssluiers en Draagsters', 2009, p. 28) has argued that there were no more than a hundred women in the Netherlands who regularly wear the *niqāb* and 400 who wear it once in a while.
- 6 Gingrich likened it to Nazis putting up a sign next to the Holocaust Museum in Washington (16 August 2010). The centre, including the mosque (or 'prayer space'), was officially opened in late September 2011.
- 7 In a letter to the editor of the *Volkskrant*, 8 August 2007.
- 8 *The Guardian*, 15 March 2009.
- 9 The very complexity of the Qur'ān has made it unusually susceptible to farfetched theorising. Christoph Luxenberg's, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* (Berlin: Hans Schiler 2000; translated as *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran*, 2007) is a case *par excellence*. Luxenberg, a still unpenetrated pseudonym, argues that the Qur'ān was originally written in a Syrio-Aramaic patois and only later shoe-horned into classical Arabic, and it was this process of imperfect translation that accounts for the Qur'ān's many apparently incomprehensible passages. Although Luxenberg's scholarship has been roundly criticised by experts in the field, his thesis has nevertheless seeped into the popular imagination (who does not now know that the virgins promised to good Muslims in paradise are "really" raisins?), to a degree that now makes it unignorable.
- 10 Although the mosaic inscription on the Dome of the Rock, dated 80/690, contains Qur'ānic verses, albeit with similar small variations, as does a papyrus letter dated 102/721 (Y. Rāḡib, 'Une lettre familiale rédigée en 102/721' *Annales Islamologiques* 45 2011: 273-284), no *complete* Qur'ānic codex could so far be safely dated to the earliest period. François Déroche's recent discovery of a substantial Qur'ānic manuscript datable to 690-700 has changed this (*La transmission écrite du Coran dans les débuts de l'islam. Le codex Parisino-petropolitanus*. Leiden 2009).

- 11 See Ibn Khaldūn's (d. 1406) statement that the scribes living at the time of the prophet Muhammad who were engaged in the copying of the Qur'ān were not free from deficiency in their writings (*The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, translated by F. Rosenthal, London 1967, vol. 2, pp. 382-3).
- 12 See also the Qur'ānic commentary project Corpus Coranicum (<http://koran.bbaw.de>).
- 13 In the absence of a standardised transliteration system for colloquial Egyptian, I use an adjusted form of the system employed to transcribe *fushā* in this book. I have transcribed those texts containing one or more words in Egyptian as colloquial even if the rest looks like *fushā*.



## Reading the Revolution

Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, chased from Tunisia after 23 years in power; Hosni Mubarak, forced to stand down in Egypt after 30 years in power; Muammar Gaddafi, deposed and finally killed in Libya after 42 years in power; Ali Abdullah Saleh gone from Yemen after 33 years in power; Bashar al-Assad, after 11 years, close to toppling in Syria; even King Abdullah II of Jordan (12 years in power), long the friendly face of Arab autocracy, looking increasingly vulnerable as the ground begins to shift under him as well. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia (six years in power) has felt the need for \$36 billion in additional social welfare expenditure.<sup>1</sup> And even before, the Green Movement protesting the 2009-10 elections that brought Mahmud Ahmedinajad a second term in Iran, was severely curtailed, but its voice still resonates. The storm blowing across the region is bringing change on an almost unimaginable scale.

Not least among the wreckage lying in its wake are many of the West's easy assumptions about Middle Eastern culture and politics. In his address to Congress nine days after the September 11<sup>th</sup> atrocities, George W. Bush affirmed to Muslims throughout the world the respect of the United States for their faith and its tenets. 'Its teachings are good and peaceful, and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah.' In attempting to wrest what 'Islam' stands for away from the violence and extremism of al-Qaeda, Bush attempted to assert his own, more congenial take on the religion. But the premise was flawed and the attempt fundamentally misguided, not only in reducing the complexity of Muslim doctrine to sound-bite characterisations such as 'good' and 'peaceful', but in assuming that Islam automatically fixes the frame for the aspirations and allegiances of every Muslim. In the extraordinarily highly charged environment of September 11<sup>th</sup> and its aftermath, and given al-Qaeda's militant Islamist rhetoric, this confusion was perhaps understandable. Subsequent events, however, have utterly confounded it.

'Why do they hate us?' the president asked. The answers were readily at hand. 'They hate our freedoms – our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.' Here, in a nutshell, was the 'Muslim rage' thesis, long propounded by veteran Islam-watcher Bernard Lewis<sup>2</sup> over a lengthy series of increasingly despairing publications. Mired in regressive patterns of subjugation and

control, beset by corrupt and ineffectual rulers, intellectually despondent and economically adrift, the peoples of the Middle East were locked in ‘a downward spiral of hate and spite, rage and self-pity, poverty and oppression’.<sup>3</sup> Lewis though, a scholar of great erudition, nevertheless tried to retain some nuance when considering the role of Islam in the Middle East’s malaise. Was Islam by its very nature antithetical to the development of democratic institutions? Lewis decided, on balance, it was probably not.<sup>4</sup> More strident voices writing in his wake though – especially those with little knowledge of Middle Eastern languages and minimal engagement with its culture – had no such reservations. For Samuel Huntington and political theorists like him portentous systematisation largely precluded nuance. Islam’s inveterate illiberality set it on a millennial collision course with Western values and Western interests. The unavoidable result was nothing less than – to use Huntington’s notorious phrase (borrowed from Lewis) – a ‘clash of civilisations’.<sup>5</sup>

Dubious theories about Islam and the Middle East are hardly new, and Huntington’s has received its fair share of criticism.<sup>6</sup> What has been particularly depressing about the ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis, however, is the degree to which it has penetrated the popular imagination and infiltrated policy-making.<sup>7</sup>

## ■ Arab Spring

What then has the Arab Spring done to this view? Most importantly, it has called into question the West’s fixation on Islam as an underlying *problematique* to which all other problems – whether Middle Eastern politics, global terrorism or immigration – necessarily return. For one, it turns out ‘they’ do not necessarily hate us at all.<sup>8</sup> While Bush, and many like him, emphasised that Muslim terrorism is the work of an extremist fringe, his very use of the word ‘extremist’ implied a continuum of views, along which variance was defined more by intensity than essential content. So, as the protesters filled Cairo’s Tahrir Square, viewers around the world watched their television screens to see where on the line between ‘moderate’ and ‘extremist’ the protests would fall. Anti-American and anti-Western slogans, effigies of Western leaders and Israeli flags consumed by flames, and calls for Islamic rule were dreaded, but expected.

And yet the protests operated on an altogether different discursive plane – one, in fact, that passionately upheld those very values Bush had complacently taken to be exclusively Western, with banners that proclaimed a hunger for Western-style freedoms, civil society and the rule of law. The most straightforward call for democracy, ‘the people want ‘to overthrow the system’ (*al-sha‘b yuridu ‘isqāt al-nizām*), resonated in fact so well with those wanting change that it has been adopted by the ‘Occupy’ movement and can now be heard (in Arabic) on Wall Street and other banking

capitals. The protestors, it became clear, represented the new, SMSing, tweeting and Facebook-crazy Egypt, outward-looking, globally connected and impatient for change. While mostly a phenomenon of Egypt's tiny middle class, its influence ranges much more broadly. And even more, it presents an Egypt that no one had seen.

The fundamentalist bogeyman with which Arab despots had long used to frighten Western governments into propping up their squalid regimes turned out to be a distortion, especially striking in Egypt since Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood had long provided the only effective opposition to Hosni Mubarak's National Democratic Party dictatorship. There were members of the Muslim Brotherhood at Taḥrīr Square during those first demonstrations, who waved their Qur'āns and called for change in the name of Islam, but these belonged to a new generation who were, in fact, showing their disagreement with the old guard exactly by participating in the spontaneous popular uprising.

Since then the Islamist forces have regrouped. In Tunisia's 23 October elections the Islamist party al-Nahḍa won 41.5 per cent of the seats. The Muslim Brotherhood together with the Salafists gained a watershed victory in Egypt's November parliamentary elections. The Islamists are definitely experiencing more freedom than they did before the revolution. Laws outlawing Islamists have been abolished in Tunisia which resulted in several incidents with conservative Muslims protesting film broadcasts, alcohol consumption and women's clothing. In Egypt the prohibition against wearing the *niqāb* in university exams was lifted. These measures have not immediately resulted in an Islamist hijacking of the Arab Spring, a straight-forward Islamicisation of public life. Rather, as clashes between the Tunisian police and Salafī demonstrators in Tunisia and the fierce debates between Salafī and Muslim Brotherhood MPs in Egyptian parliament as well as the current, albeit recently challenged by the recently appointed president Muḥammad Mursī and in the end probably short-lived truce between the Egyptian army and Islamist parliament show, the debate continues at all levels with shifting alliances and changing attitudes.

