

# The Pedagogical Virtues of Comparison: Jacob Jonas Björnståhl in Constantinople 1776-79

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## Abstract

Jacob Jonas Björnståhl is regarded as one of the founders of Oriental studies in Sweden, partly because of his almost three-year stay in Constantinople, from mid 1776 to early 1779, but to an equal extent due to his contacts with the leading European Orientalists of his time during the *grand tour* that preceded his residency in Ottoman capital. In *Resa till Frankrike, Italien, Svezitz, Tyskland, Holland, Ängland, Turkiets och Grekland* [Travel to France, Italy, Switzerland, Holland, England, Turkey and Greece] (1780-84) the reader as an armchair traveller can still follow Björnståhl through Europe, from Stockholm to Constantinople, as did the 18<sup>th</sup> century subscribers to the six volumes that were eventually published on his journey. With his interest in comparative philology and a historical-critical approach to ancient texts he was a forerunner of the evolving more systematic study of the Muslim world in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The printed reports for the general public, as well as his manuscripts, bear witness to both his pedagogical and academic ambitions. This short presentation on Björnståhl is relevant to a broader discussion of Niebuhr and the Danish Expedition because Björnståhl's work is notable in two respects. It represents a continuation of general Swedish political interests in the Ottoman Empire as well as new academic trends in Europe that started to influence the universities at Uppsala and Lund from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century – in the sciences as well as in the humanities. Born a son of a poor lieutenant Jacob Jonas Björnståhl still got a university degree and option to travel on a *grand tour* as a tutor that eventually took him to the Orient. Thus Jacob Jonas Björnståhl was a man at crossroads significant for this period in both his professional and personal life.

In July 1779 the Swedish Orientalist Jacob Jonas Björnståhl died at the age of 48 in Salonika, Greece. His unexpected death meant that he never received the message that he had been appointed the first professor in Oriental languages at Lund University, or in “Eastern languages and Greek” as the chair was named. Björnståhl had neglected the advice not to drink the local water, fell seriously ill, and died most probably from dysentery. Although he had aspira-

tions to visit Arabic speaking lands, and had just begun his journey at the time, these ambitions remained unfulfilled.<sup>1</sup>

Björnståhl had completed a long *grand tour* through Europe with two young noblemen (from the early spring of 1767 to March 1776) before he reached Constantinople, the city that had served as a gate to the

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1. Zetterstéen (1924).



Fig. 1. Jacob Jonas Björnståhl. Frontispice in *Allgemeine geographische Ephemeriden*, Vol. 21. "C. A. B. Sculps." The initials "C.A.B." have not been identified, but the artist has reproduced a print by the Swedish engraver Jacob Gillberg, who based his portrait on a medallion made in 1772 by J. T. Sergel in Rome. This engraving illustrates a biographical note about Björnståhl by the editor of *Allgemeine geographische Ephemeriden*, F.J. Bertuch, on pp. 109-110 in vol. 21 of the journal. Scanned from the journal.

Orient for several Swedish travellers since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. After sending the last of the young barons back to Sweden, and having received support from King Gustavus III to visit the Holy Land to search for manuscripts, he continued alone from England and arrived in Constantinople in May of 1776. There he was to prepare himself to travel in the Middle East with a more scholarly focus, especially on philology.

Despite his early death on the threshold to Arabic speaking lands, Björnståhl is, nevertheless, regarded as

one of the founders of Oriental studies in Sweden, partly because of his almost three-year stay in Constantinople, from mid 1776 to early 1779, but also due to his contacts with the leading European Orientalists of his time during the *grand tour*. In the collection of his travel letters *Resa till Frankrike, Italien, Sweitz, Tyskland, Holland, Ängland, Turkiet och Grekland* [Travel to France, Italy, Switzerland, Holland, England, Turkey and Greece] (1780-84) the reader as an armchair traveller can still follow Björnståhl through Europe as did the 18<sup>th</sup> century subscribers to the six volumes that were eventually published.<sup>2</sup> These printed travel reports were not primarily aimed for an academic audience. Björnståhl's experiences and observations became known to his fellow countrymen posthumously through the editions commissioned by Carl Christoffer Gjørwell (1731-1811), one of the pioneers of the Swedish liberal press. Through various publication projects Gjørwell provided a growing middle class with periodicals on various themes. The editorial process was complicated and Gjørwell's position on the emerging media market must be taken into account when evaluating the relation between the manuscripts and the published volumes.

