

## With vowels from God

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Arnoud Vrolijk and Richard van Leeuwen

ARABIC STUDIES IN THE NETHERLANDS

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Thomas van Erpe (1584–1624) by an unknown artist

still believed that more accurate knowledge of Islam was necessary to convince “our own minds of the falsity [of Islam], if not of the Turks themselves”.

It is striking how almost all the important groundwork for the development of Arabic studies in Europe had been accomplished by the end of the eighteenth century, much of it indeed before the end of the seventeenth century: the

After he was appointed first Professor of Arabic at Leiden University in 1613 Thomas Erpenius delivered an inaugural oration, *De linguae Arabica praestantia et dignitate* (“On the excellence and dignity of the Arabic language”). In it he made mention of the usefulness of the language for trade and diplomacy. Erpenius’s oration and its suggestion that there might be a utilitarian purpose to the study of Arabic was much plagiarized by scholars who came after him. But the truth was that Turkish would have been more useful for diplomats and merchants working in in the Middle East. Dutch and British Arabists were only occasionally called on to deal with correspondence with the ruler of Morocco. Again, though Erpenius also argued that knowledge of Arabic was necessary for those seeking to convert Muslims, hopes of the success of such missions had effectively been abandoned in the Middle Ages.

Erpenius was on firmer ground when he argued that Arabic could serve as a handmaid for Hebrew studies and this must have been the language’s chief appeal to those who sponsored the chair. The Dutch dominated Arabic studies in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and they put their scholarship in the service of the Protestant religion. Erpenius, Franciscus Raphaeleus, Jacobus Golius, Levinus Warner and Josephus Justus Scaliger (French, but recruited to Leiden) were the leaders in the field of study. Though Edward Pococke was the equal of these scholars, he was a lonely eminence in Britain. The dominant discourse of early Orientalism was religious and an *odium theologicum* pervades much of Arabic Studies in the Netherlands. Dutch scholars pored over Arabic manuscripts in quests for ammunition to be deployed against Catholics, Unitarians, Socinians and others. Though it was understood that there was little chance of converting Muslims, there remained hopes that the Eastern Christians might be brought to Protestantism. Moreover Adriaan Reland, while acknowledging that Muslims could not be argued into Christianity,

scholarly printer Raphaelengius produced an Arabic typeface; Erpenius produced a grammar; Golius produced an Arabic–Latin dictionary; Levinus Warner assembled a substantial library of Arabic manuscripts for researchers to work from; outside the Netherlands the Qur’an was translated by Lodovico Marracci, André Du Ryer and George Sale; the *Bibliothèque orientale*, the precursor of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, was compiled by Barthélemi d’Herbelot and posthumously published for him by Antoine Galland in 1697.

For a long time the Dutch had the leading voice in Arabic studies and the voice they spoke in was Latin. Almost all scholarship in Islamic and Arabic studies was published in Latin. The *Bibliothèque orientale* was to break with that tradition. An even more shocking break came when, in 1850, the Dutch historian of Muslim Spain, Reinhart Dozy, gave his inaugural address not in Latin, but in Dutch. Though Dozy, who was desirous of reaching a wide reading public, went on to publish copiously in a flowery literary French, by the nineteenth century German had become the most important language in which issues of oriental scholarship were discussed.

A pictorial history of Dutch Arabism is a curious enterprise, though an attractive one. It contains images of stern and scholarly bachelors in wigs, obscure manuscripts in exotic scripts as well as ecclesiastical closes and college libraries under gloomy skies. I imagine that an illustrated edition of M. R. James’s *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* might contain similar pictures. (But no picture of the manuscript of the Tractate Middoth features in *Arabic Studies in the Netherlands*.) The scholars commemorated pictorially were an eccentric bunch. Scaliger spent a huge amount of time on two impossible enterprises, the universal chronology and the attempt to square the circle. Not content with being an expert Arabist, Golius tried to become an expert in practically everything, including mathematics, optics, geography, botany and astronomy. The Hebraist Taco Hajo van den Honert argued that the Jews never spoke Hebrew, for it was a language reserved to God alone.

The longest entry is devoted to Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857–1936). He converted to Islam, though the sincerity of that conversion has been doubted. He had at least one secret native wife. His attitude to Dutch colonialism in the East Indies was fraught with ambiguities. He may be thought of as a not very likeable character looking for the leading role in a novel by Joseph Conrad. As the example of Hurgronje suggests, Dutch Arabists were still making important contributions in the early twentieth century and Michael Jan de Goeje and Arent Jan Wensinck became the driving forces behind the first appearance of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* in 1913. Thereafter things have not gone so well. *Arabic Studies* is fascinating, but it reads like an elegy for the subject, since in its introduction Arnoud Vrolijk and Richard van Leeuwen lament the recent suppression of various professorships of Arabic and the marginalization of the subject in Dutch universities. Their book concludes with these words: “At the moment Leiden University alone still has a chair of Arabic language and culture, and Arabic studies in the Netherlands thus seem to have reverted to 1613 when they first started”.

Though Johann Heinrich Hottinger, the subject of Jan Loop’s monograph, was Swiss in origin, he came very close to joining the Dutch Arabists in Leiden, for he was on his way there to take up a professorship of theology in 1667 when he drowned in a river. Hottinger, who had spent most of his career in Zurich, was a young scholar in a hurry in the wrong place. There were no Arabic manuscripts in Zurich apart from the ones he hastily transcribed for himself. His transcriptions and his deductions from those transcriptions were strewn with errors. He had no colleagues, but only distant correspondents. Yet recondite theological and philological obsessions drove him on. For Hottinger and many of his contemporaries the chief purpose of Arabic was to elucidate obscure terms in the Bible. Jan Loop’s meticulous study takes the reader deep into arcane territory. For example, Hottinger was set upon demonstrating that, contrary to what many scholars claimed, some of the earliest Arabic inscriptions and manuscripts did include vowel points (rather than leaving the vowels to be guessed at by the reader). Hottinger went on to argue from this that vowel points in Hebrew were similarly not a recent invention. He and his allies then thought that this demonstrated that the Masoretic vowel-pointed Hebrew text “was the inspired and infallible work of God”. And this having been established, then another deadly blow had been struck against Vulgate version of the Scriptures which the Catholics foolishly relied on. Elsewhere, Hottinger used his partial knowledge of Islamic history and theology to demonstrate that Muhammad and the Pope were the twin Antichrists. Both the books under review offer accounts of ancient and obsolete erudition, virulent theological polemic and philological passion and, in so doing, provide definite pleasures, if of a dry sort.