

Niebuhr in Egypt¹

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Abstract

The Royal Danish expedition is justly celebrated for its contribution to an understanding of Arabia. But the most concentrated period of time its members spent together was not in Arabia at all. It was in Egypt. The sojourn in that country was an unexpected boon, Egypt not even appearing on the original itinerary of the expedition. But what an opportunity it presented to an undertaking with an avowedly Biblical purpose. When Niebuhr and his companions were detained for a year in Egypt in 1761-1762, it was, after all, in a place that some have called the cradle of the Jewish people. But although Egypt had existed for millennia, with or without the Jews, the notion that its history served as little more than stage setting for the drama of mankind as played out in the Hebrew Scriptures was pervasive in eighteenth-century Europe. But freed for the year from the painstaking instructions of Michaelis, Niebuhr was able to approach the country with an open mind and in so doing made an early contribution to the nascent discipline of Egyptology. He also produced the first detailed maps of Cairo and the Delta produced by anyone – European or otherwise – and left a detailed snapshot of the country in the middle of the eighteenth century. The period in Egypt introduced the themes that characterized the remaining five years of Niebuhr’s travels.

The Royal Danish Expedition to Arabia Felix has long been recognized as a landmark in the European study of the Arab and Muslim worlds. But if its contribution to the knowledge of the “Orient” was largely in the sphere of the profane, it should be remembered that the impulse for its dispatch was primarily religious. The moving force behind the expedition was the foremost sacred philologist in Europe, Professor Johann David Michaelis, who believed that in the highlands of *Arabia Felix* or the Yemen, a kind of “eastern” Arabic was spoken that was closer to Hebrew than its variants in the west; and that this study would lead to important contributions to an understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures. Notwithstanding the ex-

PLICITLY religious purpose, the expedition was staffed with “scientists” who were to mine this mother lode for its riches. They would be guided by *Fragen*, or questions assembled by Michaelis that included contributions from scholars across Europe. It was the marriage of science and religion that made this undertaking so unusual: the two were only different aspects of the same “truth” for Michaelis, and the reconciliation of their apparent differences was the express purpose of the expedition.

Given this frame of reference it might be asked: “Why Niebuhr?” and “Why Egypt?” After all, the expedition was staffed by Danes and Swedes in addition to Carsten Niebuhr, a Frieslander and a Saxon, and its goal was Arabia Felix, not Egypt. But however much the Swede Petrus Forsskål is remembered for his contributions to eighteenth-century botany; and

1. This paper was drafted while the author worked on a book of the same title; the book is now published (Guichard 2013).

the Dane Frederick von Haven for the manuscripts that make up the core of the Royal Library's collection, it is the expedition's cartographer Carsten Niebuhr who is revered in the annals of exploration. "Revered" is not too strong a word. To the serious student of the European exploration of Arabia, "Niebuhr" has always been a name to conjure with, and he was cited by many of the explorers and travellers who followed in his footsteps, particularly those who wrote in English, as their great predecessor.

John Lewis Burckhardt (a Swiss who wrote in English),² Richard Burton,³ Gifford Palgrave,⁴ J. G. Lorimer,⁵ Edward Robinson,⁶ David Hogarth⁷ and St. John Philby⁸ all bear witness to the enduring influence of Niebuhr in opening the Peninsula to Europe. Part of the reason may be that, of the members of the expedition, only Niebuhr left a published record of

2. See Burckhardt (1822). Burckhardt died in Cairo in 1817 and his notes were assembled by an editor so the absence of specific references is understandable, but he refers to Niebuhr throughout the book.

3. Burton (1893). Burton was not a man to readily credit others working in the same field. Although he praises the "accurate" Niebuhr, in his *Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah* (1893) he seems to focus more on Niebuhr's occasional lapses than on his celebrated accuracy.

4. Palgrave (1865) dedicates his *Narrative of a Year's journey through Central and Eastern Arabia* "To the memory of Carsten Niebuhr in honor of that intelligence and courage which first opened Arabia to Europe ..."