In other words, the two scenarios for the revolution's possible outcome – Western-style democracies with automatic equal rights for all or a restrictive Islamist takeover – are caricatures. The structures of repression entrenched in many Middle Eastern countries turn out to be very resilient. But more importantly there remain many contradictions and almost unbridgeable clefts in these societies – between city and countryside, between the educated and the illiterate, the rich and the poor – that create suspicion and fear of change and other groups. Most people in these societies, we forget, have a difficult time simply fighting for their existence and want their lives to return to normal, allowing them to work, make a living, start and maintain a family.

The true character of the revolution and the society behind it then, is much more complex. It will take more than a ‘Spring’ to change it, but most importantly the revolution and its aftermath has shown that it is in constant motion. The road will be long and bumpy but the discussion continues and while going about their day-to-day business, many continue to be involved. The commemoration of the Egyptian revolution on January 25 of this year brought again millions of Egyptians to Taḥrīr Square, spilling onto the bridges across the Nile. The court cases initiated by the new governments are eagerly followed across the Arab world, and postings on Facebook and articles in newspapers critically examine both new and old rulers as well as their supporters. New graffiti give expression to grievances and demands that have (still) not been met. The slogan ‘the army and the people are one’ (*ig-geesh w-ish-sha’b id waḥda*)<sup>9</sup> with which soldiers were welcomed in January 2011 turned into ‘the people want to overthrow the military rule’ (*al-sha’b yurīdu ‘isqāṭ al-ḥukm al-‘askarī*).<sup>10</sup> The current government and its liaison with the military gave rise to: ‘Two fear the square: parliament and the Muslim brothers’ (*itneen khayfīn il-midān il-maḡlis w-il-‘ikhwān*).<sup>11</sup> In the meantime anonymous graffiti artists cheekily recast Islamism’s stock phrase, *al-Islām huwa al-ḥall* (‘Islam is the solution’) into *al-raḡṣ huwa al-ḥall* (‘dancing is the solution’) on posters and stencils that have been appearing on Cairo’s streets.<sup>12</sup>

These many faces of the revolution were also expressed in the jokes, plays-on-words and visual games that appeared on the banners and signs carried through the streets. Stickers celebrating January 25<sup>th</sup>, the day of the first large protest in the square, parodied car number plates, with their loose letters, unlike the regularly connected Arabic script. A dentist’s banner playfully announced: ‘Pulling a molar: 20 Egyptian pounds. Pulling a tooth: 10 Egyptian pounds. Pulling Mubarak: free!’ Commenting on the bad state of public health, another one said: ‘Do you know why Mubarak is 80 years old? Because he is not on health insurance!’ (*‘ārif leeh ḥusnī ‘adda t-tamānīn? ‘alashān ma-byit’alig-shī fī t-ta’mīn*).<sup>13</sup> Remaining closer to the election theme, another banner referred to the practice of using symbols on electoral ballots by stating: ‘Elect the revolution. Symbol:’ followed by the depiction of a gasmask (*intakhibū al-thawra ramz:*). Exploiting the ability of vowels can change the meaning of Arabic words written solely with consonants, the letters *mīm*, *ṣād*, *rā* appeared with different vowels around it, indicating the reading: *Miṣr muṣirr* (‘Egypt is determined’ or ‘persistent’). Even further away, Lara Captan, a Lebanese designer depicted the Arabic word *nizām* (‘system’) together with the different strokes that formed the letters of this word, thereby collapsing not only the scriptural structure of the word but also symbolising the falling to pieces of the government systems that the Arab Spring demonstrators were calling for.<sup>14</sup>



*Illustration 2 The Stroke, designed by Lara Captan.*

These jokes connected with a long-standing culture of humour in Middle Eastern (especially Egyptian) politics, but they were lost on most foreign observers and reporters because they were not able to read them. More importantly, they were ignored because they were so alien to the Western image of an oppressively humourless Middle East.

## ■ Arabic beyond Islam

Arabic is a language of a richly variegated array of cultures and societies that today embraces a quarter of a billion speakers, including not just Muslims but millions of Christians and Jews. This is true now, but it was especially true for the centuries following the Muslim conquests. While the Islamic empire expanded quickly in the seventh century, it took much longer for the subjects of Muslim rule to become Muslim themselves. The influence of the Arabic language, however, was immediately discernible. It is this interaction between Arabic and the indigenous languages, between language and politics, language and religion, that has been the focus point of much recent research, including my own. A better awareness of the importance of multilingualism and the subtle choices made in the use of languages existing side by side, and the power of language as a mover and symbol (in a negative and positive sense) of cultural change, has greatly enhanced our understanding of early Islam and the spread of Islamic power.

Even after Arabic replaced indigenous languages, linguistic diversity, remained a feature of the Arabic speaking world. The literary Arabic (*fushhā*), described in ninth-century grammars and linguistic works, but based on the language of the Qur'ān, was and is used for official, scholarly texts. Students of this language can access a vast reservoir of texts from the earliest graffito or papyrus dated to 12 and 10 years after the death of the prophet Muhammad respectively, to the latest blog comment written 10 minutes ago. Next to this literary language exist the vernacular variants, the so-called dialects (most importantly Moroccan, Egyptian, Levantine and that of the Gulf) still spoken today, but whose features can also be found in mediæval graffiti, letters and other 'unofficial' texts. The papyri, typically, with their mundane and temporal character, contain many features of this spoken language, forming a middle form between the literary Arabic and the dialects proper.

How you interpret this language of the papyri – as a corruption of the literary language or as a purposely designed language for specific goals – leads to important questions about methods and levels of education and literacy. The choice of language register is thus closely connected to one's social, intellectual, economic, ethnic background, but can also be chosen for a specific audience, revealing concerns about the purpose of the message and the underlying meanings that are being communicated. Papyri

and other texts have allowed us to examine these questions for the past, but this phenomenon continues up to today.

To return to the bill boards carried by and the graffiti sprayed by the protestors of the Arab spring, it is clear that they too conveyed messages via the language used that go beyond the proximate content of the texts. A superficial observation shows that more conservative Muslims and Islamisist groups used classical Arabic (*fuṣḥā*) for their messages. On the other hand one could find nicely painted and carefully executed banners written in colloquial idiom and slogans written on makeshift pieces of cardboard in rhymed classical Arabic. But even beyond that lies the language used in social media. Arabic written in Latin characters with some symbols, such as 7 for *ḥā'* and 3 for *'ayn*, is used to write text messages on telephones and the internet, as well as Arabic letters. Spoken and written variants of Arabic are mixing to form new languages which are continuously changing and developing especially quickly due to the enormous amounts of text files of texts that are moving around the worldwide web and other forms of new media.<sup>15</sup> Taking features from the dialects and Standard Arabic, educated spoken Arabic functions at national and transnational levels.<sup>16</sup> A similar development towards a fluid Arabic *lingua franca* for the internet is now taking place in the communication in social media.<sup>17</sup> Films, soap operas, talk shows and songs made and watched all over the Arab world, along with blogs inviting comments from different Arabic-speaking users, are facilitating and demanding communication across linguistic borders on a scale and at a speed that continues to boggle. To miss this dynamic linguistic world is to miss a large part of the experience of the people in the region and the forces that drive them.

## **Beyond the Arabic world**

The influence of Arabic too extends far beyond the world of Arabic-speakers. The majority of Muslims now live outside of the Middle East and it is the growth at its margins that makes Islam the world's most rapidly expanding religion. It is still Arabic and the Arab-speaking world, however, that is the star around which this constellation orbits. It is in Arabic that Muslims read the Qur'ān and do their daily prayers; it is to the main centre of learning, the Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, that they come from all over the world to perfect their understanding of their religion in the language of its most important texts; and it is to the heart of the Arab world, to Mecca on the Arabian Peninsula, that believers journey to perform the *hajj*. Without Arabic we will understand neither Islam nor the Middle East, nor indeed the many cultures that look to them for guidance and support.

As any Arabist will readily attest, Arabic is by no means an easy language to master. But for those seeking anything more than the most superficial understanding of Islam it is essential. For some reason, however, as

Tarif Khalidi has pointed out, ‘the Arab/Islamic world is currently the last region on earth where non-experts can freely claim scholarly authority’.<sup>18</sup> In the case of understanding Islam, this curious dispensation has made a Qur’ānic scholar of every firebrand with a paperback translation and a highlighter. It is a preposterous situation and does a significant disservice to us all. Without access to the larger body of Islamic religious and legal literature and commentary – almost all of it untranslated – any attempt to understand Islam as a working faith will be crippled. This is because it is precisely in these intricate layerings of interpretation, clarification and reconciliation that the real ‘truth about Islam’ lies.

