

# **The Estonian cultural policy, Estonia and the Mediterranean regions, yesterday and today,**

**by Thomas R. Kämmerer, Tartu.**

**Dear president, dear colleagues, dear ladies and gentlemen,**

thank you very much for this honourable chance to speak to you. As one of the representatives of the Anna Lindh foundation with its headquarter in Alexandria since the beginning of this year I take the opportunity for this short speech with great pleasure. I have to add for those who do not know me, that I am philologist on the fields of Ancient Near Eastern Studies (cuneiforms) at the chair of the same name in Tartu / Dorpat, Estonia, which does not mean that I do not know the *current* situation for instance in present Syria quite well.

The topic of my paper will be an information about how Estonia will react to the proposals of the Barcelona process by the cultural point of view, respectively its young Anna Lindh foundation which is just launching its own programmes, with other words the question will be which part within the common EuroMediterranean development Estonia will play on the level of cultural co-operation?

## **1. Estonia in Arabic records**

To understand the current situation concerning the Estonian cultural and with it the political relation to Near Eastern and North African countries I like to start giving a short overview about the past. It is indeed quite exciting to learn that it were the people of Arabian countries who heard from Estonia much earlier than people living in the region of Estonia got any information about the Near East or North Africa:

The rest of the world was first informed about Estonia by the Spanish-Arabian botanist and geographer Abu Abdallah Muhammad al-Idrisi, only in 1154, who studied in Cordova, Spain. His planisphere is considered the first scientific map of the world. There he marked - among other sites - also the capital city of Estonia, Tallinn as Q/Tualaven (Kolõvan), describing it as a seasonal stronghold of a country with the name Astlanda.

These maps were reviewed and compiled by the Norman king Roger II Guiscard of Sicily (1097-1154) who named this book *Nuzhat al-Mushtak*, respectively *Kitab Rudjar*, i.e., *The Book of Roger*, and the map, *Tabula Rogeriana*.

So far the first record about Estonia offered by an Arabian geographer in the 12. century. It goes without saying that from now onwards we can find more information about Estonia in European as well Arabian literature.

## **2. Arabic culture in Estonian records**

But what do we know concerning the information Estonian people have had in these early centuries about Arabian cultures?

It was the Estonian Egyptologist Otto Friedrich von Richter (1792 – 1816) of German origin who learned during his studies in Heidelberg, Germany, 1809-1812 the Persian and Arabian language. In 1814 he traveled to Turkey, Egypt and Nubia. Already 1816, as a young man of only 24 years, he died in Smyrna. Well, he was one of the first scientists at all - living in Estonia - who offered in several articles and lectures on Arabian cultures information about the Near East and North Africa.

Later on especially at the university of Tartu, in former times Dorpat, other scholars worked at the field of oriental studies. Here I should mention at least the professors

Bulmerincq, Seesemann and of course Uku Masing, my almost direct predecessor in Ancient Near Eastern studies at the faculty of theology in Tartu.

Nowadays besides my chair in Tartu an Estonian Assyriological society and an Estonian Arabic society exist. The members of these institutions are eager to provide the Estonian public with academic information about the Arabian cultures.

But nothing is said about any information the Estonian non-academic public has concerning the Near Eastern and North African cultures and I have to confess besides information Estonians can get by TV and some public newspapers almost nothing is known about the Mediterranean and oriental regions at all.

### **3. Future cultural policy of Estonia / the university of Tartu**

As most of you already know Estonia as well as Latvia and Lithuania and other Eastern European countries joined the European Union on May 1, 2004. Estonia - and here in opposite to Poland and Hungary for instance - will join the European currency system of Euro already on January 1, 2007.

The remarkable eagerness of Estonia to be a reliable partner in the European Union goes hand in hand with the new Estonian policy to build up co-operations between Estonia and different countries from both shores of the Mediterranean sea. Thus the Estonian ministry for foreign affairs in Tallinn has already started to launch programmes between Estonia and some of the Arabic countries especially Egypt:

In January 2005 the former foreign Minister Kristiina Ojuland visited Egypt, in here address to the Egyptian council of Foreign affairs she has said: "Egypt plays a crucial geopolitical role. I have also come here to show that we, a European Union Member State in Northern Europe, acknowledge the vital significance of a strong EU-Egyptian partnership, despite the fact that our bilateral relations and foreign policy have so far been focused mainly upon countries closer to us."