5. See his monumental *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman, and Central Arabia* (Lorimer 1915) where he calls Niebuhr the best source of information about the Gulf of the middle of the 18th century.

6. Robinson (1867). In his *Biblical Researches in Palestine and Adjacent Regions* he often refers to Niebuhr, particularly in the Sinai.

7. In *The Penetration of Arabia* Hogarth (1904) devotes a chapter to Niebuhr in the Yemen and is profuse in his appreciation of the German: "... if any of his fellows surpassed him in energy, courage, or endurance, in intelligence or in his measure of that scientific temper which is equally free from prejudice or from laxity, then a more remarkable mission was never dispatched to any land." (p. 40).

8. Philby (1922) opens *The Heart of Arabia* with a quotation from the French edition of the *Travels* and calls Niebuhr "the father of Arabian exploration."

his travels in his lifetime. But there is more to it than this, and it surely has to do with the breadth and quality of that record. Niebuhr was a man notable for the catholicity of his interests and, as we will see, his contributions extended well beyond his cartographic duties, narrowly defined. It is the gradual build-up of unimpeachable and timeless information in Niebuhr's accounts that is most impressive. It must be in recognition of this quality that moved the editor of the *Lives of Eminent Persons*, published in London in 1833 by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, to rank Niebuhr among history's intellectual and scientific giants.⁹ They included Galileo, Kepler, Newton, Adam Smith, Michelangelo and Sir Christopher Wren.

And then, "Why Egypt?" Here, the answer is equally straightforward. The goal of the expedition may have been Arabia Felix but the longest sustained period of time the members of the expedition spent together was not in Arabia at all. It was in Egypt. When the decision was taken to send them via the Mediterranean and Red Sea rather than Tranquebar and India, it would have important ramifications for their work. Due to a combination of factors - having to do with internal friction in the party, unrest among the Bedouins in the Hejaz, and unsafe conditions in the important Sinai port of Tor - they were detained in Egypt for over a year, from September 1761 to October 1762 when they sailed from Suez for Jidda.

What an opportunity Egypt presented to an expedition with an expressly biblical purpose! They were, after all, in a country that some have called "the cradle of the Jewish people."¹⁰ But although Egypt had existed for millennia, with or without the Jews, the notion that its history served as little more than stage setting for the great drama of mankind as played out in the Hebrew Scriptures was pervasive in eighteenth-century Europe. To his credit, Niebuhr approached Egypt with an open mind, without the credulity or religious provincialism that characterized the usual approach to the country. It was surely the absence of

9. Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. (1833).

10. See *Les Juifs en Egypte* (Fargeon 1938).

a specifically biblical focus that led to the quality of his insights.

In the nearly seven years of his travels Niebuhr actually spent the most time in India, followed by Egypt, Iraq, Yemen, Anatolia, Syria and only then Arabia, if by that we mean his short stays in Jidda and Muscat. But in terms of space, nearly a fifth of the almost 1,200 pages of his *Travels* are devoted to Egypt. It was here that he developed and refined his mapmaking, to be applied throughout his travels, although never replicated in the same detail; it was here that he first became interested in inscriptions, to be followed by his seminal contributions to an understanding of hieroglyphic, Himyaritic and cuneiform scripts; it was in Egypt where he was introduced to the baleful effects of rule by an alien elite that would accompany him all the way to the borders of Christendom; and it was here that he made his most complete study of a country, recording its physical configuration, population, religion, government, commerce, dress and popular pastimes.

What, then, did Niebuhr find in Egypt that would be of interest to the scholars of Europe?

The Antiquities of Egypt

It was with the “antiquities of Egypt” that Niebuhr expanded his role as reporter and indulged his scholarly bent, although not in a way that might be expected of an expedition with an expressly biblical purpose. Had Michaelis known that they would spend over a year in Egypt we can imagine the kind of questions he might have armed them with:

- What was the frequency and average length of famine in the Nile valley?
- Was a famine of seven years unusual, and had such a famine occurred within the memory of the inhabitants?
- Where were the corn storehouses of Joseph located?
- Where was the land of Goshen? Where were the sacred cities of Pi'-thon and Ra-ma-ses?
- What was the Egyptian method of making bricks?