This has been long appreciated in the West. Arabic has been taught at European universities since the sixteenth century. It was introduced to Leiden, at the instigation of the French émigré super-scholar Joseph Scaliger in 1599. Leiden’s first teacher of Arabic was a Jewish convert to Christianity of Polish extraction who had previously lived in England. Its first professor, Thomas Erpenius, inaugurated in 1613 and still perhaps greatest occupant of the Leiden chair of Arabic, had studied in England and Paris, and travelled to Venice, Milan, Basle and Heidelberg.<sup>19</sup> His successor, the equally remarkable Jacob Golius, operated on a stage of similarly pan-European breadth. These early Leiden scholars planted the seeds of what I like to think of as this university’s Arabic tradition: a cosmopolitanism in outlook, an unbounded curiosity about the Arabic world, and a focus on the language, both the literary and the spoken, the normative and the lived, as the only truly valid passport to that world. We are lucky that the library of manuscripts and texts they started continues to be one of the best in the world.

Al-‘Arabiyya, is very much alive.<sup>20</sup> Whether one approaches it via eighth-century papyri, the novels of Naguib Mahfouz or short messages in an adjusted Latin alphabet, its rewards are exceptionally rich and plentiful. It can only be hoped that we continue to value it and continue, through it, to challenge and enrich our understanding of the world that gave rise to it. The necessity of doing this is only getting greater.

## Notes

- 1 ‘Throwing Money at the Street’, *The Economist* 11 March 2011.
- 2 See especially, ‘The Roots of Muslim Rage’, *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990, pp. 47-60. See too M. Ruthven, *A Fury for God: The Islamist Attack on America*, London 2002.
- 3 ‘What Went Wrong?’ *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 2002, p. 45, expanded into *What Went Wrong?: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*, Oxford 2002.
- 4 ‘Islam and Liberal Democracy’, *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1993. Cf. Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture*, Washington D.C. 1992.
- 5 S. Huntington, ‘The Clash of Civilizations?’ *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993, pp. 22-49, expanded into *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York

1996. See too, for example, D. Pipes, *In the Path of God: Islam and Political Power*, New York 1983, or even more splenetically, A. Perlmutter, 'Islam and Democracy Simply Aren't Compatible', *International Herald Tribune*, 21 January 1992, or "Wishful Thinking about Islamic Fundamentalism," *Washington Post*, 19 January 2002.
- 6 See for example, E. Said, 'The Clash of Ignorance', *The Nation*, 22 October 2001, pp. 11-13. And consider I. Buruma and A. Margalit, *Occidentalism: A Short History of Anti-Westernism*, London 2004, which sees Osama bin Laden as an intellectual child of the West's own tradition of ambivalence about modernity. It's worth remembering too – as is often overlooked – that Huntington's timeless verities are actually the by-products of a very particular time ('Apart from Japan, the West faces no economic challenge', 1993 p. 39) – one now long gone!
- 7 In fairness to Huntington, it is perhaps worth pointing out that he never claimed to be a Middle Eastern specialist, nor was he primarily concerned with Islam.
- 8 See too D. Mogahed, 'Who Speaks for Islam? Learning What Most Muslims Think, and Some Lessons for Policymaking', in J.M. Otto and H. Mason (eds.), *Delicate Debates on Islam: Policymakers and Academics Speaking to Each Other*, Leiden 2011, pp. 77-83.
- 9 K. Khalil (ed.), *Messages from Tahrir: Signs from Egypt's Revolution*, Cairo 2011 Khalil, p. 20
- 10 Observed by the author on a scaffolding in Zamalek, Cairo, January 2012.
- 11 Observed by the author on a scaffolding in Zamalek, Cairo, January 2012.
- 12 I would like to thank TsoLin Nalbantian for sending me an image of such a graffito.
- 13 Khalil, p. 109.
- 14 www.laracaptan.com. I would like to thank Thomas Milo for introducing me to Lara's work.
- 15 See also the initiative launched by Qatar-based Taghreedat to make it possible to store files posted to sites such as Twitter to be stored, searched and retrieved in Storify based in San Francisco.
- 16 E.S. Badawi, 'Educated Spoken Arabic: A Problem in Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language'. In K. Jankowsky (ed.), *Scientific and Humanistic Dimensions of Language*, Amsterdam & Philadelphia 1973, pp. 15-22.
- 17 D. Crystal, *Internet Linguistics*. London & New York 2011. I would like to thank Mona Farrag for this reference.
- 18 In a letter to the editor of *The Times Literary Supplement*, 6 August 2010.
- 19 On the history of the chair, see esp. P. C. Molhuysen, *Bronnen tot de geschiedenis der Leidsche Universiteit, 1574-1811*, vol. I, 's-Gravenhage 1913, pp. 120-21; J. Brugman and F. Schröder, *Arabic Studies in the Netherlands*, Leiden 1979, p. 3; R. Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and their Enemies*, London 2006, p. 79.
- 20 Its health, despite the onslaught of English, has been noted by *The Economist* ('A God-given way to communicate', 24 April 2010, p. 39).



## Hoezo Arabisch?

De Engelse kunstenaars Gilbert en George gebruiken graag Arabisch in hun kunstwerken. Hun *Ginkgo*-serie toont Arabische woorden en zinnen die ritmisch over metershoge panelen marcheren (zie de afbeelding op p. 10). De bijzondere, visuele schoonheid van het Arabische schrift, een unieke combinatie van soepel kronkelende bewegingen en strenge zwart-witte soberheid, biedt uitzonderlijke, esthetische mogelijkheden, waar deze kunstenaars zeer effectief gebruik van maken. Maar de kracht van het Arabisch – en dit is de essentie – reikt veel verder dan de esthetische potentie. De kunstenaars gebruiken de analogie van ‘tagging’ uit de graffiti – een taal die volledig bekend voorkomt maar tegelijkertijd mysterieus en bedreigend is, die spreekt met een stem van buiten onze comfortzone. Ook het Arabisch trof dit paradoxale lot om tegelijkertijd volledig herkenbaar en volslagen verwarrend en vreemd te zijn. ‘We used even a lot of Arabic writing,’ legt Gilbert Proesch uit, ‘because we don’t understand what they mean, like we don’t understand what the tags mean, but it creates an amazing feeling. The tagging or the writing of an Arabic newspaper creates an amazing fear in western people.’<sup>1</sup>

De taal is geladen op een manier en met een voltage, die, zo zou ik willen beargumenteren, weinig talen evenaren. In de loop van zo’n 1400 jaar van stimulerende, maar ook zeer geladen interactie met het westen, heeft het Arabisch gefunctioneerd als een kapstok voor een uitgebreid en steeds toenemend assortiment aan associaties, connotaties, vooroordelen en vraagstukken. Talen reizen niet lichtbepakt, maar de enorme hoeveelheid bagage die het Arabisch op zijn reizen door het westerse bewustzijn heeft verzameld is, zo denk ik, ongewoon groot. Het is deze uitzonderlijke voorraad aan associaties waar de ‘Ginkgo’ schilderijen van Gilbert en George toegang tot verlenen. Niet de *inhoud* van de teksten is relevant – zij weten niet, en het kan hen waarschijnlijk ook niet schelen, of ze misschien wel pacifistische poëzie gebruikt hebben (of zelfs niet eens Arabisch, maar Perzisch of Osmaans) – maar waarnaar ze *verwijzen*, de beelden en associaties die spontaan en willekeurig in de hoofden van de toeschouwers opkomen. Het is de tragedie van de huidige relatie van het westen met het Arabisch dat deze complexe en ingewikkelde lading nu voor alles gekarakteriseerd wordt door angst. Voor degenen onder ons die zich beroepsmatig

met het Arabisch bezighouden ligt hier een heel belangrijke taak. Dit is een thema waar ik op terug zal komen.

Deze kunstwerken van Gilbert en George interesseren mij omdat ze met ideeën spelen die ook in de materialen waar ik mee werk, steeds terugkomen. Mijn specialisme is de Arabische papyrologie, de studie van teksten geschreven op papyrus, met name uit de zevende tot de tiende eeuw na Christus, en de middeleeuwse geschiedenis van het Midden-Oosten die we hieruit kunnen destilleren.

