Niebuhr's Method

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Abstract

If fieldwork can be defined as the practice of following or trying to follow the advice and instructions issued in advance by scholarly and scientific authorities Niebuhr deserves a special place indeed in the history of that practice. This paper presents a closer look at Niebuhr's method from three different angels of comparison: starting with some of his predecessors it will try to shed light on the originality of his approach. Turning to some of Niebuhr's critical portrayals of other travellers he met in the field it will guide us to Niebuhr's own understanding of his method. And finally turning to how later scholars have praised and evaluated Niebuhr's contributions to scholarship it will lead to a discussion of how the role of fieldwork has been underestimated and even silenced in many histories of scholarship and science.

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I. Damascus

Writing about his arrival in Damascus 23rd of August 1766 Carsten Niebuhr could not resist the temptation to compare himself to the prophet Mohammed, who, having come to overlook the city from the very same spot as Niebuhr, reportedly decided to stop his journey because, as the prophet is quoted to say, "man should only enter Paradise once." A European painter, Niebuhr continues to explain probably would have preferred a different prospect of the city showing more than the flat roofs of the houses in a forest of domes and minarets.[1] The surrounding and well inhabited plains, however, are highly delightful, particularly for an Arab from desert. "The water here" Niebuhr continues,

> is excellent, and since the Arabs drink nothing but water and also frequently go bathing, Mohammed knew to appreciate the amount and quality of the water better than most Europeans, who never drink water and perhaps never take a bath in their life. Furthermore, Mohammed here found an abundance of prime wheat instead of the Durra-bread most Arabs have to content themselves with, and also the most delicate fruit trees in large numbers which rich inhabitants of Mekka can get no better from Taiif. He thus had good reason to call Damascus a paradise. Myself, I was very pleasantly surprised when, coming from a mountainous and drought affected area and standing perhaps on the same spot as Mohammed, I caught the sight of the city to the East on a morning with excellent weather.[2]

Even though Niebuhr only spent three days in Damascus to make his observations and take and count the steps necessary for making the map,[3] which was printed in the second volume of his *Reisebeschreibung* already, he clearly had the ambition to describe Damascus and its surroundings from what more than a century later famously was called the native point of view. The final goal of the ethnographer, declared Bronislaw Malinowski in a much quoted passage of the introduction to his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*

1. Niebuhr (1837), p. 84.

2. Niebuhr (1837), p. 84.

3. Fig. 1.

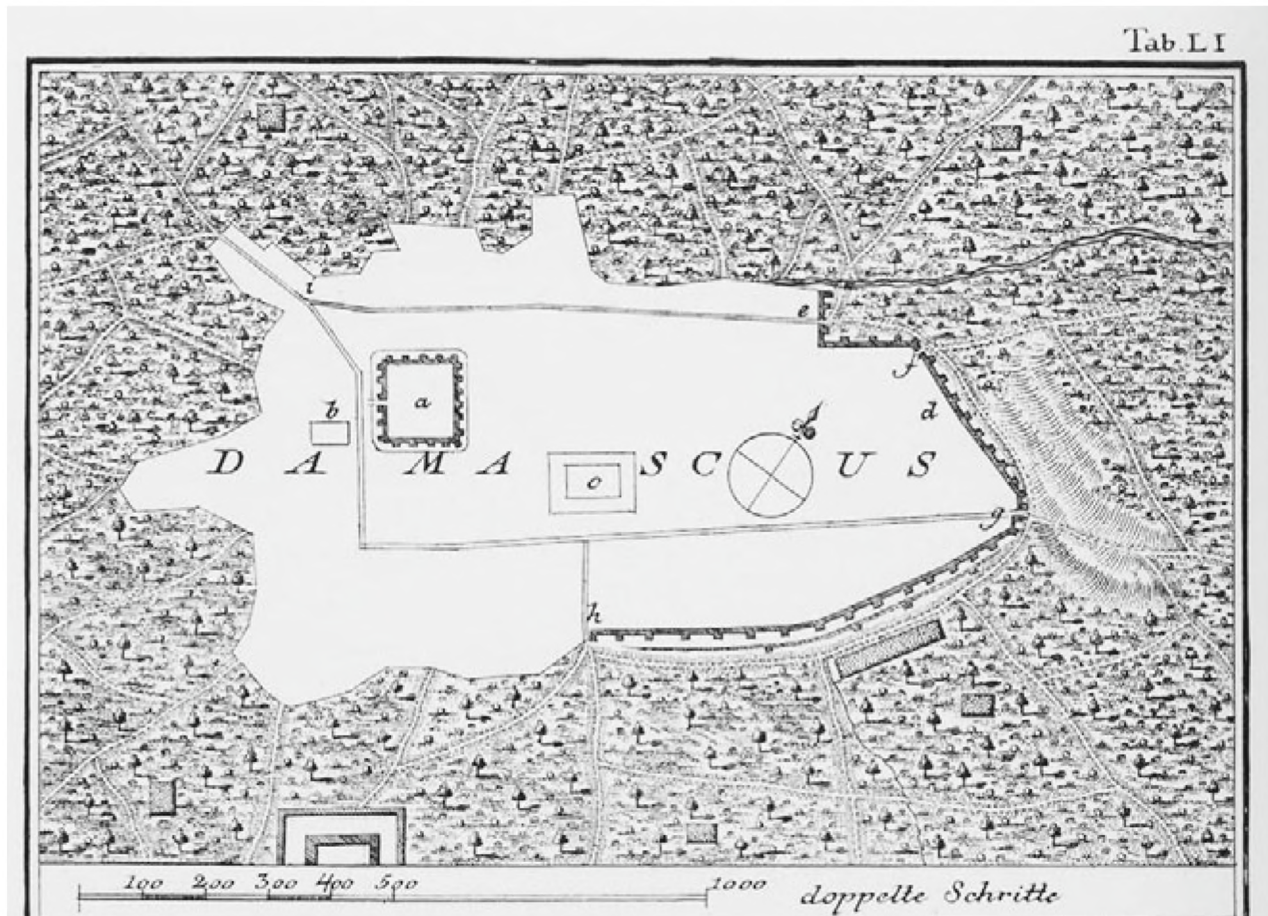

Fig. 1. Damascus. a. das Castell. b. Das Seroj oder die Wohnung des Pascha. c. Haupt-Mosqué. d. das Quartier wo die meisten Christen wohnen. ... h. Bab Schauer. Niebuhr (1778), p. 408, Tab. LI.

from 1922, is "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world".[4] In what follows I want to discuss in what sense one can say that Carsten Niebuhr actually developed a method for doing ethnographic fieldwork long before this method came to be canonised in what for this reason came to be known as *modern* anthropology.