- Were swarms of locusts borne into the country on an easterly wind?

As it was, the members of the expedition were left to their own devices and Niebuhr, for one, resisted the temptation to view Egypt through the prism of the Hebrew Bible. That was fortunate because it was the Bible itself, among other influences, that stood in the way of serious scholarship about ancient Egypt. At least since the Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela¹¹ had opined in the twelfth century that the pyramids of Giza were the corn storehouses of Joseph (although others suggested that a pyramid makes a poor granary) a Biblical view of Egypt had been irresistible to scholars and travellers.

But the Bible was not the only source of error. The hieroglyphs, or the sacred writing of Egypt, were thought to constitute a system so arcane that it could be understood only by initiates. An early vogue of hieroglyphic interpretation concentrated on symbolic meanings, and produced translations that were so wide of the mark as to be ludicrous. One eighteenth-century scholar seriously suggested that if the Psalms of David were translated into Chinese and written in Chinese characters, Egyptian hieroglyphs would be reproduced.¹²

Even after the deciphering of the hieroglyphs put an end to much of the nonsense, the Bible still had a strong and enduring hold on scholars. Richard Lepsius and William Flinders Petrie - probably the greatest Egyptologists who ever lived - would wrestle mightily in the 19th and early 20th centuries in an effort to reconcile their findings with biblical chronology. Lepsius,¹³ the great German successor to Champollion, would finally conform the histories of the two ancient peoples only by purging the Old Testament of repetition, inconsistencies and obvious absurdities. Petrie¹⁴ was so

11. Benjamin made a tour of synagogues in central Europe, Greece, Palestine, Iraq, Ethiopia, India and Egypt in the years 1165-1173. His account, originally written in Hebrew, was printed in Constantinople in 1543 and was later translated into Latin and French. A modern edition is Benjamin (1993).

12. See Budge (1978), Introduction, p XVI.

13. See Lepsius (1853).

14. See Petrie (1906), pp. 208-220.

troubled by the numbers of the Children of Israel appearing in Exodus and Numbers (“six hundred thousand and three thousand and five hundred and fifty” men, not including women and children), that he posited that a mistake in the translation of the Hebrew word *alaf* was the culprit. Extrapolating from the 603,550 men to a total population would have resulted in a figure of some 3 millions, at the time greater than the population of the entire Delta. This was clearly untenable, there being nothing in the history of Egypt to suggest depopulation on this scale. But if *alaf* were read as “tents” rather than “thousands” – that is to say, 600 tents, or in the neighbourhood of 3,000 people – Petrie reasoned, the account in Exodus might make sense.

The fact that the hieroglyphic script contained the elements of a phonetic system was first suggested by the Abbe J. J. Barthélémy interestingly, in 1761, the same year the Danish expedition arrived in Egypt. It was based on his reading of royal names appearing in ovals, or cartouches. But the insight was not followed up and it would be another six decades before significant progress was made in unlocking this key to an understanding of ancient Egypt.

What did Niebuhr find in his year in Egypt that contributed to this outcome? He, of course, visited the pyramids of Giza and indulged his surveyor’s bent by confirming that the sides of pyramid of Cheops were aligned to the cardinal points of the compass. He set up his alidade, laid out a chord and determined the height of the two largest pyramids. The figures were rough, due to the hurried nature of the survey, and he was tempted not to publish them. So it is safe to say that no dramatic discoveries were the result of his time on the Giza plateau.

But he did speculate about the age of the stone from which the pyramids were quarried, with the little petrifications¹⁵ that Strabo had suggested were the re-

mains of lentils fed to the workers. They were, in fact, marine constituents in the sedimentary rock, typical of limestone, and Niebuhr’s questions were those of a scientist, suggesting an antiquity that would dwarf the chronology of the earth understood at the time.