## ■ Papyrologie

Papyrus was het schrijfmateriaal van de hele mediterrane wereld voor ten minste vier duizend jaar, tot het uiteindelijk vervangen werd door papier in de tiende eeuw. Vrijwel elke denkbare menselijke actie en activiteit werd erop vastgelegd. De papyri bevatten, om maar een paar voorbeelden te geven, literaire werken – gedichten, historische en religieuze teksten; officiële documenten – edicten, proclamaties (uitgegeven door de autoriteiten, maar ook bijvoorbeeld geheime oproepen tot opstanden, zoals de brief van een zekere Samuel die collegabestuurders oproept tot een bijeenkomst om verzet tegen belastinginners te organiseren),<sup>2</sup> brieven en petitities (bijvoorbeeld van een vrouw wier man zo hard geslagen was in de gevangenis dat ze het buiten de muren gehoord had);<sup>3</sup> alles wat te maken heeft met staat en orde – lijsten van belastingbetalers,<sup>4</sup> bekeerde Christenen,<sup>5</sup> van armen en wezen die recht hebben op een aalmoezenuitkering,<sup>6</sup> of van gevangenen en de misdaden die ze begaan hadden (het stelen van een koe, een huis binnendringen en de eigenaresse mishandelen, bij een openbare vechtpartij betrokken zijn of een belastingregister verbranden).<sup>7</sup> Er zijn juridische documenten, waaronder huwelijkscontracten en echtscheidingsovereenkomsten, testamenten, koop- en huurcontracten, klachten en verslagen van rechtzaken;<sup>8</sup> schrijfoefeningen en leesteksten;<sup>9</sup> amuletten;<sup>10</sup> commerciële geschriften, zoals registers, rekeningen, werkvergunningen, loonstrookjes en vrachtbrieven;<sup>11</sup> er zijn ook ontelbare kleine notities en kattebelletjes, van boodschappenlijstjes en IOUs tot uitnodigingen voor feestjes, liefdesbrieven en Post-it-achtige aantekeningen.<sup>12</sup> ‘De Nijl bereikte woensdag een hoogte van twee vingers onder de 16 el’, ‘betaal de bediende zijn maandelijks loon in olie’, ‘overzicht van wat ik naar Mekka exporteerde aan *acacia* bladeren’<sup>13</sup> – een andere wereld, opengelegd in al haar variaties en complexiteit voor onze ogen, veelal alledaags, meestal pietluttig, maar altijd fascinerend.

Deze teksten zijn bewaard gebleven dankzij een bijzondere klimatologische omstandigheid. De meeste geschreven teksten in het middeleeuwse Midden-Oosten werden, net als nu, weggegooid zodra hun specifieke en tijdelijke functie was vervuld. Voor papyrus betekent dit in principe evenals voor ander organisch materiaal, de onmiddellijke en volledige

vernietiging. Maar in Egypte werd de vuilnisbelt bij uitstek op natuurlijke wijze gevormd door de uitgestrekte, lege woestijn die grenst aan het lint van bebouwbaar en bewoonbaar land langs de Nijl. Het kurkdroge zand van deze woestijnen bood de meest perfecte, natuurlijke conservatie die je maar kunt bedenken. Onder deze omstandigheden, zolang het niet met water in contact komt of wordt opgegraven om als kunstmest of brandstof gebruikt te worden, heeft een papyrus een goede kans om voort te leven min of meer tot in eeuwigheid. Duizenden zijn inderdaad bewaard – en dat zijn alleen nog maar de teksten die bekend zijn; ongetwijfeld zijn er nog duizenden meer die onder het zand op ontdekking wachten. De conservering van deze uitzonderlijke bron die de papyri vormen is een van de meest bijzondere giften van de Nijl – zoals mijn vader het noemde met een verwijzing naar Herodotus' beroemde uitdrukking, in zijn openbare les over *Griekse papyrologie* die hij precies deze week 41 jaar geleden hield.<sup>14</sup>

Slijtage en verval terzijde gelaten, geven deze papyri ons de tekst *zoals hun schrijvers deze geschreven hebben*. Het is het product zelf, een unieke boodschap, als een pijl 1400 jaar de toekomst in geschoten (maar natuurlijk wel per ongeluk), als het ware nog ademend in onze hand. De vreugde die zo'n papyrus teweeg brengt bij degenen die met dergelijke documenten werken is geheel en al verslavend. Johan Huizinga's beschrijving van deze mysterieuze en dwangmatige opwinding zal herkend worden door elke papyroloog en ik citeer: '... arbeid in het ongedrukte materiaal brengt nu eenmaal, een bekoring met zich, die tot een obsessie wordt, voor den ongeschoolde nauwelijks te begrijpen. Juist in dit, schijnbaar zoo nuchtere en droge archiefonderzoek ... pakt U zoo dikwijls dat gevoel van onmiddellijk contact met een stuk verleden... dat haken naar een gezicht op dingen van weleer.'<sup>15</sup> Tot zover Huizinga.

Wat het werken met deze documenten zo opwindend maakt is niet alleen de sensatie deze originele objecten in handen te hebben, maar, de toegang die ze verlenen tot een lang verleden tijd – het gevoel onuitgenodigd, ongeoorloofd zelfs de levens en hoofden van een andere wereld binnen te treden. De papyri legden gebeurtenissen vast die meestal niet bedoeld waren voor circulatie en zeker niet voor publicatie, en ze zijn grotendeels onaangetast door literaire trucjes en conventies. Het lezen van deze teksten brengt hetzelfde spannende gevoel teweeg als het toevallig opvangen van een conversatie in een bus of café, maar zonder het gevaar om op afluisteren betrap te worden. Hoe banaal, voorspelbaar of 'prekend' de inhoud ook is, het geeft ons het leven zoals het werd geleefd.

Maar ik moet hier wel een kanttekening bij plaatsen: papyrologie is meer dan een obscure vorm van gluren – er is, naast dit genoeg, ook een serieus historisch punt. Door te luisteren naar het geklets 'op de grond' kunnen we de uitspraken van bovenaf kwalificeren, beoordelen en controleren. We zijn niet langer volslagen afhankelijk van de persberichten van het paleis van de kalief: we kunnen de gesprekken horen die plaatsvonden

op de hoek van de straat, binnenshuis, in de karavanserai en in de *soek*. We beheersen zelf onze informatie, en worden niet langer door de informatie beheerst. Dit is een cruciaal punt.

## ■ Alternatieve geschiedenissen

‘The fellah’, vertelde men Rudyard Kipling tijdens zijn reis door Egypte, ‘has been trained to look after himself since the days of Rameses’.<sup>16</sup> Een klein maar suggestief voorbeeld uit mijn periode illustreert dit goed. De kronieken vertellen ons dat in 362/973 de Fatimidische kalief al-Mu‘izz (r. 341-65/953- 75) een decreet uitvaardigde in Egypte dat bepaalde dat vanaf dat moment de uiterst gevoelige informatie over het waterniveau van de Nijl tijdens het overstromingsseizoen niet langer openbaar verkondigd zou worden, maar dat het een geheim bleef van het paleis. We zouden op basis hiervan kunnen concluderen dat de waterstand vanaf dat moment dus een geheim was. Maar we hebben uit deze periode (van *na* het moment dat dit decreet uitgevaardigd werd) ook een document waarin heel duidelijk het niveau van de Nijl op een bepaalde dag in het overstromingsseizoen beschreven staat en dat voor openbare verspreiding bedoeld lijkt.<sup>17</sup> We weten niet voor wie of waarvoor deze tekst geschreven is, maar het lijkt het officiële decreet te ondermijnen en is in ieder geval in duidelijke tegenspraak met de narratieve bronnen. Het document biedt ons een alternatief blikveld, het is een ongepolijste en onafhankelijke bron van informatie die in directe tegenspraak lijkt te zijn met het beeld van orde en gehoorzaamheid dat het centrum verspreidde. Zonder dit inzicht, zouden we wel moeten geloven wat de narratieve bronnen ons vertellen, wat een enorm verlies zou betekenen voor ons begrip van de realiteit en het leven in middeleeuws Egypte.

## ■ De menselijke dimensie

In deze parallele versies van de geschiedenis staat de menselijke dimensie centraal waartoe de papyri ons, in tegenstelling tot de meeste narratieve bronnen, toegang verschaffen. Ze geven een naam en een stem aan de anonieme massa. Met de papyri in de hand kunnen we Bertolt Brecht’s prangende vraag uit zijn ‘Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters’ beginnen te beantwoorden voor onze periode:

Cäsar schlug die Gallier.  
 Hatte er nicht wenigstens einen Koch bei sich?  
 Philipp von Spanien weinte, als seine Flotte  
 Untergegangen war. Weinte sonst niemand?<sup>18</sup>

Vergelijk de volgende Arabische papyrus, nu in de collectie van de University of Pennsylvania. Het is de enige ooggetuigenverklaring voor de afschuwelijke aanval van de Byzantijnse vloot op het stadje Damietta in de Delta in AD 856. ‘Oh Abū Ḥafṣ, als je de verwarring en nood waarin de mensen hier verkeren zou kunnen zien. Ze [d.w.z. de Byzantijnen] grijpen iedereen die ze te pakken kunnen krijgen ... Ik vraag God om hulp in Zijn barmhartigheid!’<sup>19</sup> De schrijver is duidelijk getraumatiseerd en zijn tranen zijn bijna zichtbaar. Deze brief werd drie jaar later in kleine stukken geknipt en gebruikt voor een belastingontvangstbewijs. Het illustreert de geweldige toevalligheden die de papyrologie verlevendigen.

