

Islamic World / General
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Research on Islam in the Nordic Countries

While it may seem surprising that the far-off countries of the North have developed research interest in the Islamic world, a region they have had no colonial or similar relations with, such studies have in fact a long tradition in the Nordic countries. While we need not go back to the medieval Viking contact with the inner Mediterranean and the Arab world, both Denmark and Sweden had relations with various Middle Eastern powers from the seventeenth century onwards. Denmark, a maritime power, traded in Moroccan and other ports in North Africa, while Swedish forces in Central Europe came into direct military confrontation with the Ottoman Empire, to which they were allied for a period. Thus, there is little reason to wonder that the universities in the region developed a Middle Eastern interest.

Arabic was studied and taught in Copenhagen, Uppsala and Lund already from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and in 1760, the Danish expedition led by Carsten Niebuhr made a notable contribution to Western knowledge of the Arab peninsula. When the first university in Finland, then under Swedish rule, was established in Turku in 1640, even this distant institution was given a chair in Arabic. Norway, the fourth of the Nordic countries, developed this interest only later but can take pride in the fact that Carl Caspari's *Arabische Grammatik*, still one of the major authorities on Arabic grammar, was completed in Oslo (then Christiania) in 1848.

There is thus no novelty in the study of Middle Eastern societies and cultures in the four countries. (The fifth Nordic country, Iceland, still has to develop this area of research.) In particular over the last two decades, the field has expanded tremendously, through the extension of traditional subjects as philology and religious studies, as well as through the development of Middle Eastern research in history and the social sciences. Thus, most universities in the Nordic countries have some interest in the Middle East. About ten of them offer regular courses on the subject. They include the traditional centres of Uppsala, Lund, Helsinki and Copenhagen, as well as Oslo, Gothenburg, Stockholm and younger centres as Århus, Bergen and Odense. Research interests are varied in all institutions, but there is clearly a tendency for the more established centres to have a continuing tradition in philological and classical studies, while the younger universities have greater emphasis on social sciences and the modern period.

Arabic is currently being taught in nine of these institutions; Oslo and Bergen in Norway, Copenhagen and Odense in Denmark, Helsinki in Finland and four universities, Uppsala, Stockholm, Gothenburg and Lund in Sweden. However, only Uppsala, Copenhagen and Oslo have courses in Iranian languages, and the same three in Turkish. The teaching of Hebrew and other Semitic studies have long traditions, in particular in those universities with a tradition of theology. All institutions teach Islamic or religious studies in some form, while the history of the Middle East is taught as a specific subject only in Bergen; Copenhagen and Lund, among others, also have research in Middle Eastern history.

In terms of research, the same dual pattern can be found. All universities have research in the main areas of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, but certain fields are stronger in particular milieus. Looking at the four countries one by one, we will find that in Finland, the largest centre is at the University of Helsinki, which has a very strong focus on Ancient Near Eastern studies. In the Islamic and modern area, Helsinki has a long tradition of philological and linguistic research, now being continued by Heikki Palva and his studies of Bedouin

dialectology, in particular in Jordan. Among the younger scholars, an interest in both classical and modern Islam is developing, thus Helsinki is planning to hold a conference on Sufi studies in the near future. Helsinki is also developing relations with colleagues in nearby St. Petersburg.

The second large and very dynamic centre in Finland is that of Tampere, which is specializing on the modern political history of the Maghreb. This is constituted by a group of young scholars around Tuomo Melasuo, who is working on Algeria in the late colonial and post-colonial period. This milieu has grown in close collaboration with research centres in Europe and the Maghreb. The same is the case for the smaller group at the University of Joensuu, where M'hammed Sabour is developing very active research in the field of sociology.

Sweden is the largest of the Nordic countries, and also has the largest number of scholars in this field. Uppsala has a long and distinguished history in Semitic and Islamic studies. This approach continues to dominate the Uppsala research environment, which has the most extensive philological studies both in Arabic and other Middle Eastern languages. Another very clear distinction between Sweden and other Nordic countries is the close relation between Islamic studies and the field of theology, which has traditionally been open to the non-partisan study of all religions. This has recently manifested itself in the now-vacated Swedish Church of Alexandria, which has been transformed into a Swedish centre for Middle Eastern studies in Egypt (details are yet to be settled). The dominant figures in Uppsala may be too many to mention, but Tryggve Kronholm holds the chair in Arabic studies and has among other topics been working on Arabic literary history; while Bo Utas is a key figure in studies of Iranian languages and literature, not least in his studies in Persian Sufism.

The University of Lund has a tradition of Middle Eastern scholarship of equal depth to that of Uppsala, and is second to it in size. While it shares Uppsala's interest in philology, an active group of young scholars, organized by Jan Hjärpe, have started to focus on the ideas and social context of modern Islamic movements, both in Sweden and Europe, as well as in various countries of the Middle East.