But it was not as a geologist that Niebuhr left his mark. In the process of making his map he noticed hieroglyphic inscriptions everywhere in the city. He began to copy them, and by the end of the year in Cairo he was as familiar with hieroglyphs as he was with Kufic and other Arabic scripts. They occupy 15 plates in volume I of the *Travels*. But he was not content to merely make copies. As his facility grew he began to speculate on the individual signs themselves and in plate XLI he has reduced them to a kind of system. There, he listed over 300 individual signs in 12 horizontal groupings, organized from bottom to top in increasing order of abstraction.

In the first grouping he shows men, sitting, kneeling and lying down. We now know them to be determinatives indicating various actions or categories. In the second he includes parts of the body, in the third animals, and in the fourth, birds. By the time he has reached the twelfth group, the signs are increasingly linear and abstract. What Niebuhr has done, in fact, is what Champollion would do 70 years later in organizing the first dictionary of the hieroglyphs:¹⁶ Champollion reasoned that if the Copts, who were the racial and linguistic descendants of the ancient Egyptians, organized their vocabularies this way, they must be reproducing a system that already existed.

Niebuhr had already expressed his intuitive grasp of this relationship:

Among the many scholars of Europe there surely are some with the patience and skill to study ... the ancient Egyptian inscriptions. So if travellers provide them with a sufficient number, I am certain they will be able to clarify many matters, especially if ... they have an understanding of the Coptic language spoken before the arrival of the Greeks, for this seems essential to an understanding of the hieroglyphs.¹⁷

15. See Niebuhr (1968), Vol. I, pp. 199-200: “This is cause for reflection on the antiquity of Egypt. For, how many years must have passed before sufficient number of these little snails were born and died, for these mountains to have reached their present height? How many years must have passed before Egypt became dry? ...”

16. See Budge (1978), Introduction, p. XXV.

17. Niebuhr (1968), Vol. I, p. 201.

The statement is not only a key insight, but is an epitome of Niebuhr's method, whether applied to geography, history or language. For some explorers, to be first is everything and to be second, nothing. Niebuhr, on the other hand, was content to contribute to a growing body of knowledge that would eventually unlock the secrets of the past. If his work on the hieroglyphs had no direct consequence - Champollion came to the same conclusions independently - the same was not true of Niebuhr's later work on the trilateral inscriptions at Persepolis. There, his extremely accurate copies of the Babylonian, Elamite and Old Persian texts led directly to the deciphering of the texts and of the cuneiform script itself.

Again, it was a liberal reading of his responsibilities by the expedition's cartographer. Without overstating the case (something, incidentally, that Niebuhr himself was constitutionally incapable of doing) we see him anticipating Champollion in his seminal contribution to the deciphering of the hieroglyphs, and even Charles Lyell in his suggestion that the earth had changed slowly over millions of years, not in a few cataclysms over the few thousand years of the Hebrew Bible.

Niebuhr as Cartographer

Niebuhr was the expedition's cartographer and he took his mapmaking duties seriously. It was in Egypt that he produced his first maps (the map of Constantinople was largely a product of a second visit to the city in early 1767). They were unprecedented in their detail and accuracy. Over the many months of their residence in Cairo Niebuhr made several boat trips down the Nile to Rashid and Damietta on the coast. They allowed him to survey the two major branches of the river and he used a combination of celestial position-finding, compass headings, and judicious questions of the boatmen to fill in the detail. Most importantly, given the instructions of Michaelis, he listed the villages along the river in both Latin and Arabic characters. No one had made a map with this level of detail before and it served as the standard for

the next thirty-plus years, being reissued¹⁸ (without attribution) on the eve of the French invasion of Egypt.

But it was with his map of Cairo that Niebuhr really broke new ground. Here he was not on the Nile where he could take his sightings and pose his questions in relative obscurity. Instead, he was in the first metropolis of the Arab Muslim world, a city that in the middle of the eighteenth century was actively hostile to foreigners, especially if those foreigners were Christians and Franks. Europeans were subject to the conditions of the caliph Omar:¹⁹ they couldn't ride horses and had to dismount from an ass in the presence of a Turk; they couldn't drink wine publicly or ring bells to announce their religious services. For the local minorities - Copts and Jews - the restrictions were even more severe. Not long before the arrival of the expedition, the inhabitants of Damietta had taken offense at French merchants' mixing with Moslem women, and had risen up massacred them to a man. So, in the middle of the eighteenth-century Europeans were very careful residents of Egypt indeed.