Een emotionele uiting lezen we ook in een negende-eeuwse brief, waarin een jonge vrouw op ontroerende wijze zich beklagt omdat haar echtgenoot haar met jong kind heeft achtergelaten in de Fayyūmoase, terwijl hij de maand ramadan bij zijn eerste vrouw in de hoofdstad Fustat doorbrengt: ‘Als ik had geweten dat je ook het offerfeest ver van mij wilde vieren, had ik je niet laten gaan’. Om er dan treurig aan toe te voegen: ‘Ik heb er alleen maar in toegestemd dat je de vasten met hen [d.w.z. de eerste vrouw en haar familie] brak op voorwaarde dat je het offerfeest bij mij kwam vieren (*taraktuka tafturu ‘indahum wa-tuḍahhī ‘indī*).’<sup>20</sup>

Via dit soort stemmen wordt deze wereld begrijpelijk en echt. Maar er is nog meer aan de hand. Het is belangrijk om te weten dat mensen in middeleeuws Egypte officiële decreten negeerden, dat ze hun belastingen ontdoken en zich zorgen maakten over zieke familieleden of wat dan ook. Deze dingen moeten we weten. Maar er ontvouwt zich tegelijkertijd een veel, veel groter en belangrijker verhaal dat ons zonder de papyri volledig zou ontgaan.

## ■ De formatie van de islam

De Arabische troepen vielen Egypte in AD 639 binnen, en de spectaculaire opkomst van de islam die de veroveringen in beweging had gezet, vond slechts twee decennia eerder plaats. De zevende en achtste eeuwen zijn derhalve ‘prime time’ voor de vormingsgeschiedenis van de islam en de verspreiding van de Arabische en islamitische cultuur in het Midden-Oosten.

Laat ik beginnen met de islam. Arabische kronieken en andere geschreven bronnen verschijnen pas voor het eerst in de negende eeuw, twee eeuwen na de opkomst van de islam en de vroegste veroveringen. Tegen de tijd dat de historici en kroniekschrijvers het verhaal oppikken, is de verf, om zo te zeggen, al bijna droog – de steigers zijn neergehaald en het bouwwerk is voltooid. En deze volledige gevormdheid werd terug geprojecteerd op het allereerste begin van de islam, elke bobbel of oneffenheid gladstrijkend die het proces van vorming en ontwikkeling kenmerken. Er staat zoals u begrijpt heel veel op het spel.

Om een voorbeeld te geven. In het begin van de twintigste eeuw werd er een brief gevonden in de Fayyūmoase die rond het jaar 720 op papyrus geschreven was, d.w.z. minder dan honderd jaar na de dood van de profeet Muhammad en tachtig jaar na de Arabische verovering van Egypte.<sup>21</sup> Via de duistere wereld van de antiquiteitenhandel, kwam de brief uiteindelijk terecht in de University of Michigan, waar hij zo'n eeuw ongelezen bleef liggen. Het is een brief van de gouverneur van de Fayyūmoase, Nājīd ibn Muslim, aan een lagere beambte en het behoort tot een dossier van zo'n veertig gelijksoortige brieven. Maar anders dan de andere brieven, is dit meer dan een geschreven bericht van de ene bureaucraat aan de andere. De afmetingen van de papyrus en het erop gebruikte schrift, die veel groter zijn dan die van de andere brieven, suggereren dat de brief in het openbaar werd opgehangen en dat hij bedoeld was voor de lokale islamitische gemeenschap.

De brief moedigt de Arabieren aan hun belasting te betalen over, zoals de brief specificeert, vrij grazende geiten, schapen en goud. Tot dan toe waren Arabische moslims vrijgesteld van de belastingen; alleen niet-islamitische Egyptische onderdanen betaalden.<sup>22</sup> De papyrus beschrijft de belastingen bovendien als *ṣadaqa* en *zakāt*, de termen die verwijzen naar de islamitische aalmoezenbelasting. *Ṣadaqa* en *zakāt* vormen een van de vijf 'zuilen van de islam', oftewel hoofdverplichtingen van elke moslim, maar worden over het algemeen beschouwd als een persoonlijke verantwoordelijkheid van elke individuele gelovige.<sup>23</sup> Dat is tenminste wat we lezen in de juridische teksten.

Deze papyrus van Nājīd geeft echter een ander beeld. In deze brief wordt de islamitische toehoorders verteld dat hun bevoorrechte fiscale positie niet langer wordt gehandhaafd; en dat de aalmoezenbelasting die tot dat moment een puur persoonlijke onderhandeling tussen hun eigen geweten en hun portemonnee was geweest, nu verplicht werd gesteld en ook nog eens werd geïnd en verdeeld door de staat. De boodschap was een ongemakkelijke en Nājīd zoekt zijn toevlucht tot een reeks religieuze frasen om zijn eisen te ondersteunen en zijn toehoorders te dwingen hun belasting te betalen. Hij gebruikt verzen uit de Koran en het voorbeeld van de profeet Muhammad: 'God zond Zijn profeet Muhammad, moge God hem zegenen, met de leiding en de ware religie en alles wat God Zijn volgelingen oplegde. En God legde aan degenen die tot de religie van de islam, de juiste religie, behoren, de *ṣadaqa* op.'<sup>24</sup>

De brief eindigt met gedetailleerde instructies over hoe de belasting geïnd moet worden, die volledig overeenkomen met de praktijk van andere belastingen. Alles wat we weten over de belastinginning komt uit Arabische juridische teksten. Deze dateren zoals gezegd niet alleen van zo'n twee eeuwen later, ze behandelen ook niet de praktijk van de fiscale politiek en de dagelijkse ervaring van degenen die met deze regels te maken hadden. Ze zwijgen over de interactie tussen de belastingplichtigen en

de autoriteiten, over de praktijk van uitzonderingsposities en hoe geld te innen van onwillige betalers. Zonder deze papyrus waren wij even onwetend gebleven.

Tegelijkertijd werpt deze brief interessant licht op de vroege ontwikkeling van een specifiek ‘islamitische’ cultuur. Ik vermeldde eerder al dat de *sadaqa* over vrij grazende geiten en schapen betaald moest worden. Deze term, *sā’ima* in het Arabisch, is een technische uitdrukking: hij verwijst naar het juridische voorschrift dat alleen over die beesten die vrij rondlopend zelf hun eten zoeken, in tegenstelling tot beesten die gevoerd moeten worden, de verplichte aalmoezenbelasting moet worden betaald.<sup>25</sup> Deze papyrus bevat derhalve het bewijs dat een aantal van dezelfde elementen, die we in de latere juridische teksten gedetailleerder beschreven vinden, al in dit vroege stadium bestond. Hoewel de papyri zeker niet de islam zoals we die beschreven vinden in de latere narratieve bronnen in haar geheel laten zien, openen ze wel degelijk hier en daar een luikje. En door die luikjes zien we dat er al een eigen ‘islamitisch’ gedachtegoed en gedrag aanwezig waren. Het is nu nodig om veel meer van dit soort papyri te lezen en te analyseren zodat het hele beeld zichtbaar wordt. Zonder nieuwe teksten stagneert het onderzoek in de cruciale geschiedenis van de vroege islam, zoals het al lange tijd heeft stilgestaan terwijl wetenschappers piekerden over het probleem van de narratieve bronnen.<sup>26</sup>

Maar de brief biedt ook fascinerend inzicht in de praktische oplossingen voor een probleem dat in deze periode in het hele islamitische rijk speelde. In het begin van de achtste eeuw waren de veroveringen tot stilstand gekomen – alles wat veroverd kon worden was wel zo’n beetje veroverd. Het gevolg voor de schatkist van de kalief was een dramatische terugval in inkomsten, juist op het moment dat de administratieve ambitie, als een gevolg van de grotere bestuurlijke rol die islamitische heersers op zich namen, toenam. De islamitische autoriteiten waren derhalve gedwongen hun fiscale politiek te herzien.

We zien hier hoe religieuze principes tot een werkbaar bestuursysteem werden, hoe met gezond verstand en behoedzaamheid oplossingen gevonden werden voor praktische problemen binnen het kader van de islamitische dogmata.<sup>27</sup> Het is een belangrijke bijstelling van het beeld van een monolithische en onveranderlijke islam, of we die nu interpreteren als serene volmaaktheid of rigide onbuigzaamheid.

De vraag is natuurlijk of het beeld van een geavanceerd en ontwikkeld bestuurlijk systeem met een eigen culturele en religieus-juridische traditie zoals we die hier lijken aan te treffen, ook gevonden kan worden in de tachtig jaren die tussen de verovering van Egypte en het schrijven van deze brief liggen.