Björnståhl's fame after his untimely death was of course limited to certain reading circles, still the six volumes have been a popular collector's item and extracts from his travel letters have appeared in many thematic anthologies in modern times. Even if the better part of them deals with Europe at large, the descriptions of Constantinople and the lives of the Turks have been the hallmark of Björnståhl's position in Swedish literary history as a 18<sup>th</sup> century travel writer. This short presentation on Björnståhl is relevant to a broader discussion of Niebuhr and the Danish Expedition because Björnståhl's work is notable in two respects. It represents a continuation of general Swedish political interests in the Ottoman Empire as well as new academic trends in Europe that started to influ-

2. Björnståhl (1780-1784). The Danish audience was introduced to Björnståhl through Jørgen Stauning's *Iagttagelser og Efterretninger om Orienten* (Stauning 1787) that presented excerpts from Harmar, Niebuhr, Forsskål and Björnståhl, and with a focus their contributions in relation to Biblical studies.

ence the universities at Uppsala and Lund from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century – in the sciences as well as in the humanities. Born a son of a poor lieutenant Jacob Jonas Björnståhl still got a university degree and option to travel as a tutor on a *grand tour* that eventually took him to the Orient. Thus Björnståhl was a man at important crossroads in both his professional and personal life.

With his interest in comparative philology and a historical-critical approach to the analysis of ancient texts, he was a forerunner in the efforts in Sweden to develop a more systematic knowledge of the Muslim world.<sup>3</sup> The travel letters in print for the general public, as well as his remaining manuscripts, bear witness to both his pedagogical and academic ambitions.

### The Swedish-Turkish Contacts

The Swedish interest in the Turkish region goes back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century and could be defined succinctly as contacting enemies of Russia for Sweden sought alliances against its archenemy through many channels, and the Ottoman Empire became part of this web of negotiations and agreements. As early as in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century contacts were sought with the Crimean Tatars to unite against the Tsar and some partial documentation of these negotiations has survived. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century there are some very few, but intriguing, Swedish travel accounts from Ottoman lands and Constantinople, most of them with a political and diplomatic background. The Orthodox Lutheran antipathy against “the Turk” and “the Sultan-Anti-

Christ” was accentuated in the religious conflicts of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and sometimes inscribed in apocalyptic interpretations of the Ottoman military achievements. Although filtered through prejudice and limited knowledge of the context, these early travel accounts emanated from an emerging interest in the world outside Europe and from a view on knowledge as a useful tool in the international political game. In comparison to Björnståhl are two of these earlier texts of special interest. The diplomat Claes Rålamb wrote a diary from Constantinople in 1657-1658 as did the chaplain at the legation, Sven Agrell, in 1709-1712. Both provided accounts of their encounters with Muslim traditions, the splendours and intrigues at the Sultan’s court and the large city with a long multi-religious history.<sup>4</sup>

The Swedish-Ottoman relations were especially intense in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, as they changed in character because of dramatic political events. The Swedish King Charles XII fled Russia in 1709 after the defeat at Poltava ending his disastrous campaign there, only to become a captive of the Ottoman Sultan. He stayed until 1714 in house captivity at his compound at Bender by the Dniester River (in present-day Moldova, but for centuries a region where the Ottoman and Russian empires met) when he headed north on horseback across Europe. During this period of captivity the king had intense contacts with the Porte, but never visited Constantinople himself or encountered the Sultan in person. Still Charles XII took an active personal interest in the cultural history of the region and was apparently intrigued by Ottoman aesthetics. Three Oriental expeditions were sent out from Bender at royal request and some members returned with quite extensive travelogues. Together with reports from representatives of the Swedish camp sent to Constantinople, these provided blended collections of information about lands of the Bible, manuscripts, ancient vestiges and contemporaneous conditions in the Ottoman state.

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3. The framework for the present chapter is the project “Orientalist and Historian. Jacob Jonas Björnståhl’s Travel Writing 1767-1779” at Lund University funded by the Swedish Research Council 2011-2014. I am grateful for the opportunity to take part of this project on the traveller at large with some contributions on Björnståhl’s time in Constantinople. One ambition of the project is to digitalize Björnståhl manuscripts. Most of them are interesting in their own right as documents from the history of the Swedish press, but the members of the project are convinced of their value for both travel studies in general and Oriental studies in particular. Björnståhl’s original notes would be immediately accessible to international readers as he partly wrote in French.

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4. Rålamb’s travelogue was first printed in 1679 and appeared in a modern edition in 1963. The text was published in English in 1732.

