

Carsten Niebuhr's Reply to the French Academy: A Newly Discovered Memorandum from 1768

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Abstract

The paper reviews Carsten Niebuhr's relations with the French *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* to which he in 1768 sent a memorandum with his responses to questions submitted to the Danish expedition to Arabia by the French Academy. The memorandum was dated 2nd of September and consists of 20 pages in folio; it was received by the Academy on the 18th of November 1768, but never published. Due to subsequent theft of the document it disappeared and was forgotten until the authors rediscovered it in the French *Bibliothèque nationale* in 2001. Some of the contents of the memorandum are described together with the circumstances associated with its reception, nearly coinciding with a visit by King Christian VII to the Academy on the 3rd of December.

On his way back to Denmark, after seven years of travel during which all the other members of the Royal Danish Expedition to Arabia Felix (Yemen) had died, the *lieutenant des ingénieurs* Carsten Niebuhr ("Niebuhr" henceforth, 1733-1815) visited Göttingen to meet Professor Michaelis. The latter was the man behind the expedition and its scientific mentor. He had by then given up all hope of any scientific outcome from the expedition, having heard of von Haven's death. As a philologist von Haven's main task was to look for the Arabic words for animals and plants and to identify links with Biblical vocabulary in the original Hebrew and Aramaic versions; religions were also an important point to him. Yet, once Michaelis had met Niebuhr, whose original responsibility was astronomy and cartography, and heard him speak about the huge amount of work he had accomplished in many other disciplines, including those that came under the responsibility of von Haven, Michaelis understood that Niebuhr was in a position to provide much of the information that had been expected from von Haven.

Michaelis was so impressed by Niebuhr that he proceeded to write to Bernstorff, the Danish chancellor and foreign minister, to share his discovery and to recommend giving Niebuhr all necessary support to allow him to write his account with sufficient resources.

After his return to Copenhagen on 20 November 1767, Niebuhr had to settle in a country he did not know (he had arrived in Copenhagen for the first time in 1760 three months before departure of the expedition by ship) and in a society that was new to him: he was made a captain of the engineers, freed from service with the army to write his account of the expedition, and with this purpose authorized to use the Royal Library. He also received lodging in one of the royal palaces. Niebuhr embarked not only on reporting about the tasks of his commission but also about the tasks of his deceased colleagues since he had tried to collect materials and make observations relevant to their areas of specialization, most notably by copying many inscriptions. Though initially not qualified in many of these disciplines, he ended up contributing

with his two published works¹ the largest portion of the publications that resulted from the expedition. His publishing of three volumes using the notes of the naturalist Forsskål² made up for the rest of the printed output from the expedition.

Towards the middle of 1768, Niebuhr must have been informed that the new King of Denmark, Christian VII, who came to power in 1766, would visit Paris later in that year. This may have spurred him to give priority to responding to the large questionnaire that the French *Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* had submitted to Michaelis after he had invited scientists from all over Europe to provide questions to the departing expedition. These questions reached the expedition when it was already on the way and in separate instalments, in Constantinople, Cairo and Bombay. Michaelis published the compiled questions, his own focusing on Biblical research, and other documents, in a volume that Niebuhr received in 1763 in Bombay where his last companion died, leaving him the sole survivor.³

Niebuhr was deeply impressed by the scientific depth and breadth of the French academicians' questionnaire (e.g. the detailed *Tables chronologiques des anciens rois de l'Yemen*, a list of Yemen's ancient rulers from 1817 BC to the Prophet Muhammad with remarks and precise questions). From then onwards Niebuhr remained under the influence of these questions, as if the rational and empirical questions of the French academicians had fulfilled his own longing for scientific research freed from Michaelis's Bible-centered approach.

This note is a brief presentation of the document in Latin received in Paris on the 18th of November 1768, which, together with its translation in French

and its history, have been made available for the first time in the Academy's own *Journal des Savants* in the July-December 2011 issue.⁴

Niebuhr must have spent the summer of 1768 drafting his responses, not to all questions, but only to the ones from the French Academy. By the first of September he had a draft manuscript translated into Latin ready⁵. The final text, with only a few sentences modified from the last draft, is dated 2nd of September and consists of 20 pages (10 unbound folios) addressed to the "Illustrious and most erudite members of the Academy". The handwriting is in a different hand and much easier to read than the last draft. In the introduction, Niebuhr explains that he will not address all the questions but only intends to provide a preliminary view, while cautioning that only ten months after his return he still has much material and notes to review. At this stage the text does not give any indication that he will separate his principal scientific contribution, his above-mentioned first book, from the more personal one, a detailed narrative of his travel from Copenhagen to Bombay and back to Copenhagen, his second book⁶. Niebuhr's great map of Ara-

1. Niebuhr (1772; 1774-1778).

2. Forsskål (1775a, 1775b, 1776). The authors wish to thank Professor Ib Friis for showing them Forsskål's still extant collections of plants at the Herbarium, and Assistant Professor Peter Rask Moeller and Ole Tendal for showing them Forsskål's still extant collections of animals at the Zoological Museum (including the famous "fish herbarium"), both collections at the Natural History Museum of Denmark.

3. Michaelis (1762).

4. Detalle and Detalle (2011). Both authors extend their gratitude to the organizers of the symposium "World Views and Local Encounters in Early Scientific Expeditions 1750-1850" held at the Royal Academy in Copenhagen on 27-28 October 2011 on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of the departure of the expedition for this opportunity to place the *Memorandum* in its wider context. A word of thank is also due to Professor Bernard Haykel of Princeton University, for his unflinching support.