Het antwoord is ja.<sup>28</sup> De oudste twee Arabische papyri dateren van tijdens de verovering zelf. Ze zijn geschreven in het jaar 22 van de islamitische jaartelling, AD 643. De eerste is een ontvangstbewijs voor 65

schapen die aan een Arabische legereenheid geleverd zijn, de andere is een belastingaanslag voor twee en een halve gouden dinar.<sup>29</sup> Het zijn perfecte voorbeelden van het soort documenten dat collega's grappen doet maken over papyrologen: in- en verkoop van schapen en belastingteksten, wat kun je daar überhaupt voor relevante informatie uit halen? Maar laten we – zoals papyrologen dan doen – de teksten eens nader bekijken.

Dit zijn documenten die tot de routine van bestuur behoren en ze tonen dat de Arabieren vanaf het begin direct waren betrokken bij de alledaagse administratie van Egypte. De teksten zijn geschreven in het Grieks en het Arabisch (hoewel het Griekse gedeelte van de tweede papyrus verloren is), maar het zijn niet simpelweg vertalingen: elk tekstgedeelte was niet alleen geschreven door een verschillende klerk (hun beider namen staan onderaan de tekst), maar ze gebruiken ook elk hun eigen formuleringen, terminologie en informatie, die wijzen op onafhankelijke schriftelijke, administratieve en zelfs juridische tradities. Met andere woorden, de ideeën, gewoontes en benaderingen die de Arabieren met zich meebrachten, konden het bestuur van zo'n ontwikkelde en uitgebreide entiteit als Egypte aan. Dit wil niet zeggen dat de Arabieren het gehele administratieve systeem bij hun komst volledig omgooiden, maar dat ze op bepaalde beperkte gebieden wijzigingen doorvoerden die ze nodig achtten.<sup>30</sup> En deze traditie werd dus – tevens – uitgedrukt in het Arabisch.

Maar het Arabisch is ouder dan de islam. Ik richt me hier alleen op de periode direct voor de veroveringen. Pre-islamitische christelijke Arabische stammen waren volledig geïntegreerd in de Byzantijnse bestuurlijke en administratieve structuur. Ze bewoonden steden in het Byzantijnse rijk waar ze kerken bouwden en andere monumenten oprichtten. Niet alleen speelden ze een belangrijke rol bij de verdediging van het Byzantijnse rijk, maar ze waren ook verantwoordelijk voor fundamentele administratieve taken, zoals de inning van belasting en tolgelden. Uit de vele Arabische en Griekse inscripties die ze achterlieten spreekt een hoge mate van bureaucratistische integratie in het Byzantijnse systeem, maar ook een ontwikkelde en standvastige eigen identiteit.<sup>31</sup> Met de opkomst van de islam kreeg deze Arabische identiteit een religieus gelijk. God had immers tot Muhammad gesproken in het Arabisch. Het was de taal van de God die de Arabieren had doen zegevieren over de oude Byzantijnse en Perzische rijken, de taal van de overwinning.

## ■ Arabisering

Dit brengt ons tot een ander verhaal dat zich in deze twee eeuwen ontvouwde, namelijk de verspreiding van de Arabische identiteit en cultuur onder de onderdanen van de islam. Dit proces was zo succesvol dat het achteraf bezien onvermijdelijk en vanzelfsprekend lijkt. Maar de papyri

laten ons de verschillende stadia en de verschillende wegen van dit proces zien waarbij de Arabische taal en cultuur uiteindelijk de eeuwenoude traditie van het Grieks en de millennia oude traditie van het Egyptisch, of meer recentelijk van het Koptisch verving. De papyri tonen dat de arabisering een langzaam voortschrijdende ontwikkeling was die niet overal op dezelfde wijze verliep, en die zeker niet onafwendbaar was. Het is eigenlijk heel bijzonder dat het Arabisch zo succesvol was, hetgeen we beter begrijpen wanneer we twee andere voorbeelden uit de geschiedenis van het Midden-Oosten gebruiken. Na duizend jaar Griekse aanwezigheid was Egypte nog steeds niet Grieks sprekend. De Mongolen die in de dertiende eeuw op spectaculaire wijze het islamitische rijk overnamen, gebruikten al snel het Perzisch. Taalkundige veranderingen zijn nooit vanzelfsprekend.

Een van de verklaringen voor de arabisering is niettemin zeker de aantrekkingskracht die de taal van de heersers op de overheersten uitoefende. Aan het begin van de achtste eeuw vinden we reeds Egyptische christenen die met moslims maar ook onderling het Arabisch gebruiken. Het is ook verwoord in de klacht van de schrijver van de tiende-eeuwse Apocalyps van Samuel van Qalamun, die het betreurt dat meer en meer Egyptische christenen Arabisch spreken ten koste van het Koptisch: 'Oh ramp, dubbele ramp! In deze tijden imiteren zij [d.w.z. de kopten] de moslims. Zij geven hun kinderen islamitische namen ... en ze doen iets dat zo verschrikkelijk is dat jullie harten zeker zullen overstromen van verdriet als ik het vertel: ze laten de schone Koptische taal in de steek en leren hun kinderen op jonge leeftijd Arabisch spreken.'<sup>32</sup> Desalniettemin bleef het Grieks als levende en dynamische schriftelijke cultuur tenminste tot het einde van de achtste eeuw bestaan.<sup>33</sup> En het Koptisch beleefde in de islamitische tijd haar meest dynamische periode en bleef gebruikt worden door bekeerlingen en Egyptische christenen tenminste tot in de elfde eeuw.<sup>34</sup>

Het moge duidelijk zijn uit deze voorbeelden dat Arabisering en islamisering twee processen zijn. Ook nu nog zijn er natuurlijk grote christelijke minderheden in het Midden-Oosten die volledig gearabiseerd zijn. Zeven eeuwen na de verovering van Egypte was het grootste deel van de bevolking nog steeds christen. De omslag kwam pas onder invloed van grootscheepse vervolgingen onder de Mammelukse heersers in de 13e en 14e eeuw.<sup>35</sup> Zoals de sluwheid van de Arabische bestuurders ervoor zorgde dat lokale identiteiten niet nodeloos vernietigd werden, zo maakte de complexiteit van de Arabische administratie het nieuwe model uiteindelijk onweerstaanbaar.<sup>36</sup>

Als symbool van de nieuwe machthebbers en hun triomferende religie was het Arabisch overal aanwezig. Zoals gezegd werd het al in de twee oudste documenten gebruikt. Ook het Arabisch in de eerder besproken brief die de *šadaqa* belasting aan moslims oplegde, fungeerde als een symbool voor de islamitische staat, die zo zelfs tot een klein dorp in de Fayyūm doordrong. Tegelijkertijd benadrukten deze geschriften dat de

islamitische staat in de voetsporen trad van de geletterde bureaucratische rijken die eraan voorafgingen. Deze papyri tonen hoe de Arabieren de symbolische kracht van de taal wisten uit te buiten. Het Arabisch in deze teksten fungeert in Gilbert en George's vocabulaire als een 'tag'.

Deze boodschappen die de geschreven tekst onderbouwen en omringen vormen een onontbeerlijke dimensie van de tekst. Maar zonder kennis van de taal kunnen we de tekst niet begrijpen. Ik wil nog een voorbeeld geven.

In de vroegste Arabische papyri uit Egypte zijn administratieve titels en technische termen vaak in het Grieks weergegeven, getranscribeerd in het Arabisch. Het Griekse *meizoteros*, te vertalen als 'betaalmeester', degene die de belastingen ontving en daar ontvangstbewijzen voor schreef, werd in het Arabisch *māzūt* en kreeg zelfs een typisch Arabische 'gebroken' meervoudsvorm, *mawāzīt*, die we ook in de papyri aantreffen.<sup>37</sup> Het weerspiegelt de situatie in het pas veroverde Egypte toen de meeste locale beambten dezelfde christelijke Egyptenaren waren die ook onder de Byzantijnen gediend hadden. Hun functies samen met de Griekse termen om hen te beschrijven, bleven bestaan.

Zo'n vijftig jaar na de verovering raakte de Arabische term *qabbāl*, letterlijk 'de ontvanger', in zwang, maar de Griekse term bleef ook in gebruik.<sup>38</sup> In de negende eeuw trachtte de kalief vanuit Baghdad zijn controle over Egypte te vergroten en hij stuurde een grote groep Perzische ambtenaren (samen met soldaten) naar het land. Met de beambten arriveerde ook een nieuwe term voor de betaalmeester, *jahbadh*, afgeleid uit het Perzisch.<sup>39</sup> De namen van de beambten die we in de documenten van deze periode tegenkomen wijzen eveneens op een Perzische etnische achtergrond. De veranderingen in terminologie weerspiegelen de migratie van ambtenaren en een etnische en taalkundige verschuiving in de administratie van Egypte – een ontwikkeling die zonder kennis van de taal onopgemerkt zou zijn gebleven.