Given the fraught state of relations between Christianity and Islam, - the Turks had been turned away from the gates of Vienna for the last time only on 1683 - mapmaking was dangerous, if only because maps had military uses. Niebuhr didn't let this stand in his way. It is clear that he walked the streets of the city, over and over again. As aids, he used a small pocket compass to determine direction, and his own two feet and ten fingers as counters to determine distances, with perhaps a *subha*, or Muslim rosary, to enumerate the hundreds. We can imagine him, then, this obvious Frank, although he had adopted the loose local dress by then, appearing in the major neighbourhoods, at first accompanied by a *sarraj* - a kind of local policeman - and then increasingly alone. As the months

18. A map entitled "Carte Physique et Politique de l'Égypte, par E. Mentelle ... et P.G. Chanlaire" and dated "An VII" (in the French Republican Calendar, = 1799) forms part of *Conquêtes des Français en Égypte* (Herbin de Halle 1798-1799). An insert called "Carte Particulière et Détaillée du Delta" is so close to Niebuhr's map that it might have been traced from Niebuhr's original. Indeed, it appears that it was.

19. See Butler (1902), p. 448.

passed he would have become almost a part of the landscape. But there were still areas too dangerous to enter.

He wrote up his notes on a daily basis in the rented house in the *haret al-ifrang*, or Frankish quarter, outside the Fatimid core of the city. As the map slowly took shape, he probably revisited the landmarks to verify the distances, and retracing his steps today is a testament to their accuracy. For the outlying areas he may have ridden a donkey, although some were within walking distance and it was always better to keep a low profile. The resulting map of the city – plate XII in volume I of the *Travels* – with its key to mosques, churches, quarters, gates, ponds and bridges, in both Latin and Arabic characters – was unprecedented in its detail and accuracy.

The French expedition map published in 1811 is more detailed still, but the French had conquered the country, brooked no interference from the population and deployed an army of savants to record its detail. It is remarkable that a solitary European, without official sponsorship, in the midst of a hostile populace, was able to produce such a map. It was an important precursor of things to come, although none of the city maps he later prepared would replicate the detail of Cairo. There, his curiosity too often attracted the attention of the authorities, and he was not anxious to repeat the experience.

In the process of making his map Niebuhr kept his ear to the ground and most of the detail in the 230 pages of his *Travels* devoted to Egypt represents a liberal reading of his duties as the expedition's cartographer. His statement of what the map is *not* is vintage Niebuhr: "One will not find a history of the city here; I have described its location and its size as I actually found them."²⁰ But we should be forewarned about Niebuhr's disclaimers. He is always rather too modest, and the portrait he paints of Cairo in 1761-1762 is well fleshed out.

He would describe the polyglot population, Muslim, Christian and Jewish, the latter two in their own effective ghettos. But *all* Egyptians groaned under the

tyranny of the Mamluk beys, a mostly-Circassian slave caste that had ruled Egypt since the thirteenth century. Niebuhr lists the eighteen members of the *beylicate*, with details of their origin and rise to prominence. As he made his way back to Europe, through the Persian Gulf, Iraq, Syria, Anatolia and Rumelia, or European Turkey, he would be witness everywhere in the Ottoman East to the baleful effects of rule by powerful outsiders.

Niebuhr also described the "diversions" of the populace in their hours of leisure, of the favourite gathering places for celebration of the Muslim feasts, and of the popular prejudices and predilections. He listed the main imports and exports of the country, from paper and French fabric to gum Arabic and coffee. Janissaries – "new troops" in Turkish but a kind of merchant-warrior class in Egypt – were heavily involved in the still very profitable Red Sea coffee trade, and the members of the expedition would later sail from Suez to Jidda in the company of many of these men. They would be another constant in his *Travels*, and Niebuhr would see the last of the janissaries only just before crossing the border from Moldavia into Poland five years later.