Diplomats were sent from Sweden to the Porte already in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and in 1734 a permanent Swedish diplomatic presence in Constantinople was established, after an absence of representation for 20 years. Reports from a line of prolific diplomats, some of them with good command of the Turkish language, constitute a rich source not only on political and diplomatic activities in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but for cultural life at large.<sup>5</sup> The military alliance with the Ottomans lasted from 1709 to 1808. During this time Sweden's political and military power declined, and by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Constantinople was more and more instead identified as a hub for trade and commerce and the reports to Stockholm from Sweden's diplomats bear witness of these new interests.

Björnståhl entered into this highly intellectual environment at the legation in 1776, and indeed he represents not only a new outlook on academic knowledge, but also a new type of traveller and researcher. Björnståhl did not have the social background of the Swedish diplomats to the Porte (several of them noble men from the beginning or later knighted for their service) or for that matter of the chaplains serving at the legation. The vicars of the legation had initially been on a special mission to buy and free slaves of Protestant background so they would not fall into Catholic hands; the Swedish chaplains at the time of Björnståhl's visit played an important role in the city's Lutheran community delivering their sermons in several languages. Björnståhl may hail the king or praise the Lord in his letters, but he is not a representative of the social elite and he does not appear to reflect a position of personal Christian piety in his descriptions of other beliefs.<sup>6</sup> He was rather a man

who after his university education got a second opportunity to develop his academic interests in the linguistics of the Middle East, this time through travel. He was a learned man, better educated than the personnel at the embassy, but Björnståhl is, nevertheless, hard to define in social terms as he held no salaried academic position.

## Social Mobility, Linnaean Uppsala and the Comparative Method

Björnståhl's biography is interesting in several ways. The emergence of significant social mobility based on education at the time must be underlined.

Although his family was poor (his father was an underpaid second lieutenant in the Swedish army), Björnståhl was able to obtain a first-rate education thanks to scholarships and hard work. Björnståhl's education was made possible due to talent and grants; he was lucky to live in a time when education could pave way for a career.

While growing up he received a solid education at the grammar school in Strängnäs where he could develop interest in Biblical philology and other Semitic languages. Thus he was well prepared when he was enrolled in 1754, slightly over-aged 23 years old, at Uppsala University and started with Biblical studies. He soon pursued a more decided interest in Semitic languages, specifically Arabic. He demonstrated outstanding ability in language studies and displayed considerable ambition. While in Uppsala he also attended the popular lectures of Linnaeus, who exerted a dominant influence on the academic discourse at the university with his systematic ideals, and certainly not only in the sciences.<sup>7</sup> The dream of going abroad must have been nurtured by the Linnaeus apostles' journeys far beyond Europe; their findings and trave-

5. Callmer (1985); Karlsson (2003)

6. It is difficult to judge Björnståhl's personal position on religious matters from the manuscripts and the printed texts or to draw any line between personal statements and tropes and literary conventions of the time. There is a difference in the tone between Björnståhl's descriptions of other denominations compared to an earlier document from the Swedish legation, Sven Agrell's diary 1710-1712. Agrell was a chaplain sent from the king's camp at Bender and he read what he witnessed through his own religiosity. A personal

diary and edited travel letters are of course not to be compared straight off, but it is apparent that Björnståhl is more rejecting and even scornful of the Muslim practices he encountered despite his larger formal knowledge of Islam and what could be expected to take place.

7. Lindroth (1981).

logues as well as their many times tragic deaths must have been much talked of topics in Uppsala.

Björnståhl's strong performance as a student caught the attention of Johan Ihre (1707-1780), a scholar in philology well known in Europe for his systematic and comparative approach to the Germanic languages. He became Björnståhl's mentor and tried to steer him towards Germanic studies and a readership in Swedish philology. However, the focus of that position was soon changed to Arabic, which was Björnståhl's area of interest and competence. His thesis at Uppsala was a study of the Ten Commandments from the perspective of Arabic dialects entitled, *Decalogus Hebraicus ex Arabica dialecto illustratus* (1763). The study was apparently well-received, but as a salaried position at the university was not available, his studies came to an end. Instead, due to the social connections of his mentor, he began work as a tutor at various estates of the Swedish nobility. It was through one of these assignments, with the Rudbeck family at Hässelby, that Björnståhl was presented with the opportunity to travel abroad.

In 1767 Björnståhl set out on a journey that eventually would take him and the two Rudbeck brothers to France. He then continued, with one of them, Carl Fredrik (b. 1755), on to Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Holland and England during which they had opportunities to pay visits to Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot, Pope Clement XIV and Goethe. Few other Swedes had had an opportunity to meet with so many of the leading European intellectuals of that era. At the age of 21 Carl Fredrik Rudbeck returned home to Sweden to begin a military career in accordance with his family's expectations after the long tour with Björnståhl on the continent. No particular interest in the humanities can be found in Rudbeck's letters after his return to Sweden although the bond between teacher and disciple had been very strong.