Thus, we can say today, that the thoughts and objectives outlined by the Anna Lindh foundation (EuroMed) for the dialogue between cultures fit exactly the policy of our ministry for foreign affairs and let it seem advisable and necessary to consider in Estonia as well as in other EuroMed member states the launching of own institutions and programmes which identify themselves with these objectives of EuroMed and try to translate their basic ideas into public interest. Indeed the paths which will be treated to do so will be different in the single EuroMed member states. Besides, an important role will be the inclusion of the young generation par excellence.

And it will be the young generation to form the object of one of our new programmes. I have to say that it was an idea of the head of the Austrian national network, Mr. Florian Haug. He called his project Odyssey, to use the name Odysseus which speaks for itself. Already this summer the Estonian Universities of Tallinn and Tartu declared that each of them with the beginning of the next academic year - autumn 2006 - are able to offer at least 10 free study places for students of those Arabian countries which would do the same to Estonian students. That offer includes free accommodation and free access to all academic lectures and libraries during the whole study plan. Our Estonian government and the rectors of our universities would be glad and very honoured to launch that project together with Egypt, Jordan and Morocco. It goes without saying that our aim is to increase the number of participating students and universities continuously.

Besides the administrative aspect of that project there is of course also an academic: We do not like only to invite students from Southern Mediterranean countries to *study* in Estonia, we like to invite students to take part in a project called *Odyssey*. Students of such a project should understand their study plan as useful and necessary for both participating countries. Thus, their obligate research theses should include

results which offer profits for Estonia respectively other North European countries as well as for the participating Arabian country.

One of the future perspectives of Estonia as one of these EuroMed member states as well as one of these new European states belonging to the European Union is the more and more emerging spiritual and intellectual new orientation of the Estonian society. This new orientation is based not least on the experiences of his younger history and also allows to let be the Estonian society especially qualified for bilateral cultural projects, maintained by Estonian and Arabian institutions in future.

One of the Estonian bodies responsible for this and other projects I will speak about just some minutes later should become the already founded North-East European Centre for the interdisciplinary conception of Near Eastern and African Cultures (CINENAC). Its domicile is located in Tallinn, the capital city of Estonia, also already because of a desired nearness to the Finnish partner in Helsinki.

The main objectives - besides the Odyssey project of that Centre - shall be established as set out in the statute of the Anna Lindh Foundation, which will be proposed to the institutions of the partnership. The main objectives are:

- Because of the statues of Anna Lindh foundation to support only at least *bilateral* projects, or better said: projects which are realised by rather more than two participants, we already have invited officially other member states of Anna Lindh foundation as there are Egypt, Lebanon and Syria. Concerning the contents of our centre we recommend two exciting purposes:
  - α. The history of tradition from the Ancient Near East up to the arabic world (diachron), which includes the translation of arabic literature into Finnish, Estonian as well as into English and vis versa "our" literature (e.g. Kalavala, Kalevipoeg) into Arabic, as well as arabic lectures, congresses, scholar and student exchange.
  - β. The history of the transfer of technologies (rather synchron). That means the transfer of technologies concerning e.g. metals (brass), but also purple and last but not least the alphabet, not to forget cultic rituals, their origin and the route humans used to transfer these items and the methods and technologies which were necessary for production from their oriental origin to Europe.
- to identify, develop and promote areas of cultural convergence between the countries and peoples of the Mediterranean, Lebanon, Syria and Egypt, *and* Estonia and Finland as the most north-eastern European EuroMed members states.
- to hold a close and regular dialogue between Near Eastern respectively North African cultural circles and those of Estonia and Finland, firstly by promoting the understanding of Arabic modern literature (e.g. translations into Finno-Ugric: that means: Estonian, Finnish and Hungarian language as well as into English).
- to serve as a catalyst for promoting cultural cooperation and mobility between Arabic and Finno-Ugric speaking people at all levels (e.g. scholar, student, pupil exchanges, etc.) targeting in particular the young and activities relevant to young people.
- to promote a better understanding of modern Arabic as well as Ancient Near Eastern and North African cultures by the northeast European youth.

The above-mentioned objectives make it clear that the Centre wants to concentrate upon two fields of work: The presentation of modern Arabic cultures by their **a.** present (e.g. mainly Arabic language, but also music and performances, etc.) as well as their **b.** historical traditions (e.g. interdisciplinary discussion between institutions of modern Arabic and Ancient Near Eastern and North African cultures) mainly to the youth of Northeast Europe.

**a.** Our team so far sees following priorities for the translation, publishing and commentaries of modern and historical Arabic authors:

1. Hanna Mina,
2. Sakarija Tamer,
3. Ṭaha Ḥuscin's Autobiography,
4. Al-Ghazzālī: "Al-munkidh min al-dalāl" and "Muškat al-anwār" (plus introduction and commentary),
5. Hanān al-šaiḥ: "Misk al-ghazāl",
6. Usāma ibn Munqidh: "Kitāb al-i'tibār".