Dit is het essentiële punt: niet iedereen hoeft Arabisch te kunnen lezen en verstaan, net zoals niet iedereen Kantonees, Tamil of Tagalog hoeft te spreken. Maar we hebben wel een kader van toegewijde specialisten nodig die in de gelegenheid zijn om hun kennis over te dragen zodat teksten – dat wil zeggen het geheel aan culturele associaties, maar altijd gebaseerd op een grondige bekendheid met de taal – worden begrepen en hun betekenis kan worden doorgegeven. Leiden heeft een kostbare reputatie op dit gebied die 400 jaar teruggaat en waar zeer weinig academische instellingen aan kunnen tippen.

Zelfs een vak dat zo obscuur lijkt als papyrologie raakt aan de kern van de grote vragen in de islam en de Arabischeontwikkeling van een marginale stammenmaatschappij op het Arabisch schiereiland tot een cultuur die tientallen landen en honderden miljoenen mensen omvat. Maar vrijwel elke poging om zich met deze wereld bezig te houden van welk uitgangspunt dan ook zal beloond worden. De rijkdom van deze cultuur is onuitputtelijk

en wekt steeds weer verbazing. We hoeven nergens bang voor te zijn – zelfs Gilbert en George niet.

## **Dank**

Toen ik voor het eerst naar Leiden kwam als student woonde ik bij mijn oudtante Co in de De Goejestraat. Het was pas veel later, toen ik Arabisch was gaan studeren, dat ik erachter kwam wie Michaël Jan de Goeje was. Hij was om precies te zijn een van mijn voorgangers op deze leerstoel en een van de grootste Arabisten ooit. Maar hij was niet de enige. Deze universiteit heeft meer beroemde Arabisten onderdak geboden dan welke andere academische instelling in Europa dan ook. Het is een traditie, zoals ze in Amerika zouden zeggen ‘to die for’. Om op de schouders van zulke giganten te staan brengt bij mij wel wat hoogtevrees teweeg. Maar ik ben vastbesloten om te zorgen dat deze traditie behouden blijft en doorgegeven kan worden.

Het is geen geheim dat de politiek, de media en het publiek vragen om goed onderbouwde meningen over de hedendaagse islam en het moderne Midden-Oosten, een verzoek waar ook deze universiteit op verschillende manieren gehoor aan wil geven. Ik waardeer het dat de universiteit daarbij een bredere visie van deze studie blijft handhaven, waarin de rijke veelzijdigheid van het Arabische cultuurgebied en de historische diepgang een rol spelen. De klassieke periode is meer dan slechts een achtergrond voor ons begrip van het huidige Midden-Oosten. Dit is niet alleen omdat de Arabische taal, verankerd in de Koran, buitengewoon stabiel is. Het is omdat deze bijzondere periode van wetenschappelijke en literaire bloei een integraal deel uitmaakt van de dagelijkse ervaring van het leven in de regio. De middeleeuwen leven en zijn relevant op een manier die wij ons in het westen nauwelijks kunnen voorstellen. Het zou zijn alsof het nieuws in Nederland in de taal van P.C. Hooft gelezen werd of taxichauffeurs Vondel konden citeren.

Een van de grote verworvenheden van deze universiteit is dat Arabisch hier in de taalkundige en geografische context van het gehele Midden-Oosten, samen met Perzisch en Turks bestudeerd wordt. Dit is een fantastisch waardevol en kostbaar bezit, waar we heel bewust mee om moeten gaan. Ik ben de leden van de opleiding APT dankbaar voor het warme en zorgzame welkom dat zij mij hebben geboden. De opleiding heeft heel wat te verduren gehad de laatste jaren, maar de veerkracht en de potentie zijn enorm zoals ik al heb gemerkt en ik zie ernaar uit om samen ervoor te zorgen dat onze opleiding haar reputatie behoudt in de universiteit, in Nederland en in de rest van de wereld.

Bovenal mijn voorgangster, Remke Kruk, maar ook al mijn andere docenten hier in Leiden dank ik voor jullie aanmoedigingen om extra dingen te doen tijdens mijn studie. Ik hoop dat ik hetzelfde enthousiasme voor het

vak en de volledige beleving ervan kan overdragen op mijn eigen studenten. Ik begon mijn loopbaan in Leiden in de vakgroep geschiedenis en hoewel ik op een gegeven moment, zoals mijn vader het noemde, ‘de Witte Singel definitief overgestoken heb’, doet het mij veel plezier nu als collega naast mijn oude docenten werkzaam te zijn. Vooral de decaan die wellicht ‘for old time’s sake’ zijn luisterend oor altijd open, en minstens zo belangrijk, zijn email altijd aan heeft staan ben ik zeer erkentelijk voor zijn niet aflatende steun.

Dames en heren studenten. Meer dan vijftig jaar geleden wees mijn roemrijke voorganger Joseph Schacht vanaf deze plaats zijn studenten op hun verantwoordelijkheid objectieve en betrouwbare voorlichting over het moderne Midden-Oosten te verschaffen ook al interesseerden ze zich vooral voor de klassieke periode.<sup>40</sup> Ook jullie zal voortdurend gevraagd worden commentaar te leveren op de gebeurtenissen die de kranten beheersen waarbij de rest, en dat is het grootste deel, van de Arabische cultuur geen rol speelt. Jullie verantwoordelijkheid is het om ook al die andere facetten van de Arabische taal en cultuur te vermelden. Het zal mij een eer en genoegen zijn om jullie gids te zijn in dit boeiende landschap.

De twee mensen die hier hadden moeten zijn, zijn Sarah Clackson en mijn vader. Zij stonden aan de wieg van mijn loopbaan als papyroloog en zijn nog steeds een grote inspiratie voor me. Gelukkig ontmoet ik hen bijna dagelijks in mijn werk met de papyri en kan ik hun stemmen bijna horen alsof ze me nog steeds hun ontdekkingen en observaties vertellen. Ik weet dat ze ongelooflijk trots zouden zijn geweest dat ik hier nu sta.

Ik wil hier ook Alex en Etty bedanken. Zonder de infrastructuur en het vangnet dat jullie bieden was dit niet mogelijk geweest. Etty maakte het mogelijk dat ik toch nog een jaar in Eugene ging studeren na mijn middelbare school. Het was het begin van mijn buitenlandavonturen. Alex, ik kan hier niet uitdrukken hoe dankbaar ik ben voor je steun langs die lange weg die begon ergens in upstate New York en (voorlopig) geëindigd is zover als je ongeveer maar zijn kunt van jouw huis. Als we in rustiger vaarwater belanden, en mij is verzekerd dat dit gebeuren zal, denk ik dat we hier heel gelukkig kunnen zijn.

Ik heb gezegd.

## Noten

- 1 AVRO Close up: ‘Gilbert and George – Art for All’, uitgezonden 15 maart 2009, 18:25 (1:30:54). Zie ook: ““You see all these Arab newspapers, you don’t understand a single word, and that creates some kind of ... tension”, Gilbert says, referring to the Arab calligraphy that swarms over the mural-like ginkgo works. “Don’t you think?”” in Gordon Burn, ‘It’s appalling!’ *The Guardian*, 2 juni 2005.
- 2 *P.Ness*. no. 75.

