

A HISTORICAL SURVEY

The data published in the *Onomasticon Arabicum* online have a long history. This past partially explains certain particularities and, from a contemporary point of view, deficiencies. In other words, a similar onomastic project starting today would present data differently. However, we consider the scientific and technical approach by the *Onomasticon Arabicum* to allow separate as well as combined interrogations on any of the different elements of the Arabo-Muslim names worthwhile to have it implemented.

1. The elaboration of the *Onomasticon Arabicum* Project

Transmission of knowledge in medieval Islam was one of the projects Georges Vajda held when creating the IRHT's Section Orientale. Under his guidance, Jacqueline Sublet was analyzing biographical sources and gathering onomastic files when, in 1964, she discovered that vast (250 000 files) *Onomasticon Arabicum* gathered in Rome (Accademia dei Lincei, Fondazione Caetani) before 1914 by Giuseppe Gabrieli and Leone Caetani. Being aware of the very beginnings of computerizing, then on punched cards performed at the IRHT – which was a pioneer in the field of treating medieval historical matter – she dreamt of a computerized Arabic biographical dictionary. Jean Glénisson and Lucie Fossier encouraged this project from the very beginnings.

Later on, in Rome, J. Sublet together with Biancamaria Scarcia-Amoretti, and under the patronage of Giorgio Levi della Vida and Francesco Gabrieli, examined the files of the OA and they could see that the onomastic identifications had been compiled from manuscript sources, most of it being published – and that new references had to be added. The task was so big that they thought of a first task: reorganizing the files (at the moment the files were ranked according to the *kunya*-s) and making a copy to have it in the IRHT. Then it became obvious that

- 1) computerizing the data was the only way to have access to such an immense amount of biographical information, although Latin script was the only way to register information in a computer at that time,
- 2) gathering an international team to compile the sources and register the biographical material.

Thus, in August 1966, in the 3rd meeting of the UEAI in Ravello, Georges Vajda, together with J. Sublet and B. Scarcia, announced the creation of a project to renew the Italian

Onomasticon Arabicum and computerizing Arabic prosopographical data. It was in fact premature proclamation – announced also in an article “La prosopographie arabe”, published in *Annales XXV*, 1970, p. 1236-1239 – and the beginnings of long lasting developments that end for the present here, with the coming into being of the *Onomasticon Arabicum* as a online database (OA-online). In this adventure, a number of pioneers joined the team along the decades during almost half a century:

The French “Section arabe” of the IRHT began to enlarge under the responsibility of J. Sublet. All its members were successively involved in the project of extracting names from sunni sources, mainly from Ibn al-‘Imād’s *Šaḍarāt al-ḍahab*: Arlette Doux and Sophie Bilderling, then Geneviève Humbert-Fourcade, Lakhdar Souami and Nicole Cottart, with the punctual collaboration of Jean-Paul Pascual, Bruna Soravia, Marie-Claude Mouchet and Stefano Mangano, Mohamed Hamadé and Nabil Moussa, while Abdelouahad Jahdani was a main help during all those years.

They were assisted in this temporarily by a Kuwaiti team headed by Chaker Mustapha with A. Charif and W. El-Aridh. The French team provided technical support with Pierre Bichard-Bréaud in Nancy who elaborated the first computerized version of the *Onomasticum arabicum* under the responsibility of L. Fossier (See Bichard-Bréaud, in *Série Onomasticon Arabicum*, n° 5, 1973). Then Françoise Delaveau and Agnès Guillaumont, under the direction of Josée Beaud went on with improving computerizing on a more advanced machine. Mauricette Coignet, then Séverine Gambier registered the data in the IRHT.

B. Scarcia constituted an “Italian team”, Angelo Arioli, and the punctual collaboration of Daniela Amaldi, Angelo Scarabel and Marco Salati, with the aim of extracting names from Iranian shi‘i sources, while Renato Traini compiled manuscript sources about the Zaydis in Yemen, and Adalgisa De Simone registered biographies of the Sicilians learned men.

During the 70ies and 80ies the original Italian-French project attracted collaborations of specialist within a specific type of biographies, cited here in a rough chronological order according to their collaboration:

- Adel Sidarus in Evora, Portugal (scientists) with E. Llaveró Ruiz, in collaboration with Marie-Geneviève Guesdon, Paris;
- Kees Versteegh in Nijmegen (grammarians) together with Evald Ditters;
- Manuela Marín in Madrid, Spain formed a large team including Maria Luisa Avila, Maria Isabel Fierro, Mercedes Garcia Arenal, Luis Molina Martinez, Ana Ramos Calvo who compiled biographies in Muslim Spain: results are published in the form of articles and books in the series *Estudios onomastico-biograficos de al-Andalus* in the CSIC from 1988

onwards. Mohamed Meouak joined the team, analyzing sources on the elites in Muslim Spain.