The Red Sea and Sinai

But in departing from Cairo Niebuhr was not done with Egypt. There remained three tasks that were particularly important to Michaelis and, not surprisingly, they had to do with the Bible. The first dealt with the place where the Children of Israel crossed the Red Sea. It was hoped that a close examination of the tides and sea-bottom in its northern reaches might contribute to an understanding of the event. The other tasks would require travel in the Sinai Peninsula. There, in 1722, the prefect of the Franciscans in Cairo had seen odd inscriptions on a *Gebel el-Mokatab*²¹ – or "written mountain" – that had sparked immediate interest in Europe, where scholars believed they might be the beginnings of the square Hebrew script, scratched by

20. Niebuhr (1968), Vol. I, p. 109.

21. See Clayton (1810). The information had clearly passed by word of mouth prior to this published version.

the Israelites during their wanderings in the wilderness. And it was known that the monastery of St. Catherine in the south of the peninsula had a library with many old copies of the Bible. Von Haven was tasked with examining them with a view to discovering any differences they might contain.

Given the limited time in Sinai and the fact that he was involved in all three tasks, Niebuhr was unable to make a thorough study of the Red Sea around Suez. He measured the time and tides on a single day before setting out for the south, and on four days after his return. The information was admittedly scanty but it suggested that tidal movements in the northern reaches of the Red Sea were very different from those in Germany where the Elbe exited into the North Sea. Michaelis's suggestion that an extraordinary ebb upon ebb tide, such as occasionally occurred there, may have played a part in the crossing was, therefore, unlikely.

As for the Bibles in the monastery, the long journey proved to be a fiasco. They had a letter of introduction from the Greek Patriarch in Constantinople, but lacked the letter from the Bishop of Mount Sinai in Cairo. Without this letter they were denied entrance to the monastery by the monks. Michaelis was distressed when he learned of the rebuff and a stern letter of reprimand was drafted for von Haven, whose fault the failure mostly was. In the event, only with the supposed *Gebel el-Mokatab* were they rewarded with success, and it was not something that would interest the foremost biblical philologist in Europe. There was no "written mountain" as such, only names in Greek and Nabataean letters, scratched on soft rock faces by pilgrims on their way to the holy places in the south. But in the process Niebuhr was led by his Bedouin guides to something nearly as interesting, the 4th-dynasty Pharaonic temple now known as *Serabit el-Khadem*, where, much later, Flinders Petrie would find rude scratchings of a script that came to be known as "proto-Sinaitic," that *did* represent a stage in the development of alphabetic scripts to the north.²²

22. See Petrie (1906), p. 129.

Back to Copenhagen

When the members of the expedition boarded ship in Suez in October of 1762, they passed out of Egypt and so, technically, beyond the bounds of the subject we have examined. However, many of Niebuhr's experiences on the return to Copenhagen would be a repeat of those in Egypt and replicate a theme of this conference, the intersection of science and religion.

Niebuhr epitomized the two disciplines. He represented the best of the Enlightenment seekers, a believing Christian - and there was hardly a man in eighteenth-century Europe who dared call himself an atheist - but one who believed with the New Testament that there were things that belonged to Caesar - or science - and things that belonged to God. We see him reflecting on Exodus 13, 20 when they reached *Ajerud* "at the edge of the wilderness" on the road to Suez; or later wondering whether *Serabit el-Khadem* wasn't perhaps the Mount Hor of Numbers 33, 37; or even whether the Kurdish girls - "unveiled and perfect beauties" - watering their flocks in southern Anatolia weren't doing just as Rebekah did when she assisted Abraham to drink in Genesis 24, 13-26. But his point of departure was not the literal truth of the Scriptures, into which nature must be fit, as if facts must first be subject to biblical conformity before they passed muster as science or history.

