

Switzerland and the arabs

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SWITZERLAND AND THE ARABS

It is fair to say that Swiss public opinion is generally slanted towards the Israeli cause in the present Middle East conflict. Any conversation with an average Swiss will show that he has greater understanding for the Israeli than for their Arab opponents. This can be explained in several ways. The most likely explanation must be the sufferings of the Jews during the war, coupled, perhaps, by an uneasy national conscience about Switzerland's war-time role. Anti-semitism has certainly never reared its head in Switzerland since 1945. Another possible reason is that the western mind, attached to the values of organisation, efficiency and achievement, feels a natural admiration for the strivings of the small people of "Exodus", who have made a garden of a patch of desert. The Arabs, on the other hand, seem to squabble unceasingly and prefer inflammatory declarations to concrete action. There is more respect for a country that in six days has defeated armies immeasurably larger than its own with courage and ingenuity, than towards states that have nationalised western-owned goods, whose people are deemed inconstant and who have expelled and dispossessed a good many Europeans, including many Swiss.

From the Phoenician to St. Theodorus

Very little is known among ordinary western people of Arab culture and Arab art. They have better notions of the Far East, of Greco-Roman culture and of African arts (much in the fore with modern art and pop music). No one realises that dozens of words in common language

(such as "cheque" and "admiral") are Arab words and one forgets that the Arabs were the sole purveyors of knowledge before the Renaissance.

The Swiss have throughout the centuries had unsuspected ties with the Arabs. The first links were probably established a few centuries before Christ by Phoenician traders opening counters on the Plateau. Contacts with the oriental world were maintained and enhanced during four centuries of Roman occupation.

The *Pax Romana* helped the trade of Arab merchants to flourish in Gaul, Italy and the areas covered by Switzerland today. Switzerland was a crossroad for trade in spices, papyrus, incense, wine and oriental fabrics. Arab trading colonies were established on the Plateau as they were in other areas of the Roman Empire. The Roman Legions also brought with them soldiers from Syria and Asia Minor.

The Governor of the Southern Alps during the second half of the Fourth century A.D., who is referred to in the earliest Christian inscription found in Switzerland, in Sion, may have been of Oriental origin. On the other hand, a legend has it that Rhaetian soldiers were in the Holy Land at the time of Christ's crucifixion.

The Arabs had a profound influence in the religious life (Pagan and then Christian) of the Roman Empire. The cults that progressively shook the foundations of traditional Roman religions were of Oriental inspiration. Arabs later became the missionaries of the new Christian religion and brought forth a number of saints, among whom Saint Theodorus, of Octodurus, who founded the first basilica of St. Maurice (although

his Arab origins are contested by some authorities). Nevertheless, all the early churches, such as those founded at Saint-Symphorien, Avenches, Romainmotier, Chur and Disentis were profoundly influenced by Arab art, of which Carolingian architecture was a direct offshoot. The Arabs have left their mark in the decorative art of manuscripts written by monks. Calligraphy and "arabesques" are fundamentally Arab traditions.

What the Valais had forgotten

The Arabs appeared in Switzerland some six centuries after the fall of Roman power. By that time the notion of "Arabs", which we have used so far for convenience, was justified as Islam had been well established in the already-existing Arab empire. The Arabs who entered Switzerland came from the Maghreb (North Africa) after having conquered the region in the South of France now known as the Maures and the Esterelles. Their first appearance in the Swiss Alps was recorded in 906. In 921 they held positions on the Great St. Bernard Pass and occupied St. Maurice in 940. Twenty years later they had settled in Martigny, Brigue, Sierre, Chillon and the country of Vaud and built a number of fortifications. They crossed the Grisons, captured Disentis and looted Chur Cathedral. They thrust towards Lake Constance, penetrated the Jura and reached out to the west nearly up to Geneva.

The Arabs were not to have a lasting influence in Switzerland, as they did in Spain and Sicily. They gave Arab names to a few places, such as Pontresina and Allalin, and introduced a water allotment system which was practiced in the Valais until the last century. In 972, they captured Saint Mayeul, Abbot of Cluny in the Valais and order of the powerful leader of Cluny. The news shocked Christendom and a crusade was launched to evince the Arabs from central Europe. The Armies of William 1st, Count of Provence, attacked the fortress of Garde-Freinet, in the south of France, which served as a base to the Arab invasion. It was seized in 975 after a bloody battle. Many Arabs remained

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in Switzerland, particularly in the Valais, where they became assimilated with the local farming population. Many were converted to Christianity and many people in the Valais have remote Arab origins.