Money was scarce and Björnståhl was asked to write travel letters by his benefactor Carl Christoffer Gjørwell who then edited and offered them to subscribers. Any reading of Björnståhl must recognize that the letters were meant for a broader audience, the growing middle class who subscribed to Gjørwell's

publications as an introduction to contemporaneous European ideas and his publications served as a "window" to the larger world outside Scandinavia. Thus Gjørwell became an important source of income for Björnståhl and his writings became a significant element in Gjørwell's larger publishing efforts. Gjørwell also worked actively to gain financial support for Björnståhl's extended travels after his position as a tutor ended and was eager to provide more reports from the Orient to his subscribers.

The book version of Björnståhl's travel letters in six volumes (1780-84) was a success with the Swedish audience (although not from an economic point of view) and, even earlier, abroad. A German translation appeared already in 1777, a Dutch in 1778 and an Italian (based on the German) in 1782.<sup>8</sup>

The German translation received several reviews, one of them critical as it deemed the text too detailed, yet also criticized the accounts for moving from topic to topic without going into sufficient depth. Björnståhl, apparently upset, wrote a reply that appeared in a later volume. It is written in a self-reflective and personal mode that is very unusual for him. In this passage he characterizes the travelling researcher as a person who is at home everywhere and nowhere:

It could well happen that the traveller, who is focused on exterior matters, sometimes forgets the inner side of things; but those who forever dig inwards should not forget the gratefulness and the dependence they owe the one, who with great effort and endeavour, collects for them abroad.

No one is more modest than the travelling researcher; he openly admits his ignorance; he travels to learn from others – and when he knows one place, he leaves for the next, where he again will be the ignorant – until he has acquired knowledge also here only to leave more enlightened than before.

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8. Eight of Björnståhl's letters are, so far, available at the Electronic Enlightenment, a database produced by the Bodleian Library and Oxford University. Letters from Björnståhl's correspondance with Linnaeus are available at <http://linnaeus.c18.net/> with summaries in English; translations of the letters will follow.

He preaches on his own shortcomings as well as his eagerness to learn.<sup>9</sup>

Even if the persona in the travel letters speaks in the first person and with a distinct voice, usually the curious and enthusiastic learner, are personal passages referring to emotions unusual with Björnståhl. Perhaps it can be assumed that Björnståhl was hurt by the review because he knew it was valid to some degree. On the road year after year, Björnståhl had acquainted himself with the academic debates of the time; he was constantly looking for books and manuscripts, but there was no time for him to sit down and prepare scholarly contributions of his own. Björnståhl's dilemma of being caught between a popular approach and a more academic one is perhaps even more apparent in his writings from Constantinople.

During the *grand tour* Björnståhl's primary responsibility was as a tutor, but he did not miss any opportunity to meet orientalists, philosophers and linguists, or to visit libraries – all intended to advance his insights into the contemporary academic debates in his fields of interest. His eagerness and stamina is well documented. With his background in Semitic studies at Uppsala he was well prepared for his first encounter with the Orient. His previous contacts with Ihre and the systematic and comparative approach to linguistics provided him with a useful method for future observations.

The historical-critical perspectives on the Bible were of special interest to Björnståhl, but not necessarily for theological reasons. These new points of departure put the canonical texts in a broader Semitic landscape where his expertise could be applied. In Paris, where Björnståhl and the Rudbeck barons stayed for almost three years, Björnståhl's position among scholars was witnessed by the visiting Swedish Crown Prince Gustavus (and most likely later influencing the future King's decisions). Another recognition of his growing reputation were memberships in learned societies such as the Académie des inscrip-

tions et belle-lettre in Paris and later the Society of Antiquaries in London.

In Göttingen Björnståhl met with Johann David Michaelis whose broad fields of interest were reflected in the Royal Instructions for the Danish Expedition to Arabia and of inspiration for further contextualizations of the ancient Hebrew texts. Michaelis pioneering approach to Biblical philology that combined the studies of the Old Testament with the general linguistics of the Near and Middle East certainly accorded well with Björnståhl's scholarly preferences. Michaelis was also very well aware of the fact that the lack of relevant manuscripts in European libraries was a hindrance for much research and this must have encouraged Björnståhl who looked for manuscripts wherever he came.