Gothenburg University seems to have focused more on the contemporary Islamic world, being the Nordic country with the largest number of scholars on Middle Eastern political science as well as contemporary political history. Sune Persson is the dominant figure there. He has written several standard works on the modern history of the Palestine conflict and the Middle East.

Stockholm University has a research interest in Arabic language and literature, the chair in Arabic there was until recently held by Kerstin Eksell. She has, however, recently taken over a post in Copenhagen. Stockholm also has some research in various social sciences of the Middle East. Individual scholars on the Middle East are also employed at other smaller universities in Sweden, such as Linköping and Umeå.

In Denmark, the classical tradition is preserved by the University of Copenhagen, which also has a continuing tradition in philology as well as in ancient Near Eastern studies. Recently, the internal organization of this latter has been modified, in that several units of Near and Middle Eastern studies come under the

umbrella of the Carsten Niebuhr institute of the University. This covers the traditional areas, but is also opening up to research more focused on modern Islamic topics, often in cooperation with Lund just across the straits in Sweden. This reorganization is spearheaded by the historian Jørgen Bæk Simonsen, who has worked both on medieval and contemporary Islamic topics.

The University of Århus, the second largest Middle East research milieu in Denmark, has built up a tradition of anthropology at the Moesgaard institute/museum. A number of expeditions to Afghanistan have brought this centre to attention, not least those led by Klaus Ferdinand. Århus also has other research interests in the modern Islamic world, both in anthropology and political science.

The only Danish university with a specific Centre for Middle Eastern Areas Studies is however the third one, Odense. This new centre has focused on contemporary studies, and has also given emphasis to reach beyond the academic world. Research on water issues, contemporary linguistics and political Islam can be noted at this centre, which was selected to be the national coordinating centre for Arabic teaching in Denmark.

It must also be noted that the Danish State has taken an important interest in developing contemporary Middle Eastern studies in Denmark. This has led to the establishment of a Danish Centre in Damascus, as well as the development of a Middle East network project. The latter is to last over five years, with a number of national and international conferences each year on a variety of subjects, including conflict resolution, water politics, and others. The aim of the network, which is run from Copenhagen, is to develop research especially among young scholars from all Danish areas.

In Norway, the 'dividend' from Norway's role in the 'Oslo process' has been some national funding for research on Palestinian/Israeli issues, but not so as to set a determining mark on the research milieu. The University of Oslo carries the national traditions of philological and linguistic research in all three language groups. The Arabic milieu has grown up around Gunvor Mejdell, now supported by the recent arrival of Michael Carter. Recently, a research group on current social and political issues in the Gulf has also developed in Oslo.

The Bergen research environment is, on the other hand, dominated by history and anthropology. Bergen is unique, not just in Scandinavia, but in Europe and beyond, for its very special focus on and relations with one country, the Sudan. This spans not only all arts and social sciences, but even cooperation in medicine, natural sciences and other disciplines as well, which all have tended to focus cooperation on the Sudan. Beyond the history of the Sudan – pioneered by Seán O'Fahey – Bergen has focused on the history of Islamic Africa in general, and in particular on the documentation of its sources. In anthropology, the Sudan interest (started by Fredrik Barth, now in Oslo) has been matched with a recent interest in the Turco-Iranian world, initiated by Reidar Grønhaug, and most recently research on the Indian Ocean is growing. Bergen also has a specific coordinating Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, which i.a. publishes the journal *Sudanic Africa* (on the history of Islamic Africa) and various book series.

It is the custom in non-European studies of this region to organize on a pan-Nordic basis, rather than on a purely national one. This is

evidently because the individual national research environments are comparatively small, and only on the Nordic level can one expect the inter-university exchange that larger countries find nationally. Thus, there were, in the 1970s, common Nordic research centres established both for Asian studies (in Copenhagen) and for African studies (in Uppsala). No such pan-Nordic institution was set up for the Middle East, which was thus split between the two. As the two centres developed, both have a formal attachment to the Islamic world. But the Asia centre has decided to focus its attention on East and Southeast Asia, thus de-emphasizing their interest in Asia west of the Indus. The Africa institute is strongly focused on contemporary issues, and while not formally restricted to sub-Saharan Africa, evidently feels a pull in that direction.

To counteract this falling-between-the-centres, Middle Eastern and Islamic scholars have organized themselves in a society of scholars, which has no fixed centre, but is organized from the Bergen Middle East centre. Its main objective is information interchange between scholars in all fields of humanist and social sciences of the Islamic world and the Middle East, and holding regular conferences and academic encounters between scholars in these fields throughout the four countries. Thus, the fourth triennial conference of the Society, on 'Globalization and the Middle East', was held in August 1998 in Oslo (after the earlier ones in Uppsala, Copenhagen and Joensuu). ◆

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The statistics in this article are based on the Directory of Middle Eastern Studies in the Nordic Countries, Bergen 1998, which brings more detail of the various research topics and geographic areas covered in the Nordic region. More information on Nordic countries can be found on the Web, at the address <http://www.hf.uib.no/smi/nsm/>