- in the USA, Seeger Bonebakker, together with Fedwa Malti-Douglas, then with John Hayes and Everett K. Rowson undertook the analysis of literary sources and biographies of poets;
- in Tunisia, Mounira Chapoutot-Remadi, Khaled Kchir and later, Rachida Besrouer with other collaborators analysed Mamluk biographies;
- in Lebanon, Juliette Rassi compiled an Ayyubid historical source.

Meanwhile, in Gent, Belgium, Mark Plancke elaborated a scheme for a detailed description of Arabic biographical sources which Patricia Kasdi applied in her memoire on the biographical sources preserved in the Section arabe.

Some collaborators were correspondants of the Project, as Donald S. Richards in Oxford, a specialist in manuscript documents of the Mamluk period, and Boguslav Z. Zagorski, in Warsaw, who was studying African Toponymy.

The collaborators used to meet once a year to confront their experiences in compiling biographical sources of different kinds and periods. The first descriptions of the scientific method appeared in 1971 under collective signature: “*Documents sur la mise en ordinateur des données bioaphiques*”, then in 1973 in a structured handbook by F. Douglas and G. Fourcade: *The treatment by computer of biographical data* gave a full method to compile biographical material in the first ten centuries of Islam. From 1979 to 1987, results of reflexion on onomastics were published in the 5 volumes in *Cahiers d’onomastique arabe*, éd. CNRS, Paris, and several publications came out in several teams (see below “Publications”). Meanwhile, the machines with punched cards were succeeded by magnetic tapes – processed by a giant IBM computer located in the Orsay University, outside Paris, from where printed “listings” of selected content had to be carried to the IRHT. Around 1985, micro-computerizing became a possibility to visualize these information directly on the computer. Thus, the re-writing of the program on McIntosh-computer was confined to Izzeddine Salah in collaboration with Nicole Cottart. The French team, with Muriel Roiland, Nasrine Rayati, Marc Geoffroy and Tariq Riabi, concentrated then on the corrections of Ibn al-‘Imād’s *Šaḍarāt*, revised in a new scientific edition, by ‘Abd al-Qādir and Muḥammad al-Arna’ūt (Beirut, 1986-95). At that time, the transfer of data from Latin to Arabic characters was successively performed within the same McIntosh program (4D). Unfortunately, the transfer and new data processing took too much time and the result was far from been obvious, despite a tentative of publishing results on a CD-Rom in Bordeaux. Thus, the history of persons mingles with the stages of data-processing, which offers another point of view.

2. Data history

When J. Sublet and B. Scarcia initiated *the Onomasticon Arabicum* project and the international enterprise took form in the 70ies, computing was done in huge machines, directed by computing specialists. After the punch cards era, data were written by hand on “borderaux”, a paper-sheet containing the rubrics, and successively transformed into electronical data processed by the computer and stored on magnetic tapes. Since writing in Arabic was not common computer-knowledge, the initial decision was to transcribe data into a transliteration in Latin letters. [See examples and publications from 1971 onwards.] At that time teams in Italy, France, Portugal, the United States, Spain, Netherlands, Tunisia and Libanon contributed.

The next technical step under the responsibility of Nicole Cottart was to pass data to a smaller type of computer with a specific data-base program in 1985 (OnoMAC) that finally allowed the transfer of the Latin transliteration into Arabic (FILTRAMAC in 1996). Retrospectively, this specific program on the McIntosh computer was too closed, too complicated and contained too many “security control”-mechanism, but did not allow to effectuate global changes. As result, data input and correction became very fastidious, progress very slow and hardly any publications saw the light after 1990. Several teams left the project, others had handed in their data and waited for the implementation to get results.

The French team, responsible for informatics within the project, could not master the technical difficulties and the project continued at small scale for several years in the 90ies. Data input was done exclusively in Latin transliteration, but from 1996 on, data of certain volumes of Ibn al-‘Imad’s *Šādarāt* and other sources were consecutively transformed into Arabic. The new edition required, once again, data revision.