Due to the corrupt Ottoman authorities and their humiliatingly excessive demands (alluded to in a manner reminding of Clifford Geertz and the police during the Balinese cockfight),[5] Niebuhr only spent three days in Damascus before going back to the Lebanese mountains with, as he says, a small company of peasants, hardly enough to deserve to be called fieldwork in any sense of the term. Spending almost seven years in the field, however, and doing so with the explicit intention to view the world from not only the prophet Mohammed's, but actually many different native points of view, Niebuhr can be claimed actually to have done fieldwork in the strict sense of the word (to quote the title from another of Malinowski's books).[6] Or this at least is what I will to try to show in what follows.

4. Malinowski (1922), p. 25.
5. Geertz (1973).
6. Malinowski (1967).

II. Precursors

If we define fieldwork as so many ways of practicing instructions and answering questions which have been issued by academies and other scientific and scholarly institutions and individuals, then we can add at least a couple of centuries to the history of fieldwork as it has been told again and again by nearly all the textbooks of anthropology. This history started, one could say, around the time of the "crisis of the European conscience 1680-1715" described so eloquently by Paul Hazard.[7]

Robert Boyle's *General Heads for the Natural History of a Country, great or small, drawn out for the use of travelers and navigators* from 1666,[8] the unpublished instructions for the astronomical French expedition to Gorée and the Antilles 1681-1683 by the *Académie Royale des Sciences* in Paris studied by Nicholas Dew[9] or John Woodward's *Brief Instructions for Making Observations in all Parts of the World: as also for Collecting, Preserving, and Sending over Natural Things. Being an Attempt to settle an Universal Correspondence for the Advancement of Knowledge both Natural and Civil*[10] from 1696 are among the earliest examples of this new genre of instructions and questionnaires which developed further throughout the 18th and 19th centuries in both England, France, Italy and Germany and which has thoroughly scrutinized in a whole series of recent studies.[11] As with Boyle and Woodward, most of the earlier texts indicate that fieldwork to begin with aimed at various aspects of natural history, at what later was to differentiate into botany and zoology, geography and mineralogy, geology and astronomy etc. They also point at a new kind of relationships and forms of exchange between the theoretically interested academies and their members on the one hand and the practitioners of their instructions out there on the other.

A striking example of how precisely such instructions actually did have effect can be found in Captain Robert Knox's Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon in the East Indies from 1681.[12] Robert Knox was sailing with his father to Persia in the service of the East India Company, but a storm forced them to get ashore on the island of Ceylon, modern Sri Lanka, in 1659. Here they were held captive for the next 19 years; his father having escaped in 1661, Robert Knox managed to return home via Batavia to London in 1680. When trying to write about his long stay on Ceylon, Knox seems to have worked closely together with Robert Hooke, the well-known curator of experiments of the Royal Society. And it is from Hooke's preface to Knox book that we are informed about the significance and importance of the instructions issued by this society for the coming into existence of the kind of scholarly and learned travel accounts such as that of Captain Robert Knox. Beginning with a complaint about the many discoveries which in spite of the invention of writing and the art of printing "have been lost, to the great Detriment of the Publick", Hooke continues:

> It were very desirable therefore that the Causes of these and other Defects being known, some Remedies might be found to prevent the like Losses for the future. The principal Causes I conceive may be these; The want of sufficient Instructions (to Seamen and Travellers) to shew them what is pertinent and considerable, to be observ'd in their Voyages and Abodes, and how to make their Observations and keep Registers or Accounts of them. Next, The want of some Publick Incouragement for such as shall perform such Instructions. Thirdly, The want of fit Persons both to Promote and Disperse such Instructions to Persons fitted to engage, and careful to Collect Returns; and Compose them into Histories.[13]

7. Hazard (1935); see also Harbsmeier (2012) for a slightly more extended version.
8. Collini & Vannoni (2005), p. 61-69.
9. Dew (2010), p. 6.
10. Woodward (1696); see also Collini & Vannoni (2005), p. 71-75.
11. Blanckaert (1996); Bossi and Greppi (2005); Bucher (2002, 2003); Chappey (2002); Collini and Vannoni (2005), Copans and Jamin (1978); Kury (2001), p. 91-146; Stagl (1995); Puccini (1995); Rubiès (1996); Urry (1973); Vaccari (2007).
12. Knox (1681); see Rubies (1996), p. 139-141, and, more recently and in much more detail, Winterbottom (2009).
13. Knox (1681), Preface.

The main result of Hooke's active participation in the preparation of the text of Knox's account of Ceylon probably has been the very structure of the account: rather than a narrative of the captain's voyage and captivity, it has the form of a systematic description of Ceylon and its inhabitants starting with "A General Description of the Island, a chapter Concerning the chief Cities and Towns of this Island, a third Of their Corn, with their manner of Husbandry, a fourth Of their Fruits and Trees, a fifth Of their Plants, Herbs, Flowers, a sixth Of their Beasts Tame and Wild, Insects, and a seventh Of their Birds, Fish, Serpents, and Commodities" as the first part mainly devoted to natural history. The second part then deals with the present "King of Cande, his Manner, Vices, Recreation, Religion, and his Tyrannical Reign, his Revenues and Treasure, his great Officers, his Strength and Wars" and finally "A Relation of the Rebellion made against the King as a second part followed by a third devoted to various aspects of the ethnography of the Inhabitants of this Island, their different Honours, Ranks, and Qualities, their Religion, Gods, Temples, Priests, their Worship and Festivals, their Religious Doctrines, Opinions and Practices, their Houses, Diet, Housewifery, Salutation, Apparel, their Lodging, Bedding, Whoredome, Marriages, Children, their Employments and Recreations, their Lawes and Language, their Learning, Astronomy and Art Magick" and finally their "Sickness, Death and Burial." It is thus only towards the end of the book, in the final part after the exhaustive parts devoted to natural history, what later would be called politics and ethnography respectively, that we come to a narrative about how the author happened to get there, how he survived his captivity and how he finally escaped to return home again.