In England, the last stop before Turkey and earlier an important environment to Michaelis' intellectual development, Björnståhl met in Oxford with William Jones, whose Persian translations were actively supported by the Danish king Christian VII. Björnståhl characterized Jones, 28 at the time but already known abroad as an exceptional scholar, as a "*genie superieur*". The two men had a great deal in common beside their interests in comparative linguistics; they both came from modest backgrounds<sup>10</sup> and had to support themselves as tutors. A university career in their respective main field of interests was not possible for either man. Jones turned to law, became a lawyer and moved to Calcutta. In 1786 he presented his ground-breaking theories on the links between and development of the Indo-European languages as a group, and in line with the methodology Björnståhl had been introduced to by Ihre at Uppsala. Björnståhl apparently felt at home in Oxford with its library collections, colleges and learned men. It was also the place where Benjamin Kennicott was in the midst of the process of publishing his ground-breaking critical edition of the Old Testament which indicated that several of the standard Hebrew texts were the result of editorial later composition.

While in Oxford, Björnståhl received the royal command to go to Turkey. Gustavus III wanted him

9. Björnståhl (1780-1784), Vol. III, pp. 75ff.

10. Although Jones' father was a well-known mathematician.

to embark on an Oriental journey that would collect fresh materials for a recently commissioned new Swedish translation of the Bible.

## In Constantinople

Björnståhl was well received upon arrival at the Swedish legation in Constantinople. The envoy at the time, Ulric Celsing (1731-1805)<sup>11</sup>, had learnt Turkish and there were two local language teachers stationed at the legation along with two dragomans. Celsing was impressed by Björnståhl and helped him to obtain further funding for his assignment and expressed astonishment that Björnståhl could not find a permanent position at a Swedish university. Björnståhl was welcome to stay at the Palais Suédois, but for some periods he also chose to live in the city to learn Turkish more quickly. He apologizes to Gjörwell who apparently “expects that I already speak Turkish, since I so long before my arrival to the Orient – specially during my long journey through the noblest of European countries – endeavoured in Oriental languages. But it does not come quickly.”<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the other countries he had stayed in, he did not know the local language before hand. This disadvantage triggered his desire to become proficient in Turkish. In his efforts Björnståhl was frustrated that he could not find proper dictionaries and grammars on Turkish, as he was used to having had in the libraries of Europe. He was therefore quite happy when he found an accessible public library recently opened with the support of funds left by the late grand vizier, Raghîb Pasha (1698-1763). Björnståhl described this library in an almost exuberant tone: “It is open every day, except on the Turks’ holidays. It has MSS of Turkish, Arabic and Persian books in various Sciences, after their subject matters”. It was open to Europeans, as Björnståhl

puts it in his letter, but he expressed surprise when it came to the interior design: “There are no tables or chairs in the whole library, one has to sit on the floor according to the customs of the country, on carpets, tapestry, or on pillows or pads, -- holding the paper in the hand and writing on the knee.”<sup>13</sup> Despite the grumpy tone about the practicalities Björnståhl was happy to go through the collections; he praised the vizier who had made it possible through his will and noted that the donor’s mausoleum was located just outside the library. In Björnståhl’s depiction the library stands out almost as a shrine for learning.

Taking on Oriental dress had been the strategy of many travellers to try to blend in and search for authenticity. Foreign traders and diplomats had portraits of themselves in Turkish clothes made back home as a sign of acquaintance with the East and as memorabilia (Linnaeus had himself painted in Sami costume). By taking on Turkish costume and hereby performing a kind of cultural cross-dressing, Björnståhl hoped to explore parts of the city outside the diplomatic quarters of Pera. Probably he was more successful than most travellers as he really tried to engage with people, although sometimes these efforts were disappointing because he found the residents not forthcoming enough. Björnståhl’s intentions to learn Turkish were serious and he repeatedly emphasized that command of the local language is as the key to successful observations in a foreign land. He commented on the difficulties he had with Turkish, of a language family previously unknown to him, totally different from the Semitic Arabic and the Indo-European Persian and still with so many influences and loanwords from them: “this is why this is the richest and most difficult language.”<sup>14</sup> An additional difficulty in gaining information was the challenge of socializing with the Turkish people and the absence of any invitations into private homes as he had been used to in his earlier travels in Europe.

Björnståhl was not only deeply disturbed by the difficulties of this process of education in the Middle

11. Both his father and elder brother had served at the Swedish representation to the Port. All three Celsings took an extraordinary interest in Turkey and Ottoman life and their diplomatic reports serve as a most useful complement to Björnståhl’s notes and letters. Karlsson (2003).