Besides the authors mentioned above there are indeed other authors important as well.

**b.** Nevertheless the future work of this Centre will endeavour another point of view. For all of us it is quite obvious that we can explain and understand present (i.e. cultural, religious and political) situations, events and deeds only by the background of history.

That is the reason why the initiator of this centre are the chair for Ancient Near Eastern Studies (cf. <http://www.ut.ee/muinasteadused>) at Tartu University, Estonia and the Department for Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Helsinki, Finland. Therefore, one main topic of this Centre besides translations of modern Arabic literature will be the common discussion between Arabists together with Assyriologists and Hittitologists, researching history and tradition. Essential contents of these discussions / research will be the transfer of technologies, which we can verify by history itself, history of culture, religion and languages. Objects are the origin of metals (i.e. brass / messing), purple but also the alphabet and the path they took on their way to Europe.

#### **4. Description of the Problem / Need / Situation**

The present situation in Finland and Estonia is slightly different. In Finland there is a sound tradition of Arabistic, in Estonia the situation is marked by the gap of 50 years of isolation. During the soviet time many committed specialists worked in the field of Arabistic, but their work hasn't been recognized by the authorities. As to the level of intellectual circles we can realize competence, but as to the level of wide masses of people, pupils or students, the incompetence is remarkable. Nevertheless, the awareness of modern or classical Arabic culture plays marginal role either in Finland or Estonia. The danger of prejudices about Arabs or Moslems, complemented with unawareness about religious phenomena, especially in Estonia is easy to be generated.

There are three ways of preventing such prejudices. First, the Centre for Near Eastern and North African cultures should offer a wide spectrum of reading material about and from the modern as well as ancient Arabic world, either in Finnish, Estonian, Hungarian or English. Second, it is up to the Centre to mediate non-written culture, like music etc. And third, a further stage of the development of the Centre would comprise a moral or direct support for the exchange of scholars, students, pupils and other interested people between Syria, Lebanon and Egypt – Estonia and Finland, which will lead to the organization of future cultural events, like conferences, music and theatre festivals etc.

## 5. The tradition and the present situation of Arabic translations in Estonia

The tradition of teaching and studying the Semitic languages, especially at the University of Tartu goes back to the foundation of the university in 1632. Arabic has been taught at least from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. First skilled Estonians were studying and translating from the Arabic already in the 1930s. Starting with Uku Masing (1909-1985) there are until today scholars and intellectuals who are capable of Arabistics. Unfortunately the soviet obstacles were strong enough to hinder the birth of the real Arabistic in Estonia. The threat of dilettante or secondary translations existed. In spite of this we can name outstanding and wide commented translations like *Risālat Ḥayy Ibn-Yaqzān* by Ibn-Ṭufail (H. Udam), the poems *Lāmīyatu-l-ʿarabi* by aš-Šanfara (U. Masing) and *Waddīʿ Hurairata* by al-Aʿšā (K. Kasemaa). Attempts have been made to start with the translation of *Qurʾān* and of the fairy-tales from *alf laila wa-laila*, some of them published. From the modern authors two works deserve to mention: *Layālī alf laila* by Nagīb Maḥfuḏ (K. Kasemaa) and *Urs az-Zain* by aṭ-Ṭaiyib Šāliḥ (A. Annus). A florilegium with some examples from Adonis, Yusuḥ Idrīs, Nizār Qabbānī, and Darwīš Maḥmūd (A. Annus, K. Jõgi) is published in some literary magazines. It is not much, but it proves to be a relatively good starting point for further work, all the more many attempts are already made and there are young committed specialists and students in Estonia, who are looking for the possibilities.

## 6. Impact of Activities

A Centre of this kind will compile firstly knowledge and mediation. In spite of all engagement one will have to try to work essentially and objectively and to report. One will have to pay attention to the fact that the compiled results of this interdisciplinary research are not falsified. In the Centre itself one will have to compile a statute in which competence of individuals as well as of the whole Centre is regulated. It will become very important that a suitable access to the media occurs. In every case the convergence between the Mediterranean and North-European countries like Estonia and Finland will be further emphasized.

I thank you for your attention and would be very glad for any comment or question. I hope I could show, that Estonia likes to be an *active* partner within the EuroMediterranean process and that not only my chair for Ancient Near Eastern studies, which already co-operates with the German universities of Göttingen, Munich and Tübingen, but also several other institutions are eager and ready to co-operate with your mediterranean institutions, although we do not have such a long tradition in any EuroMediterranean relation.