The cooperation between Knox and Hooke certainly was decisive for the shape of Knox's Historical Relation, the instructions however, which Hooke deemed so deeply important, entered into the process *post festum*: not as instructions for how to act and behave out there in field, but as instructions only for how to organize and write up the experiences and observations thereafter. Knox's Historical Relation was perhaps one of the earliest scholarly ethnographies; it was not yet based on fieldwork however. In December 1689, Robert Hooke gave an address to the Royal Society in which he in which he provided what was the first detailed description of cannabis in English, commending its possible curative properties and noting that Knox "has so often experimented it himself, that there is no Cause of Fear, tho' possibly there may be of Laughter."[14] Knox's experiments with cannabis were not yet part of fieldwork; the Ceylonese with whom he interacted only became his informants after he returned from the field.

The case of Robert Knox was far from the only example we have of instructions mainly being used in the context of debriefing and interrogating travellers once they had returned rather than preparing them for their voyage in advance. Much the same could be said, among examples from Germany only, about the cooperation between for example Hans Staden[15] and Johannes Dryander[16] in the sixteenth century or between the learned traveller Adam Olearius and the travellers whose accounts he edited later in the seventeenth century.[17]

From the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, however, we can see a growing the emergence of a whole series travellers, who actually both did author and issue the instructions which they themselves had followed or planned to follow in future expeditions.

Peter Simon Pallas for example, who in 1767 was invited by Catherine II of Russia to became a professor at the St Petersburg Academy, between 1768 and 1774 led an expedition to central Russian provinces and West Siberia, Altay and Transbaikal collecting natural history specimens. The regular reports which Pallas sent to St. Petersburg were collected together and published as *Reise durch verschiedene Provinzen des Russischen Reichs* [Journey through various provinces of the

14. Bennet (2003), pp. 205-206.
15. Harbsmeier and Whitehead(2008).
16. Harbsmeier (2008).
17. Mandelslo (1658); Andersen and Iversen (1669).

Russian Empire],[18] where he covered a wide range of topics, including geology, mineralogy, botany and zoology in addition to substantial reports on the native peoples and their religion. Nine years later, he published his instructions for another traveller: *Instructions pour M. Patrin, naturaliste, à qui est enjoint d'accompagner l'expedition destinée pour la Kovima et la mère glaciale*,[19] and as if to follow up on his instructions, between 1793 and 1794 he led a second expedition to southern Russia, visiting the Crimea and the Black Sea, of which he gave an account in his *Bemerkungen auf einer Reise in die Südlichen Statthalterschaften des Russischen Reichs*.[20]

Another obvious example is the Venetian naturalist and traveller Alberto Fortis who has described his field methods in great detail in his Preliminary notes deemed necessary to serve as directions for travels aiming at illustrating the natural history and the geography of provinces adjacent to the Adriatic and particularly Istria, Morlacchia, Dalmazia, Albania and connected islands published in Venice [Venetia] in 1771,[21] and whose European fame derives from his *Viaggio in Dalmazia* published in two volumes three years later.[22] Immediately translated into both German, French and English, it was his detailed ethnographic account of the Morlacchi, a pastoral people living in mountains of Dalmatia close to the Adriatic coast, which according to Larry Wolff qualifies as "a pioneering effort in the emergence of modern anthropology":

> On the one hand, Fortis was fully versed in the philosophical writings of Rousseau, and familiar with the model of the noble savage, which shaped the account of the Morlacchi. On the other hand, unlike Rousseau, Fortis was committed to the labour of empirical observation, both as a natural historian and as a witness of customs, so that his philosophical reflections were applied to carefully observed phenomena. Montesquieu created Persians but never went to Persia. Rousseau conjured the noble figure of the savage Carib but never came close to the Caribbean. Fortis's account of the Morlacchi, however, was based on something like modern anthropological field research, and the Morlacchi of Dalmatia were accessible to his observations, because they were to be found just across the Adriatic Sea from Padua and Venice.[23]

One could probably find still other examples for the coincidence between the roles of scholar and of traveller, which may be said to lay at the foundation of fieldwork, but here it must be enough also to mention Johann Reinhold Forster, who in his youth went to Russia in hope of a career as scholar and explorer, and later became famous as participant, together with his son Georg, of Cook's second voyage from 1772 to 1775. Forster's *A catalogue of the animals of North America ... to which are added short directions for collecting, preserving and transporting all kinds of natural history curiosities* came out in London 1771.[24] In 1778 he published his own *Observations made during a Voyage round the World* which in addition to a series of chapters about various aspects of natural history he develops, as Nicholas Thomas has argued, a complete comparative ethnology of the inhabitants of the various islands in the South Pacific.[25] Fieldwork once again turns out to have been practiced by scholars, who at the same time nourished theoretical and comparative ambitions.