12. Björnståhl (1780-1784), Vol. III, p. 3.

13. Björnståhl (1780-1784), Vol. III, p. 37.

14. Björnståhl (1780-1784), Vol. III, p. 2.

East, but he also missed his old travelling companion. His letters to Sweden tell of a rather miserable person, who, after so many years with company, now finds himself alone. It is apparent from his writings that he saw Constantinople as only the starting point for a much more extensive tour of the region and it is apparent that Björnståhl finds the stay too extended; he urged to move on.

Björnståhl is often negative, if not harsh, in his descriptions of the Turks he encountered. Several reasons could be behind these condescending remarks. Björnståhl's interests had to this point been primarily philological and antiquarian and perhaps he was disappointed by his encounter with the Orient. His experience did obviously not live up to the expectations he had from reading. It is apparent from the letters that Björnståhl had read earlier travel accounts in various languages, most likely during his visits to libraries during the *grand tour*; the question remains what expectations they had given him.

If books, manuscripts, sites and celebrities had been the focus in his travel accounts before, in Constantinople Björnståhl tried to portray customs, people and culture in a way he had not done before. The philologist obviously felt uncomfortable as ethnographer. He was disappointed that he could not find Turks interested in what he regarded as learned matters and therefore he deemed the Turks he encountered as lacking in curiosity and drive in science. Many were reluctant to respond to his intense inquiries on various matters and even suspected him of being a spy. Turkish men of learning did not speak any European language and spoken Arabic was apparently not an option for communication. Fortunately, the dragomans at the legation came to play a crucial role for Björnståhl in supporting his attempts to understand the environment he was investigating – one that he assumed to be an indication of the real Orient, i.e. the Arabic speaking world.

The basic categories in Björnståhl's narrative strategy are contrasts and dichotomies, and the fundamental differences between Europeans and Turks is the continuous theme in his writings from Constantinople.

This mode of narration colours the way he communicates with an audience with limited knowledge of the Ottomans, and even less of the historical background. The implicit reader of the travel letters appears to be eager to learn as the account is full of detail, but not broad milieu descriptions. Björnståhl choose a didactic method for his presentations in Gjörwell's publication, which in many respects represented a legacy from Linneaus' and Ihre's Uppsala, where systematic structuring of acquired knowledge was combined with an abundance of detail. Hereby he combined the academic and the popular; and the encyclopaedic flow of earlier descriptions of foreign lands merges with the more systematic orientation of the Enlightenment and emerging evolutionism.

Björnståhl's work consists of linguistic observations and ethnography as well as reports on contemporary life in Constantinople and the ceremonies and hierarchies at the sultan's court. The texts actually do not provide any unique information when it comes to ethnographic data; Björnståhl adds to the picture formerly drawn by diplomats on political missions, adventurers, tradesmen and chaplains at the Swedish legation as well as other European travel writers. Though, he complains: "we still have more novels in Europe than trustworthy descriptions of the Turks".<sup>15</sup> Although Björnståhl is very much present in his texts as a persona – the voice who speaks directly to Gjörwell and who interrelates the letters by commenting on previous episodes – Björnståhl's letters are not personal documents. The conventions of genre and expression he followed leave space only occasionally for the contacts he actually must have had with the Turks. Björnståhl is in this sense a restrained writer.

After a year in Turkey, Björnståhl wrote an often quoted letter to Gjörwell in which he summarized his observations in a catalogue structured around oppositions.<sup>16</sup> The catalogue may be rejected as more prejudice than actual ethnographic observations, but it should be underlined that Björnståhl here followed frequent themes well established in travellers' narra-

15. Björnståhl (1780-1784), Vol. III, p. 43.

16. Björnståhl (1780-1784), Vol. III, pp. 59ff.

tives from the Orient over more than a century. He starts out with emphasizing the problems of communication and provides an explanation to why this is so: “We find their manners strange, and they ours. Their living and their customs still reveal their ancient origin in the lands of the East.” When he continues, Björnståhl prepares the reader for the odd things that will be described: “one can never make a better overview of Turkey than imagining a *Europe reversée*.” Björnståhl compares himself with a landscape painter and starts a long comparative catalogue on a favourite theme in Oriental travel writing, clothes, headgear and hairstyles. It begins: “We use short and cut cloths, they use long and full-length. Our clothes are tight and sit neat, theirs are wide and clumsy. Our headgear is black, their is white or green.” In the following Björnståhl provides details on material and style, Turkish terminology and some references to religious regulations for clothing. The prohibition for men to wear silk and gold decorations is mentioned and as is the conception of Prophet’s modesty in dressing. “When men take the liberty [to wear such things] are they not regarded as righteous Musulmans, but as Freethinkers that do not care about God’s or man’s Laws.” In all respects are the differences between us and them kept up. As in the rest of Björnståhl’s text, the term Turk refers to Muslims a group and there is no doubt what “their religion” is.