Niebuhr was not only a believing Christian, but also an interested observer of the complex interplay among various creeds, most of them representing the three Abrahamic religions, or "religions of the Book": Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Here he acted as a sociologist, another kind of scientist, although the term was unknown at the time. Better yet, he was a cartographer of the sacred, but the landscape he surveyed was not so much the physical land as it was the space between the ears of the believers.

It began in Egypt where he was witness to the tensions between Muslims, Christians and Jews; of the suspicion by Muslims that the Christians were stalking horses of the Europeans and that the Jews represented a kind of fifth-column, preferring Ottoman interests to those of the native Egyptians. But it was

not only between creeds but among them: of the distrust by those Niebuhr called Rabbinate Jews of their Karaite coreligionists, and the hostility of Orthodox Copts to the Roman Catholic religious orders, zealously proselytizing in their midst. If there is another recurring theme of Niebuhr's travels it is the presence of these Catholic religious – Jesuits, Franciscans, Carmelites, Dominicans and Capuchins – all dedicated to converting Oriental Christians (Muslims were out of bounds) to the faith of Rome. For Oriental Christians, apostasy was attractive, promising access to European languages, learning and sponsorship, and an escape from their often-difficult lives as *dimmis*, or official Ottoman minorities.

India represented a kind of neutral ground where, under the relatively benign rule of the English, Parsis, Portuguese Catholics, Armenians, Greek Orthodox, Jews, Hindus of various castes, Sunnis, and Shiites all worshiped with complete freedom of conscience. The experience made a profound impression on our *billigdenkender Reisender*, or fair-minded traveller.

He had already seen the effects of religious intolerance in Egypt, and would later witness the lethal hostility between Sunnis and Shiites (not to mention Kurds and Turkmen, Christian Jacobites and Nestorians, Jews and Yezidis) in the three *vilayets* of Turkish Iraq. In greater Syria he would see a kaleidoscope of religious belief: of orthodox Sunni and heterodox Muslim sects – Nusayris (or Alawites, as they are known today), Isma'ilites, Metwalis and Druse; Jewish Rabbinites, Karaites, and Samaritans; Maronites, Greek Catholics, and Armenian Catholics in communion with Rome, as well as Greeks and Armenians who still recognized their ancient orthodox patriarchs. And these were only the tip of the iceberg in the religious mix of Syria.

In Jerusalem he would witness the unedifying hostility between the Latin and Orthodox churches, and was fair enough to reflect that the city was probably better off under Ottoman control, albeit under a kind of spiritual customhouse. If the Christians had ruled they would probably prevent other creeds from worshipping in the city. And if there was Sunni tyranny amid the religious diversity of Syria, at least

there was no Inquisition to punish departures from orthodoxy.

Niebuhr was not without parochial feelings himself, and his concern about the activities of the Roman church is apparent throughout, not least when he witnessed the poverty to which the clergy had reduced the peasantry in Poland. He generally saw other religious dispensations in the best possible light, unless perhaps they were Papist. But he was never bitter. Though a Protestant, he stayed with members of Catholic religious orders throughout his travels, and always refers to them as “the good fathers”. But we suspect he looked back to that placid atmosphere in Bombay as the epitome of religious tolerance.

David Hogarth may have included a chapter entitled “Niebuhr in the Yemen” in *The Penetration of Arabia*. But he might just as well have addressed Niebuhr in Egypt, or Niebuhr in India, or Niebuhr in the Persian Gulf, or Niebuhr in Iraq, or Niebuhr in Syria. Because they are all of a piece – the same wide-ranging inquisitiveness and intelligence, absorbing, processing and committing to paper what he sees. It is that quality of scientific discernment and open-mindedness – whether applied to geography, language, history or religion – that makes Niebuhr such a valuable resource. Anyone who doubts the pertinence of his observations today has only to recall the history of the region over the past several years to be convinced otherwise.

Hogarth sums up his appreciation with the statement that “It would be tedious to quote a hundredth part of Niebuhr's judicious observations.” I hope with this piece to have exposed the reader to a small portion of that trove.

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