Looking at this already long series of early examples of fieldwork brings to the forefront a very important further aspect of fieldwork, all too long absent from much of the secondary literature about early scientific travels, and that is the crucial role of the travellers' hosts and informants. Making this aspect part of the very definition of fieldwork as a practice of executing the instructions issued by primarily scholarly and scientific agencies directs our attention towards what I would like to call the intrinsically "ethnographic" nature of fieldwork. What all the example quoted so far have in common is a combined interest in natural history on the one and what we can call antiquarian or

18. Pallas (1771-1776).
19. Extracts in Collini & Vannoni (2005), pp. 139-143)
20. Pallas (1799-1801) – for more see Collini (1995).
21. Extracts in French translation in Collini & Vannoni (2005), pp. 85-93, see also Ciancio (1995).
22. Fortis (1774; 1778).
23. Wolff (2005), p. 5.
24. Forster (1771).
25. Forster (1778); Thomas (1996).

ethnographic issues, questions about local and native knowledge and traditions on the other. It is exactly this constellation which made fieldwork into a mode interacting with the inhabitants of the field both as informants and as objects of observation, both as hosts with whom to share knowledge (and necessities) and as individuals and populations to be described and written and reported about. In this very general sense, then, Malinowski was right when describing fieldwork as both participation and observation – as both sharing and extracting knowledge, as both interaction and dissociation.

Travelling through Japan as a member of a delegation of the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* 1690-92, Kaempfer managed to use a number of interpreters as his informants not only when botanising, but more importantly also when pretending to botanise while actually pursuing the many different investigations which finally went into his monumental *Geschichte und Beschreibung von Japan* (first published posthumously in two volumes in German 1777-1779)[26] and which show Kaempfer as a virtuoso in making use of local and native informants. Kaempfer does very explicitly acknowledge his debt to his informants explicitly and we can only speculate whether he did so trying to protect his informants against their according to Kaempfer vigilant superiors. Thanks to recent archival studies, however, we now know a great deal more about the interpreters Imamura Genemon Eisei, Namura Gonpachi, Narabayashi Chinzan and others, with whom Kaempfer shared and exchanged knowledge and information in natural history and a lot of other disciplines.[27] Published in an English translation by J. G. Scheuchzer in 1727 in London, the very title of Kaempfer's work clearly indicates that we have to do with a monograph fundamentally based on fieldwork in the sense of – in this case self-instructed – practices of sharing and exchanging substantial bodies of knowledge and information with native informants:[28] Kaempfer could only give "an Account of the ancient and present State and Government of that Empire; of Its Temples, Palaces, Castles and other Buildings; of its Metals, Minerals, Trees, Plants, Animals, Birds and Fishes; of The Chronology and Succession of the Emperors, Ecclesiastical and Secular; of The Original Descent, Religions, Customs, and Manufactures of the Natives, and of their Trade and Commerce with the Dutch and Chinese" – on the basis of extensively having practiced fieldwork.

Much better known among historians of science and of anthropology than the examples quoted so far are three other instructions for travellers from the second half of the eighteenth century, however. Quite a lot has been written already about Carl Linnaeus and the influential *Instructio Peregrinatoris* from 1759 ascribed to him and about Joseph-Marie de Gérando and his *Considérations sur les diverses méthodes à suivre dans l'observation des peuples sauvages* from the year 1800.[29]

Common to both of them is firstly, that their authors were not themselves among the travellers their instructions were meant for. Linnaeus was famous for his many botanical expeditions in Sweden undertaken both before and after the inaugural address he gave about "the necessity of travelling in one's own home country" when, shortly after returning from his tour to the Netherlands, England and France, he was appointed as professor in medicine in Uppsala in 1741. His *Instructio Peregrinatoris* from 1759, however, was obviously meant for the long series of his students who went to all the four continents while Linnaeus never left Sweden again.[30] Nor did the *idéologue* Joseph-Marie De Gérando have any intention to join the expedition for which he wrote the instructions.

Secondly, however, much more needs to be done in order to find out how these instructions actually have been practiced by some of their readers. De Gérandos instructions apparently had no effect on the Australian expedition they were meant for. More could be learned about the history of fieldwork by taking a broader look at some of trav-

26. Kaempfer (1777-1779).
27. For details see Michel (2001), pp. 76-88.
28. Kaempfer (1727).
29. de Gérando, (1800).
30. For the original Latin text, see Linnaeus (1759), and for a translation into Swedish, Fries (1906), pp. 195-213.

ellers under the influence of the group of idéologues such as for example Constantin François de Volney, who himself published a series of *Questions de statistique de statistique à l'usage des voyageurs* in 1795, few years after his *Voyage en Egypte et en Syrie* (published 1787),[31] and shortly before he went to the United States. His *Tableau du climat et du sol des Etats-Unis* from 1803[32] actually contains an appendix about the American Indians which according to Moravia can be interpreted as an attempt to practice the instructions of De Gérando.[33] And, as Siegfried Huigen recently has suggested, one also should have a closer look at Lodewyk Alberti's monograph from 1810 about *De Kaffers aan de Zuidkust van Afrika, Natuur- en Geschieedkundig beschreven,* which Huigens proclaims to be "the only practical application of the ethnographic questionnaire" of De Gérando.[34]

If we define fieldwork with Clifford Geertz as "going out to places, coming back with information about how people live there, and making that information available to the professional community in practical form", Linnaeus certainly also was one of its practitioners among the Sami, as Zorgdrager recently has argued.[35] Much more interestingly, however, one also should take a closer look at the field practices of some of the Linnaean apostles such as for example Anders Sparrmann and his ethnography of the Khoikhoi.[36] Or Peter Forsskål - and thus we finally come to what this paper should be all about, the case of Peter Forsskål and Carsten Niebuhr, and how they dealt in the field with the instructions and questions for the "Company of learned men" (*Gesellschaft gelehrter Männer*) sent off to Arabia Felix and adjacent countries for money of the King of Denmark in 1761.

31. Volney (1787).
32. Volney (1795).
33. Volney (1803), reproduced in Moravia (1970), pp. 397-439.
34. Huigens (2009), p. 192.
35. Zorgdrager (2009) - himself quoting Geertz.
36. Sparrmann (1783-1818).