- 3 Papyrus die zal verschijnen in P.M. Sijpesteijn, *The Voice of the Poor and Needy from Early Islamic Egypt* (in voorbereiding).
- 4 Bijv. *P.Cair.Arab.* II nos. 200-14 ; *P.Giss.Arab.* nos. 1-2.
- 5 *P.Giss.Arab.* no. 5; *P.Cair.Arab.* IV no. 260.
- 6 *P.Khalili* I no. 1.
- 7 *P.Horak* nos. 64-6.
- 8 Bijv. *P.Cair.Arab.* II.
- 9 Bijv. *CPR* XVI no. 35; *P.Hamb.Arab.* I no. 1.
- 10 *P.Hamb.Arab.* II no. 19.
- 11 Bijv. *P.Marchands* I-IV; Y. Rāghib, 'Sauf-conduits d'Égypte omeyyade et abbaside', *Annales Islamologiques* 31 (1997), pp. 143-68.
- 12 Voor een uitnodiging voor een bezoek, zie bijvoorbeeld: *P.Hamb.Arab.* I no. 55. Voor een liefdesbrief, zie in A. Grohmann, *From the World of Arabic Papyri*, Cairo 1952, pp. 182-3.
- 13 Deze teksten verschenen in Grohmann, *From the World*, pp. 138, 141-2, 156-7.
- 14 Gehouden op 9 april 1968. P.J. Sijpesteijn, *Een geschenk van de Nijl*, Amsterdam 1968.
- 15 *Mijn weg tot de historie*, Haarlem 1947, pp. 46-7. Huizinga wilde Arabisch gaan studeren, maar zijn familie kon het zich niet veroorloven om hem naar Leiden te sturen. Hij begon derhalve zijn studie dichterbij huis, in Groningen.
- 16 'Up the River', *Letters of Travel* (1892-1913).
- 17 Grohmann, *From the World*, pp. 138-9.
- 18 Voor het eerst gepubliceerd in Bertold Brecht, *Kalendergeschichten*, 1928.
- 19 Gepubliceerd door G. Levi della Vida, in *Byzantion American Series* III, vol. 17 (1944-5), pp. 212-21 en gereproduceerd in A. Grohmann, 'The Value of Arabic Papyri for the Study of the History of Mediaeval Egypt', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Historical Studies*, vol. I (1951), pp. 48-9.
- 20 *P.Marchands* II no. 2.
- 21 P.M. Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State: The World of a Mid-Eighth-Century Egyptian*, no. 8 (Oxford 2013).
- 22 Ibid. hoofdstuk 3.
- 23 In de Koran en in andere vroege teksten worden *zakāt* en *ṣadaqa* door elkaar gebruikt om vrijwillige en verplichte aalmoezenbelasting aan te duiden (Th. Weisz en A. Zysow, 'Ṣadaqa', *Encyclopaedia of Islam* second edition, vol. 8, pp. 708-16 and A. Zysow, 'Zakāt', *Encyclopaedia of Islam* second edition, vol. 11, pp. 406-22).
- 24 Koran IX:33, 36, 60, 103; XII:40; XXX:30, 43; XCVIII:5.
- 25 Ibn Qudāma (d. 620/1223), *al-Mughnī*, eds. 'A.A. al-Turkī en 'A.F. al-Ḥalw (Cairo 1987), IV, pp. 12, 32.
- 26 De vroegste overgeleverde Arabische narratieve bronnen dateren van de negende eeuw. Aan de andere kant is het duidelijk dat de later geproduceerde narratieve bronnen teruggaan op oraal overgeleverd materiaal en ook gebruik maken van oudere, niet overgeleverde schriftelijke bronnen. In de negentiende eeuw leidde een bronnenkritische benadering van deze latere geschreven teksten tot een sceptische revisie onder, veelal westerse, geleerden (aanvankelijk met name Ignaz Goldziher en Joseph Schacht). Deze zogenaamde revisionisten beschouwen de latere geschreven teksten als onbruikbaar om de vroegste geschiedenis van de islam te reconstrueren, omdat de afwezigheid van vroege bronnen duidt op een latere vorming van de islam in de negende eeuw (bijv. P. Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, Cambridge 1980; G. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, Cambridge 1999; C.F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, Cambridge 2003). Andere geleerden proberen via interne criteria de latere teksten te analyseren en het oudere van het nieuwere materiaal te onderscheiden (e.g. G.H.A. Juynboll, *Encyclopedia of Canonical Hadith*, Leiden 2007; M.J. Kister, *Society and Religion from Jahiliyya to Islam*, Aldershot 1990). Een jongere generatie wetenschappers tracht m.b.v. bronnen die onafhankelijk van

- de islamitische, narratieve traditie (papyri, inscripties, munten, archeologie) zijn, de narratieve teksten te interpreteren (bijv. R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, Princeton 1997). Voor een overzicht van dit historiografische debat, zie F.M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins. The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, Princeton 1998, Introduction. Voor recentelijke initiatieven op het gebied van de Arabische papyrologie, zie: <http://www.ori.uzh.ch/isap.html>.
- 27 P.M. Sijpesteijn, 'Creating a Muslim State: The Collection and Meaning of *Ṣadaqa*', in B. Palme (ed.), *Akten des 23. Internationalen Papyrologenkongresses Wien, 22.-28. Juli 2001* (Wenen 2007), pp. 661-74.
  - 28 Het volgende wordt in meer details beschreven in: P.M. Sijpesteijn, 'The Arab Conquest of Egypt and the Beginning of Muslim Rule', Chapter 21 in R.S. Bagnall (ed.), *Byzantine Egypt* (Cambridge 2007), pp. 437-59; idem 'New Rule over Old Structures: Egypt after the Muslim Conquest', in H. Crawford (ed.), *Regime Change in the Ancient Near East and Egypt: From Sargon of Agade to the Seljuks. Proceedings of the British Academy* 136 (London 2007), pp. 183-202.
  - 29 *SB VI* 9576. Y. Rāghib, 'Un papyrus arabe de l'an 22 de l'hégire,' in Gh. Alleaume, S. Denoix, M. Tuchscherer (eds.), *Histoire, archéologies et littératures du monde musulman. Mélanges en l'honneur de l'André Raymond* (Cairo 2009), pp. 363-72.
  - 30 Zie hiervoor Sijpesteijn, 'New Rule ...' noot 27. Zie ook de uitgebreide documentatie van Senouthios *anastys* in *CPR XXII*, no. 1 en *CPR XXX*.
  - 31 M. Kaimio, 'P.Petra inv. 83: A Settlement of Dispute', in *Atti dell XXII Congresso Internazionale di Papirologia* (Florence 2001), pp. 719-24; R. Hoyland, 'Epigraphy and the Emergence of Arab Identity', in P.M. Sijpesteijn *et al.* (eds), *From al-Andalus to Khurasan. Documents from the Medieval Muslim World* (Leiden 2007), pp. 219-42.
  - 32 J. Ziadeh, 'L'Apocalypse de Samuel, supérieur de deir-elqalāmoun', *Revue de l'orient chrétien* 20 (1915-17), pp. 374-404, aldaar 394-5.
  - 33 *CPR XXII* inleiding.
  - 34 De veranderde stijl in Koptische documenten na de Arabische verovering was het onderwerp van een congres in Oxford, 'Beyond Free Variation: Scribal Repertoires in Egypt from the Old Kingdom to the Early Islamic Period', University College, Oxford, 14-16 September 2009. T. S. Richter, 'Spätkoptische Rechtsurkunden neu bearbeitet (II): Die Rechtsurkunden des Teschlot-Archivs', *Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 30 (2000), pp. 95-148.
  - 35 T. El-Leithy, *Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo, 1293-1524 AD* Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University 2005.
  - 36 In de negende eeuw gebruikte het merendeel van de Egyptische bevolking Arabisch en begon het aantal bekeringen tot de islam te stijgen. Het is dan ook in de negende eeuw dat zich een eigen *Egyptische* islamitische identiteit ontwikkelt (P.M. Sijpesteijn, *Building an Egyptian identity*, in A.Q. Ahmed, B. Sadeghi and M. Bonner, *The Islamic Scholarly Tradition. Studies in History, Law and Thought in Honor of Professor Michael Allan Cook*, Leiden 2011, pp. 85-106).
  - 37 A. Grohmann, 'Der Beamtenstab der Arabische Finanzverwaltung in Ägypten in früh-arabischer Zeit', in H. Braunert (ed.), *Studien zur Papyrologie und antiken Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, Bonn 1964, pp. 120-34, aldaar 129-131.
  - 38 *CPR XXI*, pp. 119-21.
  - 39 Voor het eerst gebruikt in een ontvangsbewijs uit 249/863 (A. Grohmann, 'Probleme der Arabischen Papyrusforschung II', *Archiv Orientalni* 6, 1934, pp. 377-98, no. 14). Cf. *CPR XXI*, pp. 122-3.
  - 40 *De Arabieren in de islam*, Leiden 1954.

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**Petra Sijpesteijn** received M.A.'s in history (1996) and Arabic (1997) from Leiden University. She went on to pursue graduate studies in the United States, first at Cornell University with a Fulbright scholarship and then at Princeton University, graduating M.A. and Ph.D. from Princeton in 2000 and 2004 respectively. Her thesis, *Shaping a Muslim State: Papyri Related to a Mid-Eighth-Century Egyptian Official*, won the Department of Near Eastern Studies Thesis Prize and will appear with Oxford University Press this year. Her interests center on the development of Islam in its earliest stages from the seventh to the tenth centuries and the lived experiences of those under Muslim rule in the pre-modern Islamic empire. Her specialism within this field is the study of documents on papyrus and paper in the three languages of the Islamic period: Arabic, Greek and Coptic, and the light these shed on the day-to-day lives of those otherwise lost to the historical record. In 2008 her project, 'The Formation of Islam: The View from Below', was awarded an inaugural Starting Grant by the European Research Council. She is one of the founders and is currently the president of the International Society for Arabic Papyrology.

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