When Björnståhl uses the term Turks he means Ottoman Muslims as a collective (commenting explicitly that Arab traditions in certain respects are different). Other religious groups, Christians and Jews, are more often defined in detail and the reader becomes familiar with the differentiation in-between Christian denominations. Björnståhl here represents an early Swedish scholarly interest in non-Christian religions; which at the time had no distinct academic discipline. He typically began his own studies with the Biblical languages, and by way of his interest in Arabic and the opportunity to travel, he became a fieldworker with a forum to report back. On the one hand he regards the religion and culture of the Muslims as a reminiscent of ancient cultures and therefore *per se* of interest; on the other he notices a society with

a potential to develop. From his Enlightenment perspective is it no wonder that Björnståhl identified as key problem of what he saw as the lack of interest in science, and a rejection of European influences: “Their prejudices, and, yes, their inborn contempt for Europeans in particular.”<sup>17</sup> This attitude is explained in Björnståhl’s writings as a combination of pride and foolishness among the Turks. There are no instances in his formulations about the Turks that link to a more romantic view as more authentic and natural. Björnståhl’s method of making sense of the differences he presents is through direct comparisons, or overt cultural translations. Thus the imam becomes the vicar of the Turks, the mosque the church of the Turks and the Sultan the Emperor.

The often-quoted catalogue could be contrasted with Björnståhl’s long and lively description of the Ramadan celebrations in the autumn of 1778. The text is rich in details and more or less without normative judgements, and is perhaps the most detailed example of Björnståhl as a fieldworker. Here he sums up his observations from the holy month and criticizes scholarly literature on the matter with reference to his own observations.

Björnståhl refers back to a previous letter where is has commented on how lamps light up the mosque areas during Ramadan, something that apparently intrigues him. But this is an unusually sensual statement for Björnståhl. The festivities every evening after the breaking of the fast must have affected the whole city. Yet are people to a great extent absent from this description. Björnståhl is focused on terms and etymologies, and he provides translations of the concepts sometimes by means of oppositions or negations, sometimes with comparisons. The letter deals with dogma and regulations: what is permitted and not during the fast; and he gives a lengthy description of how the time for Ramadan is calculated. With his interest in Arabic, a modern reader wonders what Björnståhl thought of the long Quran recitations so common during Ramadan and when he describes the rules for the fast, what about the popular celebrations after dusk? Still he constructs an

17. Björnståhl (1780-1784), Vol. III, p. 59.

ethnographic present in the text by regularly stating “I have seen”, “I have heard”. And the details of the Sultan’s distribution of sweets give a hint of Björnståhl’s more sensual observation. If sounds, smells and human agency are absent most of the time is it also a reminder that the personal, romantic even emotional travel writer is the voice of another century.

The conventions of travel writing are of course a crucial perspective on Björnståhl, but his academic background should not be neglected or the implications of the comparative method taken beyond scholarly texts. He represents in this respect a shift between a period when academic knowledge was separated from other types of knowing in terms of educational institutions, genres, mode of communication and professional representatives and positions. A development that made the disciplines of the humanities expand as distinct fields of study, but caused problems for theology when confronted with the consequences of historical critical readings of the Bible.

Contextualization, comparison, and textual criticism opened up for process related perspectives on cultural change, and not the least on religion. The development of religions in the Near and Middle East was seen from these perspectives as interconnected over long periods and between geographical areas thus contradicting the view of a specific religion as essentially unique and stable in form over time. The comparative method also opened the way for theoretical perspectives on cultural phenomena as uniquely embedded in distinct contexts as well as representing shared categories in human culture that could be compared. These two sides of 18<sup>th</sup> century comparisons are visible in Björnståhl’s dichotomies between a pronounced “us” and Turks. The phenomenological comparison was therefore well supported by the emerging evolutionary paradigm in the study of foreign cultures that would dominate the academic discussions on culture and religion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and well into the 20<sup>th</sup>.