III. "A company of learned men"

Johann David Michaelis's almost five hundred pages of "Questions for a Company of learned men, who travel to Arabia on command of the His Majesty the King of Denmark" (*Fragen an eine Gesellschaft gelehrter Männer, die auf Befehl Ihro Majestät des Königes von Dännemark nach Arabien reisen*), which were published in Frankfurt in 1762 (and in French translation in Paris immediately thereafter) and only came into the hands of Carsten Niebuhr in Bombay after the company had left Arabia and the other young learned men had passed away, can be seen as one of the first and most systematic attempts of linking together antiquarian interests with questions of natural history.

Michael not only reprinted almost completely the written instructions authorized by the king,[37] but also exactly one hundred questions formulated by Michaelis himself, who, having announced the Danish expedition in advance through various learned journals, had received a number of suggestions from colleagues in all parts of Europe and had also discussed his questions with a number of colleagues in Göttingen through a series of private seminars.

Urging all the participants to make as many "discoveries for scholarship" (Instr. §1) as possible and giving detailed advice on their mutual cooperation (which as we know turned out extremely problematic), the Instructions proper not only put special stress on the necessity of daily training in the Arabic language on board the ship (Instr. §4), but even more emphatically request every member of the expedition to keep his own diary with daily entries and in a way completely comprehensible to anyone in case death should prevent them from interpreting their notes themselves (Instr. §8). Von Haven, Forsskål and Niebuhr moreover are asked to read their diaries for each other from time to time in order to remove misunderstandings but without requiring consent. At regular intervals, copies of these diaries should be sent to Europe to ensure their preservation (Instr. §9). Asking

37. Michaelis (1762), c4v-e3v. In the following is referred to the paragraphs of the Instruction as reprinted by Michaelis.

all members to show politeness and civility when dealing with the Oriental authorities, the instructions furthermore specify the duties of each participant in turn. Copying inscriptions was the task of the Danish member of the expedition, the philologist von Haven. In this case, however, and especially when dealing with yet undecipherable inscriptions, all the members of the expedition are urged to take part in the effort (Instr. § 42-43).

Michaelis himself seems to have been less concerned with inscriptions than with the Old Testament. His one hundred questions mostly deal with medical issues, with all sorts of disease and bodily disorders; with natural history and innumerable species of plants, animals and other natural phenomena; and with a few Oriental habits and customs. All of this, however, was closely related to his fundamental interest in explaining the Bible.

Michaelis admits that this exclusive concern with questions raised by reading and translating the Holy Scripture might seem inappropriate and excessively theological. According to Michaelis, however, the Bible deserves such scrutiny not only as the basis for "all our religion," but also by forcing upon us all kinds of problems of natural history and ethnography.

> Nearly three hundred names from the realm of plants, and I don't know how many from the realm of animals, and a lot of names of precious stones are found in the Old Testament, which moreover is completely interwoven with the customs of the Orientals and geography.[38]

Starting out from the Old Testament implied an important twist to the kind of natural history Michaelis advocated. Philology actually enters into his kind of natural history much more than in other questionnaires and travel-instructions of the eighteenth century. Rather than directly addressing questions of geography, astronomy, botany, zoology and medicine, Michaelis wanted his expedition to engage in what today would be called ethno-medicine, ethno-botany, ethno-zoology etc. The list of birds for example, dealt with through fifty pages in the final question number 100, only treats what he calls "unclean" and "forbidden" specimens. To Michaelis, the Bible and especially the Old Testament served as the looking-glass through which he was able to confront the issues that other contemporary authors of questionnaires and instructions for scientific expeditions, such as for example Volney, confronted directly. And with this have a first explanation of the originality of the philologically motivated fieldwork in natural history practiced by Peter Forsskål and Carsten Niebuhr.

Taking a closer look at how Niebuhr actually dealt with the book of instruction he received when actually it was too late in more than one sense of the term, leads us to a second important peculiarity of Niebuhr's fieldwork and his method.

"It was first after the demise of my friends", Niebuhr explains in the first of the books he published after his return to Copenhagen, the *Beschreibung von Arabien*,

> that I began to make records about the way of life of the Arabs and the habits and customs among them. Before that I trusted the two oldest among them in this, mainly because I found that many other travellers already had noticed a lot about them. Now I wish that I had started immediately to make records of all the ways in which the habits of the Orientals are different from those of the Europeans. I was later so accustomed to their way of life, that I definitely would not have noticed those conditions as exceptional which for a newly arrived European would have been very strange.[39]

In this passage, Niebuhr not only openly admits not to have followed neither the Royal instructions nor those of professor Michaelis. He secondly confesses that he only started thinking and writing about the strange habits and customs of the Arab at a moment when he had become so familiar with these habits and customs that they no longer were neither strange nor exceptional from his point of view. Due to the tragic death of his friends, Niebuhr was forced to do the opposite of what most contemporary travellers with an interest in both natural history and antiquarianism: writing about what had become familiar to him dur-

38. Michaelis (1762), 67v-b8r.

39. Niebuhr (1772), p. XVII.

ing his fieldwork for an audience for whom it was both exceptional and strange. In his *Description of Arabia* from 1772, Niebuhr tried his best to live to up the expectations for things strange and exceptional nourished by Michaelis. In the subsequent three volumes of his *Reisebeschreibung*,[40] he actually to a much larger extent lets us and his readers share his familiarity with what thus no longer seems strange and exceptional.