The next opportunity for contact was offered by the Crusades. Several Swiss barons left for the Holy Land, the most prominent among them were the Lords of Grandson. Two members of the Dynasty, Ebal 3rd and Othon 1st died in the Holy Land. The latter commanded the English troops in the siege of Acre. Othon 3rd, a great poet, was deeply inspired by Arab lyricism. When the wave of crusades and their failures had ended, pilgrims left on foot via the Saint Bernard Pass and Lombardy for the unending trek to the Holy Sepulchre. Others left to bring the Gospel to those countries which were now part of the Ottoman Empire and had been the birthplace of Christianity. Christoph Burckhardt died in Alep distributing scriptures and alms to the poor. The Jurassien Samuel Gobat was the first Protestant Bishop to be named in Arab countries, his seat was at Jerusalem. The most extraordinary career was that of Jean de Watteville, a Mohematan abbot who became successively officer to the King of Spain, Sheik at Istanbul, Pacha in Greece and Abbot at Beaume (France).

The first European to visit Mecca

Other Swiss left for those distant climes not out of religious calling, but to answer the call of adventure. Of the 70,000 Swiss officers who served in foreign armies before and after the defeat at Marignan, several fought in

Arab armies. One such man was Nicolas Ferdinand Perrier from Estavayer (1812-1882), who fought under Mehemet-Ali, founder of modern Egypt, against the Turks and took part in the invasion of Syria. He has left written accounts of these campaigns of remarkable historical interest. Back in Switzerland, he became an important public figure and a director of the burgeoning national railways. Another name deserving mention is Count Jean-Louis Ebenezer Reynier, who was a general in Napoleon's army in Egypt. It was in that country that Swiss-Arab exchanges were to be the strongest and the most fruitful. The history of the Swiss colony of Egypt is studied by a constellation of businessmen, engineers, writers, scientists, doctors and magistrates. One name that stands out is that of Werner Munzinger (1832-75), a young man who at the age of 26 was attracted from his native Olten for the East. From Egypt he sailed a thousand miles down the Red Sea and settled at Massaway, in Erythrea (a province that was colonised by Italy in 1890). He travelled through completely unexplored territory in Ethiopia and drew maps which in 1867 allowed General Napier to liberate British missionaries captured in the fortress of Magdala. Munzinger eventually became British Consul in Massawah and Ethiopia, and then Governor of the Sudan. He was killed in 1875 at Berbera, Somaliland, which he had placed under Egyptian rule.

Swiss scientists have played a dominant role in revealing Arab culture to the West. Geneva has given the world specialists of exceptional distinction, Max Van Berchem and Alfred Boissier, were world renowned Orientalists and epigraphists. But by far the most enterprising career was that of Jean-Louis Burckhardt, known as Sheik Ibrahim Ibn Abdallah. Born in Lausanne from Basler parents in 1784, he felt the spell of the East from early childhood and after studies at Neuchatel, Leipzig and Gottingen, left for London, where he offered to work for the Africa Society. This newly-founded society wanted to organise an exhibition from Egypt to the Niger. A first attempt carried out under its auspices by the German explorer Frederick Hormann had failed upon his death in the desert.

The Society accepted Burckhardt's offer, and after training in Arabic at Cambridge, he left for Syria in 1809, aged 25. He died of dysentery and exhaustion in Egypt eight years later without ever accomplishing his original mission. But his contributions to the historical and geographical knowledge of the East were priceless and still of value today. Having converted to Islam and dressing himself as an Arab, he explored Palestine, Syria and the Sinai. His

anthropological findings, his mapping of innumerable archaeological sites and his topographical surveys proved immensely useful to Lawrence of Arabia a century later. His journey to the Niger was postponed by an interruption of caravan traffic to the west and Burckhardt centered his explorations on the Upper Nile Valley, Nubia, and the ports of the Dead Sea. He was the first Westerner to enter Mecca, the Holy City of the Moslem creed, and the accounts of his travels in Arabia, published in English in the 1830's had immense repercussions.

Klee and the magic of Tunisia

Finally, reference should be made to the appeal of Oriental scenery to Swiss artists. Jean-Etienne Liotard (1702-1790), a Genevese well known for his portraits of 18th century personalities, including Voltaire, was one of the first western artists to be attracted by the East. His fame was enhanced by the nascent pre-romantic interest in eastern culture (examples: the success of the Thousand and One Nights, the Lettres Persanes by Montesquieu and la Princesse de Babylon by Voltaire). He lived for many years in Constantinople and worked for the Ottoman court. Another figure was a Vaudois named Gleyre, born in 1808, who left for Egypt at 26 and painted dream-like and visionary Oriental landscapes. He led a stormy life and died in Paris aged 66. Much admired by the French philosopher Taine, his famous painting "Les illusions perdues" is exhibited at Le Louvre.

It is definitely through the painter Paul Klee that the atmosphere and culture of the East has been brought to bear on Western art with the most emphasis. Klee loved Arab music, the vivid colours of Mediterranean scenery and felt a "magic meridional attraction". On 16th April, 1916, Klee was illuminated in the village of Kairouan, Tunisia, by the vision of this true self as an artist. That experience was to have a determinative effect on his career and he became, with Kadin-sky, the founder of abstract art, which, just as in the Arab artistic tradition, tries to go beyond the visible face of nature and express things outside the reach of figurative art.

The Arabs have thus given the West and particularly Switzerland, more than is commonly suspected. This knowledge can only but enhance understanding between their two people.

(PMB)

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