It is difficult to compare Björnståhl’s work with that of the Royal Danish Expedition to Arabia. The latter encompassed many competences reflective of the systematic scientific ideals of an age focussed on

science, with its members trained in the natural sciences, Semitic languages, geography, cartography and astronomy. Björnståhl is thematically narrower and hardly observes nature. The observations of Niebuhr, Forsskål and von Haven are hard to compare with Björnståhl’s because the character of their findings is different. Björnståhl was providing his publisher in Stockholm with letters to a general audience to earn some money for his travel, still waiting to make the ultimate voyage to Arabic speaking areas and to search for the cultural roots of Judaism and Christianity.

Finally, after a long stay in Constantinople a royal commission dated 27 November 1778 asked Björnståhl to continue on a tour “to search, note, and – if possible – buy new and important variants of Hebrew and Greek manuscripts of the Bible, and the oldest codices of the Biblical text, also other ancient writers, preferably Biblical.” Equipped with the Sultan’s *ferman* and recommendations from the Swedish representation, Björnståhl started his fatal journey with a visit to Greece in January 1779 with the intent to visit monasteries there with their rich collections of manuscripts. The journey to Greece was successful, and few European scholars knew what treasures were kept within the walls of the monasteries. Already here Björnståhl fulfilled part of his mission. After Greece he was to join with the younger scholar Matthias Norberg (1747-1826) to continue to Palestine and fulfill the royal commission. But Björnståhl’s death came inbetween. Norberg, who had been delayed in his travel from Sweden, later actually was offered the chair at Lund University that Björnståhl never knew he had been appointed to. The two never met; Björnståhl died before Norberg arrived at Constantinople and Norberg never completed the journey as planned, but went back to tack up his professorship.

### A Philologist Turned a Reluctant Fieldworker?

Jacob Jonas Björnståhl was in many respects a child of his time. His personal life bears witness to the emerging social mobility in Sweden that made new

careers possible to sons of the less fortunate through the vehicle of advanced education. Still Björnståhl faced many obstacles because of his poor background and his accomplishments would have been impossible without his extraordinary energy and eagerness to learn. His early interest in the Orient and studies on his own as a very young man prepared him well for the university, but he was in no way a typical student of his time.

A few generations earlier, a man with Björnståhl's social background would have had few other intellectual career options than that of the clergy. At Uppsala Björnståhl found himself in an environment with lively international contacts and news of the travels of the Linnaean disciples. His teacher and mentor Johan Ihre showed him a way to implement new scientific methods on philology and to find his own path in Semitic studies. The Björnståhl corpus as we know today is not primarily the philological dissertations of the young man at Uppsala, no matter that they caught attention then. What readers peruse today in the six volumes of *Resa till Frankrike, Italien, Sweitz, Tyskland, Holland, Ångland, Turkiet och Grekland* is a synthesis of scholarly intentions, genre conventions of the travel letter and a wish to enlighten the reading audience with impressions from abroad.

Yet, the way Björnståhl made sense of the cultural diversity he encountered in Constantinople is deeply influenced by the new methods of approaching language and cultural history through systematization. Rather than reading him only as an example of the prejudiced gaze of "the other", Björnståhl's texts are examples from a time when book learning to an increasingly extent met direct observations, and when academic studies had not yet found its structure to organize systematic fieldwork. For the general intellectual history of the Enlightenment, for academic history and for press history he deserves a place among the early Orientalists. Björnståhl and the lettered envoy Ulric Celsing both stemmed from a period when learning was less institutionalized and both could contribute in their own way based on first hand experience.

Subsequently the Swedish interest in the Orient

followed new paths. This could partly be explained by the decline of the Ottoman Empire and that Sweden's relations with Russia became more settled after the loss of Finland to Russia in 1809. Matthias Norberg, who learnt about Björnståhl's death when arriving to Constantinople in 1779 and stayed there for a period before returning to Sweden in April 1780, promoted the role of Turkish among the Oriental languages during his time as professor. This is a field that otherwise has been over-shadowed in Swedish academia by Arabic in the Semitic language group and Persian with its Indo-European context. The theological interest continued to be focused on historic Palestine and Near Eastern archaeology, where findings of ancient texts and shed artefacts new light on the Bible. The centre for that interest was clearly Jerusalem than Constantinople. Nevertheless, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the knowledge of the Arab world and the Far East increased, and to many travellers Constantinople became just a point of entry to the Middle East, even more so than before.

It may be recalled, Björnståhl wrote about the modest and ignorant travelling researcher in response to his critical reviewer; he was neither. Talented and learned, he knew how to take advantage of the situation and he became a very experienced traveller. The letter quoted above, though, indicates his awareness that he had not yet fulfilled his academic ambitions and perhaps a suspicion that he never would.

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