A further particularity of Niebuhr's method of fieldwork also is closely connected to the tragic fate of his learned young friends. "It is a mistake to assume", Niebuhr explains

> that my travel companions were carried off by infective diseases because they died so fast one after the other. I rather believe, that we ourselves have been responsible for our illnesses and that others therefore easily can take care to avoid them. Our company was too large to bring ourselves in time to live in accordance with the land. For several months, we couldn't get any drinkable strong drinks, such as we had been used to, but nevertheless we continued to have meat meals all the time, which in hot countries are seen as very unhealthy. After a hot day, we appreciated the cold evening air so well that we exposed ourselves too much to it. And we should also have paid more attention to the perceptible difference of temperature in the plains and mountainous regions. We hurried too much to get to know the interior parts of the country. ... And we often wrongly thought to have reason to complain without remembering that one doesn't always travel with pleasure in Europe either. For my own part, I often have been very sick while my co-travellers still were alive because I wanted like them to live in the European way. But after I only was surrounded by Orientals and had learnt how to take care of oneself in these countries, I travelled in Persia and from Basra over land all the way to Copenhagen in splendid health and without having much trouble with the inhabitants in these countries.[41]

While at this point, in the introduction to his first book, blaming the whole company for not adapting properly to local conditions, Niebuhr actually praises his comrade Peter Forsskål precisely for this: for having taught him how to travel with ease and pleasure when they, during what seems to have been the happiest stage of the expedition, went botanising together in the mountains of Arabia Felix. "We deplored the loss of him very much", Niebuhr writes at the occasion of Forsskål's death,

> because due to his close interaction with common people during his busy botanising, he not only was the best in our company to learn the Arabic language and its various dialects and therefore often was our spokesman, but furthermore also more generally took care that our voyage should continue in a favourable way. He was born for an Arabian voyage. He didn't easly get dissatisfied even when things turned uncomfortable. He accustomed himself to live the same way as the inhabitants of the country, which is a preconditon for travelling with profit and pleasure in Arabia. If not, even the most learned will be unable to make many discoveries in these countries.[42]

It was when botanising with his still living friend Forsskål on their donkeys through the mountains of Yemen, that Niebuhr discovered his proper way and method of fieldwork. Freely changing both name, habits, clothes, appearance and identity to adapt to the changing circumstances, Niebuhr was able to interact productively with who exactly from merely having been his hosts became his informants.

Niebuhr discovered and developed his method of fieldwork not through merely answering the questions and following the instructions of scholarly and scientific authorities such as Michaelis, but on the contrary by learning from Forsskål and then acting on his own. There was one of the royal instructions which he never failed to follow: almost every single day during all the seven years of his voyage he made sure exactly to know his actual standpoint in terms of both longitude and altitude.

IV. Other travellers

Niebuhr's self-understanding as a traveller in the service of science not only finds its expression in the ac-

40. Niebuhr (1774, 1778, 1837).
41. Niebuhr (1772), pp. IX-X.
42. Niebuhr (1774), p. 404.

count of his own travels, but also shines through in his portraits of some of the other Europeans whom he met on his way. Most of them appear to have caught his attention as a warning about what one should take care to avoid thus shedding further light on Niebuhr's understanding of his own approach.

The closest parallel to the Danish Arabian journey certainly was the expedition which Carlo Emmanuele III, king of Sardinia, sent to Egypt in 1760, only one year before the departure of the Danish ship from the harbour of Copenhagen. Also this Italian expedition had ambitions in both antiquarian studies and natural history therefore consisting of a whole group of scholars led by Vitaliano Donati (1717-1762), who had earned some fame for his *Della storia naturale marina dell'Adriatico* from 1745 and was professor of botany and natural history at the university of Torino from 1750.[43] Also Vitaliano Donati had to continue the expedition alone after the other participants had been called home because of the serious conflicts and disagreements among them. On his way to India Donati falls ill and only three days before his ships arrival at the Malabarian coast he dies without a chance for sending home the results of his observations.

Carsten Niebuhr obviously sees the almost one generation older Donati as a model. Relating how Donati remained completely undisturbed by the approaching gang of armed and horse-riding robbers while drawing ruins at the banks of the Nile, Niebuhr tells us that he took no notice at all of the warnings of his companions by which the approaching Arabs were so astonished that they descended from their horses to take a closer look at this imperturbable man. Admitting that this story perhaps was slightly exaggerated Niebuhr makes no secret of his admiration for the dedication and perseverance of his Italian colleague.[44] When few pages later writing about the death of Cramer, the last of his companions, he cannot avoid comparing his own situation to that of Donati:

> Thus I was the only one left of the whole company which the King of Denmark had sent to Arabia. But I hope, that these examples neither will deter the monarchs from continuing to support such travels nor the learned from undertaking them. If Donati hadn't hurried up so much to come to India; if we all had observed more caution to avoid cold and more generally from the beginning had taken care to live the same way as the Orientals; and if the various members of the companies had had more trust in one another and avoided making the voyage so unpleasant for one another through mistrust and quarrels, then perhaps we all would have happily returned to Europe.[45]

Niebuhr's identification with the learned Donati is almost complete, and he concludes with repudiating rumours according to which the learned Italian should have continued to Persia with the entrusted funds to become a Muslim there.

In other cases, however, Niebuhr actually passes on similar rumours. The unhappy learned Frenchman for example, whose name perhaps was Simon, asked to become a Muslim and to get circumcised after desperately having tried to avoid the company of first his fellow countrymen in Aleppo and later that of the constantly quarrelling Capucin monks. Niebuhr shows empathy in his account of how the Arabs thereafter were willing to appreciate his medical expertise, but despised him for having betrayed his fatherland and his religion. But Niebuhr also points out that this Frenchman "not always was in command of his mind" and that is was in such an unhappy moment that he decided to become a Muslim.[46] Niebuhr too tried to live and travel like the Orientals themselves, but he never considered to let himself circumcise.