5. Since the questionnaire was in French, the most common language in Europe at the time, there is no explanation for the use of Latin: we know that Niebuhr used the services of a Mr. Klein for a translation from German, his mother tongue. The original manuscript dated 2nd Sept. 1768, discovered by the present authors at the beginning of the twenty-first century, is in Paris at the "Bibliothèque nationale de France, Division Manuscrits", under "NAF 6896". The draft dated 1st Sept. 1768 is at Kiel University library under "MS KB 314.5."

6. In fact, the financial losses sustained by Niebuhr due to his being the editor-publisher of his and of Forsskål's works led him to abandon the last part of his intended writings, the travel from Aleppo to Copenhagen and his astronomical observations: this was published as vol. III of *Reisebeschreibung* in 1837 only, long after Niebuhr's death.

bia (in fact the western part of Yemen only), which he was proud to annex to his *Memorandum* as he knew it would impress the foremost geographer of the time, Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville (1697-1782), a member of the Academy, was not attached to the document. It was Chancellor Bernstorff who, after reviewing it, thought it wiser to set aside the hand drawn map of Arabia out of fear that an unscrupulous Frenchman could publish it without acknowledging Niebuhr's authorship. The fact that this *Memorandum* vanished as soon as its reception was announced may be interpreted as a proof that no documents were attached, since d'Anville was present on the day it was received, 18th of November 1768, and if he had been given a chance to view a new map he would certainly not have missed the opportunity.

The *Memorandum* attempts to cover as many of the questions of the Academicians as possible and has an impressionistic quality but nonetheless reveals the strength of Niebuhr's methodology, his empathy for the countries and people he saw and the rigorous method he applied in measuring, surveying and writing down all the information he came across. One noteworthy point is that nowhere in the 20 pages does he mention the Bible or the name of his patron Michaelis, a probable indication of his limited interest for the latter's objectives⁷.

The Minutes of sessions of the Academy report that, on 18th of November 1768, "un homme de lettres danois a présenté à l'Académie un Mémoire de M. Nehburg (sic)":⁸ the link with a Mr. Schutze, a Dane named foreign correspondent on the 16th of June 1761, whose identity and background are completely unknown, could not be established. The standard procedure for such a communication was to either have an immediate debate following its presentation or to re-

fer it to a panel of "rapporteurs" who would study it further and consider whether it should be published by the Academy. Yet, none of this happened in the case of Niebuhr's *Memorandum* and this apparent lack of interest for all the new discoveries made by Niebuhr could be linked to the fact that a few days later, on the 3rd of December, the King of Denmark came in person to visit the three Academies⁹ and was praised for sending the Arabian expedition.¹⁰ Surprisingly, Niebuhr's name was not mentioned, in spite of him being the only survivor, and his *Memorandum* having been received two weeks prior: the King had already visited the *Académie française* and the *Académie des sciences* and was probably in a hurry. The proximity in date of the reception of the *Memorandum* and the visit of the King may have been a factor in cutting short the debate on the first occasion, but it does not account for the disappearance of the *Memorandum* as a source of important information years before the full scientific account would be published.

A hypothesis which we developed in our French article is that the members of the Academy may have suffered from fatigue of the Orient, having been subjected during no less than 26 sessions between 1763 and 1768 to lengthy reports and readings by another oriental traveller, to India in this case, and fellow Academician, Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Dupéron (1731-1805), well known for his translation of *Zarathustra*.

After his books were published and had become classics of Arabian and Persian studies Niebuhr developed close relations, revealed by an active correspondence, with several Academicians in the ensuing years, notably with the famous Orientalist Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838). Niebuhr's perfect copies of the cuneiform inscriptions at Persepolis permitted the decipherment of the three languages ap-

7. This does not prevent Niebuhr from giving a detailed answer to the French questions on religion. See Detalle and Detalle (2008). Among other things, Niebuhr was first to announce and describe the birth of a new "school" called "wahabism", in Niebuhr's own words "sect", one of the origins of today's salafi movement.

8. "A Danish man of letters presented to the Academy a memorandum by Mr. Nehburg"

9. Always in the formal order: 1) *Académie française*, 2) *Académie des sciences*, 3) *Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres*. There are now two more academies in the *Institut de France*: 4) *Académie des beaux-arts*, 5) *Académie des sciences morales et politiques*.

10. A decision which in fact had been made by King Frederik V, the father of King Christian VII.

pearing there. As a tribute to his multiple contributions to philology, geography and the knowledge of Arabia, he was elected in 1802 Foreign Associate of the Academy, the most prestigious status for a non-French scientist.¹¹ Yet, although his many maps were known from his books, his contribution in the fields of astronomy remained little known because the results were published in a piecemeal fashion and with much delay. Had this not been the case, he would have been a more natural candidate for the *Académie des sciences*, given his original training.

A last word should be added about the sad fate of the manuscript, which was not only neglected and forgotten by its recipients in the Academy, but then suffered the added mishap of being stolen by a mathematician and political exile from Italy who had become member of the *Académie des sciences*. After stealing a large number of manuscripts and books from French institutions he sold them to a British collector. Decades later the lot was bought back by the French *Bibliothèque nationale* and forgotten. Sheer luck in 2001 permitted the authors to retrieve the document and its precious content for the benefit of Arabian studies and the historiography of Orientalism.¹²

11. See Detalle (2003).

12. As this article went to press another lost Niebuhriana resurfaced during a family reunion of Niebuhr-descendants in Meldorf, the town where Niebuhr lived and worked from 1778 until his death in 1815. One of them offered to the local *Dithmarscher Museum* the original in German of the King's *Instruction* dated 15th December 1760 for the *mathematicus* Carsten Niebuhr. It is to be hoped that the text will be made available, as it would be the only way to know the exact and final wording of these instructions; none of the copies issued to the four other members of the expedition is known to have been preserved.

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