At that time some 28.000 biographical notices were processed in Latin characters, some 8.000 processed into Arabic – and any error in the transliteration encoding created problems. The idea to produce a CD-Rom in Bordeaux with the support of Robert Vergnieux, and to publish the data of 3000 persons should have given a new impulsion in 1999 and 2000, with a contribution from the Bait al-Hikma in UNESCO, under the direction of Azeddine Beschouch. However, the correction of data proved to be extremely difficult in the old system.

Technically, the *Onomasticon arabicum* was then in an impasse that required a new departure. The OnoMAC database did not provide a function to export data, but data could be printed. Thus, Christian Müller saw as solution for saving the data to “print” them into a file,

clean it from all excrescent encoding, and insert the data into a new database. At that time, the technical choice fell on Microsoft ACCESS, a database-program for PC that allowed Arabic script and was user-friendly enough not to require excessive technical skills for additional search- and request-functions. The IRHT financed the elaboration of the new database, which was finally delivered in October 2002.

Since data-transfer had to pass through a clearing-process anyway, it was decided to transfer all the transliterated (28000 entries), not the some 8000 entries already processed into Arabic. Data correction passed two stages: the algorithm transforming the transliteration into Arabic brought to light many inconsistencies, that had formerly blocked the FILTRAMAC procedures. These errors were corrected in the virtual “printout” before any data-transfer to the new ACCESS-database (February-June 2002). With the new database it became possible to proceed with serial corrections on the basis of the Arabic script. One example to show the advantage of this approach: Transliteration used dots and hyphens to mark certain characters. Thus “Muh.ammad”, the correct transliteration, is very close to “Muhammad” and the error is difficult to find. With the transfer algorithm, results are مُحَمَّد for the first and مُهَمَّد for the second and very easily discovered as an error. One other example: “)FAHMI” becomes الفهم (sic!), however “)FAHMI-” is correct: الفهمي. Our decision to use the transliterated data, not the smaller “processed” Arabic data, meant that corrections effected in the 90ies on the Arabic texts were not included into the new Access database.

At the end of this conversion process in 2002, we disposed of a functioning Access-database and 28000 entries of a very unequal quality: some stemmed from very old parts of the project (i.e. several Andalusian sources, since the Spanish team did publish their results separately from 1988 onwards), while other sources had been thoroughly revised.

Work to complete Ibn ‘Imād’s *Šaḍarāt* continued with adding references to the new edition. Anne-Marie Eddé and Marc Geoffroy revised a part of the first volume according to the new edition. The former members of the project had left the IRHT and since the section Arabe did not dispose of any personal working on the *Onomastion* Project, correcting data was limited to serial corrections to avoid systematical errors by Christian Müller. Muriel Roiland and Zouhour Chaabane finished the data-input and correcting of the *Šaḍarāt* as well as the formerly thoroughly revised sources that are now to be found in the *Onomasticon Arabicum-online*.

In 2006 Jacqueline Sublet and Christian Müller published a method to use the new Access-database for individual research. Despite some (ongoing) scholarly interest, the *Onomasticon*

project as such is looking for a new perspective: Under the present conditions it seems impossible to apply for funding without publishing substantial data, but we could not publish a big amount of data without further corrections.

3. The *Onomasticon Arabicum* goes online

In 2010, synergies with the ongoing project “Islamic Law Materialized” (ERC AdG 2008, no 230261-ILM) allowed to develop a first internet-compatible “biographical module”, using MySQL. The consultation of the *Onomasticon Arabicum* via Internet then was no longer out of technical reach. Two years later, the IRHT financed the development of the *Onomasticon Arabicum-online* as a stand-alone database. Special thanks go to Hervé Blaize for the technical implementation and his sense of cooperation. We realized the web-interface of the *Onomasticon Arabicum-online* with the help of Lahcen Daaïf (Arabic version), Karim Ayari (who developed the logo) and with the participation of Muriel Roiland. Jacqueline Sublet, *spiritus rector* of the project ahead of her time, accompanied the “making of” with constant interest and good advice. Then, in October 2012, we decided to publish a selection of sources with roughly corrected 12000 data in *Onomasticon Arabicum-online1*.

At present, the IT department of the IRHT develops the new version (*OA-online2*) that allows for online data-inputting and correction, includes more data, a user interface and the possibility for new collaborators to enter their own data. Thanks go to Henri Seng (database developer), Clément Ramette (trainee) and Cyril Masset (head of department) for their combined and consecutive commitment.

Scientific and technical approaches by the *Onomasticon Arabicum* allow separate and combined interrogations on any element of the Arabo-Muslim name, travels, activities, etc. To prove its efficiency, a big sample of data is necessary: here given with more than 15.000 biographical entries.

Christian Müller

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