A similar distance as well as identification shines through in a third of Niebuhr's biographical sketches, this time of a Swedish Oriental traveller, who also had lost his religious orientation on his way. "The mentioned Swede called himself Wilhelm Ross and had been preacher in Åbo in Finland", Niebuhr tells us in a passage in the third, posthumous volume of his

43. Donati (1745).
44. Niebuhr (1774), p. 453.
45. Niebuhr (1774), p. 455.
46. Niebuhr (1774), pp. 455-457.

Travels, which also deserves to be quoted since it is, so far as I know at least, the only evidence of Niebuhr command of the Danish (and through that also the Swedish) language:

> I saw this unfortunate man after I had returned back to Aleppo in the house of the French consul. Upon my addressing him in Danish he turned pale and as if into stone; he stared at my face stiffly without uttering a word until finally and in French he excused himself for being unable to answer me; he thought that I had spoken to him in his mother tongue, and that had been so much of a surprise for him that he was unable to hide his astonishment. He asked if he I could tell if I was a Swede? When he heard who I was, and assumed that I already knew his whole story, he apologised immediately for his change of religion eagerly assuring me that this had happened out of distress and that he would return to his dear fatherland as soon as he had satisfied his wish to have seen Jerusalem.[47]

Although Niebuhr furthermore tells us that he never saw this Swede again, but only heard about him in Jaffa and from Frenchmen in other cities of the Levant, there is no doubt that Niebuhr was deeply fascinated and at the same time repelled by his story. Wilhelm Ross, who had come from France to Smyrna with almost no money, according to Niebuhr generally preferred the company of the poor rather than of the distinguished, that of the Orientals rather than of the Europeans, that of the Jews rather than of the Christians, that of the Catholics rather than that of protestants like himself, all of which made it increasingly difficult for him to reach the destination he was longing for, namely Jerusalem. Back in Aleppo and converted to Catholicism in order to take advantage of the monks' medical assistance he settled with the servants of the French consul, but continues to avoid Europeans, to stay away from mass and to seek the daily company of the Muslims, the Oriental Christians and the Jews. And when a French merchant should come by to ask questions he would soon be chased away by the smoke of the Swede's extraordinarily strong tobacco.

47. Niebuhr (1837), p. 39.

Expressing empathetic feelings also in this case, Niebuhr wishes that "this victim of a surely innocent fanaticism (*Schwärmerei*) ... deserves a better fate" since, "if he had been lucky enough to return back to his fatherland, he probably could have given us important intelligence about the common languages of the New Greek, the Muslims and the Jews". In the eyes of Niebuhr Wilhelm Ross also practiced a kind of scholarly fieldwork. He taught himself various languages, but instead of constantly keeping in mind his precise position in terms of latitude and longitude he let himself drive along and around by his longing for Jerusalem. Both travellers managed to get close to the point of view of others, but their standpoints were not the same.

Yet another of the Oriental Europeans portrayed by Niebuhr, Lord Edward Wortley Montagu, son of Mary Wortley Montagu, famous for her *Letters from a Turkish Embassy*, likewise was in search of a new standpoint. When at first coming back to Venice with a long beard and in Oriental dress, he was asked by another Englishman "how he possibly could enjoy to swarm round Turks and completely dress like an Oriental". His answer was, that when he told his father that he wanted to become a writer his father turned so displeased with him that he reduced his inheritance to merely 500 pound sterling yearly. At home in Europe he could not keep himself befitting his rank for so little money:

> To live as a wretched in my fatherland didn't please me; therefore I chose the Orient, where even with 500 pounds a year I can live among the most respected of the country because one there from me as a Christian does not expect the same level of expenditure as my previous acquaintances would have demanded.[48]

Quite the opposite of Niebuhr, Lord Montagu travels to the Orient to move among the most respected; and once arrived in Alexandria, he first of all is preoccupied with the young widow of en Italian merchant, whom he in the end also gets married to. Niebuhr's longwinded story about the many complications de-

48. Niebuhr (1837), p. 29.

riving from among many other circumstances the fact, that the Italian merchant turns out still to be alive as well as from a whole series of more or less dramatic changes in religious and confessional affiliations completes the picture of yet another traveller almost habitually changing dress, language, religious affiliation and identity, but without, like Niebuhr himself, constantly keeping track of their precise, if moving standpoint and position in longitude and altitude not only in the literal sense of these terms.

Only one of Oriental travellers portrayed by Niebuhr was given the chance to contribute a whole chapter to Niebuhr's *Reisebeschreibung* with details about various routes in Yemen, which Niebuhr had no possibility to measure himself.[49] Referring to this informant of Dutch origin not by his name, but only his initials, Niebuhr nevertheless spends several pages on the story of his life in portrait, which even more than the preceding ones can serve as a counter-image of the biographer himself and which already is found in his Description of Arabia from 1772. "DWHR" was a renegade, Niebuhr tells us when introducing this crucial informant in a passage like so many others completely left out in Heron's translation,

> he was born from respectable parents on the island of Ceylon but got his education in Holland. His family had then sent him back to India and provided him with excellent recommendations and here the Dutch merchants had put him on a ship to Mokka under the command of a Muslim Indian captain, with whom he quarrelled a lot during the journey. In Mokka, he met a Dutch renegade, a tailor by profession. He began to see his daughter and even though he could not a speak one word to her since she knew no other language than Arabic he fell so much in love with her after a short while that he wanted to marry her. Her father pointed out to him the preposterousness of his request and referred to the dissimilarity of their religions as the main impediment to his acceptance. The Dutchman then decided not to let his good fortune be prevented in this way. He went to the governor right away and demanded to be made a Muslim. The governor wanted to let him have time to think it over, but the Dutchman insisted that he should be circumcised with no delay. After the ceremony was accomplished he returned again to the tailor and told him about all that had happened. The tailor now was even less than before inclined to let him have his daughter because, even though as a European merchant he had been a well-respected citizen, he now found himself in the most miserable circumstances and in a country, where he not even could understand the language and therefore was not even able to make a living. The newly converted now realized his mistake and too late regretted his foolishness.
>
> Since reading and writing so far had been his principal occupation he though this also could provide a living as an Arab. He engaged himself at great pains in the Arabic language and learnt in short time to speak, read and write that language. The government apparently also felt pity since instead of, as a common European turned Muslim, receiving only one and a quarter species daler a month for his bare necessities, made him a knight to supply him a better income. But here he encountered yet another misfortune. Neither at school nor at sea had he learnt to ride, and his horse, realizing this, became so brave that it threw him down. Thereby he made a fool of himself for the Arabs, and this he regretted so much that he left his occupation in Mokka, where he easily could have earned enough for his survival to serve for his bread in the innermost parts of Yemen. ... Here he ended up in the most miserable circumstances. Soon he had to make a handful money writing letters, soon he wrote amulets against all kinds of disasters a man can be afraid of. Soon he preached in a mosque. He had an excellent memory, and taught himself the history of the distinguished Muslim holy men so well as one would expect from any Muslim preacher. Since he now on his travels in Yemen encountered the graves of many domestic holy men, among whom one also counts many imams, he no longer contented himself with the history of the holy, but included also political history of Yemen through that obtaining free access to the learned and a number of independent sheiks. But since he didn't have the courage continually to play the role of the beggar he finally went back to Mokka and lived there in great poverty.[50]

49. Niebuhr (1774), pp. 458-469, under the heading "Travels of a Dutch on various roads in Yemen not previously mentioned".

50. Niebuhr (1772), pp. 192-193.

Putting this biography together with Niebuhr's other portraits of Europeans in the Orient creates a whole gallery: the Italian Donati was definitely in possession of the best scholarly and scientific credentials, but like Niebuhr he quarrelled so much with his companions that they all had died when he arrived – and died – in India. Donati came closest to stand as a model for Niebuhr, but he also was the one furthest away from sharing native points of view. The Frenchman Simon and for example Wilhelm Ross gained familiarity with Oriental conditions and points of view through giving up their Christian standpoint without however attaining the recognition they had hoped for as a reward. Lord Montagu finally – and for that matter the unfortunate Dutch renegade, informant and co-author of Niebuhr's account – gained access to local themselves in the Orient through women. Niebuhr feels sympathetic towards the enthusiasm and longing for a standpoint of all these Europeans in the Orient, but while also himself constantly changing perspective and point of view he never left his – highly mobile but nevertheless unalterable – standpoint and position as defined by his daily measurements of longitude and altitude. Niebuhr's studied asceticism demanded abstinence both sexual and religious. As method, this allowed him to see the world from more than one and therefore also a native perspective and point of view.

V. Persepolis

The most powerful picture of Niebuhr at work in the field has been painted by his son Barthold Georg Niebuhr praising his father as the great land traveller, who almost turned blind when, from March to April 1765, in the burning sun he was copying the cuneiform inscriptions of the ruins of Persepolis. Creating the foundations for the later decipherment of the various cuneiform scripts was perhaps the most important contribution of the Arabian expedition to the history of modern scholarship and science.[51] As a consequence, Niebuhr's work in the field was subsequently perceived and seen as merely providing the raw observations and data to be used and properly interpreted and deciphered by the real experts, the scholars and scientists back home who at best had formulated questions and instructions for the travellers. As for Niebuhr himself, it was in his correspondence with Johann Gottfried Herder and a number of other interested scholars and professors about the proper interpretations of Persepolis that Niebuhr redefined his role from that of the only surviving member of a company of learned scholar working in the field to that of the humble and subaltern copyist who's main concern seems to have been to leave decipherment and interpretation to others.

Persepolis was in no way part of what Michaelis had imagined his Danish expedition to cover. While in Persepolis, however, Niebuhr actually did follow the instructions originally meant for von Haven: to copy "old Arab and Oriental inscriptions" even if they should be undecipherable to him (Michaelis, *Vorrede*). Looking at how Niebuhr copied inscriptions can give us a clue to his understanding of his own work out in the field in relation to the world of learning and scholarship at home in Europe.

In Egypt, Niebuhr not only copied inscriptions, but also the other pictorial representations, which he was among the first clearly to distinguish from hieroglyphic writing. Erik Iversen, according to whom Niebuhr began copying the hieroglyphic inscriptions "for his own pleasure," has praised Niebuhr's speculations on this occasion for their refreshing originality in the following words:

> He was the first to draw a clear distinction between ordinary pictures and graphic hieroglyphs. Unlike Kircher, and most of his other predecessors, he was certain that the pictures – what he called the big representations -, had nothing to do with the script, but were just pictures of people or events. Only the smaller signs accompanying the pictures were in his opinion proper hieroglyphs, and he presumed that they explained the pictures. ... His final conclusions were that instead of attempting to explain the mythological significance of the pictures, the Egyptological scholars should stick to the inscriptions, make complete lists of them, compare

51. For more details see Harbsmeier (1990).

> the sign-forms of the various monuments, and then see if the script could not be deciphered by means of coptic. The sensible ideas were unfortunately never elaborated upon. They remained more or less causal (sic) remarks, but of an outstanding perspicacity; and in the history of Egyptology they preserve the memory of an original and penetrating mind and of results obtained merely by assiduity, logical reasoning, and intelligent deductions.[52]

Part of the explanation for Niebuhr's outstanding perspicacity, assiduity, and originality in distinguishing writing from pictures in Egypt certainly has to be seen in the fact that Niebuhr followed Michaelis's instructions not only in the literal sense of trying to answer the learned questions, but more importantly in the sense of clearly distinguishing his own function and duties as observer and describer in the field from the task of the learned *Stubengelehrten* at home. It was this conscious division of labour that made it possible for Niebuhr to distinguish so clearly between what he could see for himself on the one hand and what was in need of learned efforts of decipherment and interpretation on the other.

> One finds among the large number of the learned in Europe quite few, who have the patience and ingenuity to do research about antiquities, but these have as a rule neither the wish nor the opportunity to look for them other places than in their study (*Studierstube*).[53]

Abstaining systematically from any attempt of interpretation of his own, Niebuhr was able to provide others with such accurate copies of the cuneiform inscriptions, that most of the work of decipherment could then be done at home in Göttingen and Copenhagen, thus confirming what ever since the early nineteenth century has become the general understanding of the division of labour between the scientists and scholars at home at their writing desk or even better in their armchairs on the one hand and the various travellers copying, collecting and observing out there according to the rules and instruction issued for them by others.

52. Iversen (1961), pp. 110-111.
53. Niebuhr (1774), p. 201.

In this essay I have tried to show that Carsten Niebuhr actually did better and more than he himself, his son and his afterworld have been willing to recognize. The ambition to see the world from the native point of view was a formula of much later origin. Niebuhr's method did that in practice long before.

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