

ARABICA

SCHLOTT-KOTSCHOTE, A. — Transkription arabischer Schriften. Vorschläge für eine einheitliche Umschrift arabischer Bezeichnungen. (Islamkundliche Untersuchungen, 262). Klaus Schwarz Verlag, Berlin, 2004 (23,5 cm, 162). ISBN 3-87997-619-8. ISSN 0939-1940.

bismi l-lāhi r-rahmāni r-rahīmi

This publication is a proposal for rendering Arabic-scripted information in a consistent, internationally acceptable standardized Latin-scripted form (NT — Neue Transkription) using only basic, mainly unaccented letters. There is an academic (elaborate) and a bureaucratic (simplified) variant.

The author starts with explaining, in layman's terms and using Western European examples, the essentials of Latin-based orthography: its principles and its inconsistencies. The book also briefly touches on topics like the relation between religion, language and writing and even describes the tenets of Islam (the References annex in fact includes a book by Karen Armstrong, although Mohammad-Reza Majidi's seminal work *Das arabisch-persische Alphabet in den Sprachen der Welt* is curiously missing). Some basics of Standard Arabic grammar are given, although there is no grammatical information about any of the other Arabic-scripted languages.

Then the author shows the reader how, in the everyday reality of the Latin-scripted world, multiple orthographic forms are encountered representing any given Arabic-written original. Such variation can be caused a. by regional pronunciation variants of the original or b. by orthographic conventions of the target language, or c. a combination of both. The author discusses existing latinization protocols such as the DMG (German Oriental Society), the *EOI* (*Encyclopædia of Islam*, elsewhere abbreviated as *EI*) transcription (Umschrift) and the IPA (International Phonetic Association) transcription (Lautschrift) — and the proliferation of proprietary systems used by various publishers as well as the one developed for the Swiss Federal Justice and Police

Department (EJPD — Eidgenössische Justiz- und Polizeidepartement).

In the preface government bureaucracies are specifically mentioned as possible users of the proposed alternative standard to deal with the names of foreign nationals. The book criticizes the existing practice of language-dependent transcription, the anarchy of proprietary methods constructed by publishers with the added complication of diacritics. The author, who has a background in law, is obviously thoroughly familiar with and concerned about the confusion caused by this anarchy.

This reviewer on his part sees a number of conceptual flaws that need to be addressed in order to make a break with the traditional methods viable, provided there is a need for it in the first place.

Nowhere in this publication is the new reality established by information technology acknowledged. The Neue Transkription standard is conceived for users of typewriters and for those who still think of computers as typewriters. Consequently, it is hard to see how the proposed method is not essentially just another *ad-hoc* solution.

Today, transcriptions are inseparable from global computing: internet communication and cross-platform data interchange. There, for better and for worse, everything hinges around the Unicode standard, the tools to use this standard and, last but not least, the fonts to view and print it. Unicode is an industrial protocol with the status of international agreement. It is the logical companion to the Internet Protocol and designed to encode the elements of all known script systems in such a way that they become interchangeable between programs and operating systems. For legible text on screen and paper, Unicode still depends on compatible fonts with the required extra characters, where necessary with additional, dedicated font technology. Practical objections against existing transcriptions need therefore to be formulated within the framework of Unicode and not in terms of *Schreibmaschinen*.

For instance, this publication proposes to use underscored letters *h̄, s̄, t̄, z̄* to replace conventional underdotted *h, s, t, z*. At first glance this is a sensible approach, since text processing software does not provide a simple method to place a diacritic dot under a letter, whereas underlining is readily available. Another example is the proposal to render the Arabic letter *ʿayn* with a small, superscript digit 3: ³*ayn*.

However, for the new generation of computer-savvy users, such solutions are non-starters. Superscript and underline mechanisms are application-specific. Their effects are easily lost between different applications, platforms or locations. For instance, when using email, the plain text format which is mandatory to reduce virus threats, flushes any underline and superscript mark-up. Admittedly, the Unicode standard provides hard encoded *h̄, s̄, t̄, z̄*, but to use them offers no advantage over hard encoded *h, s, t, z*.

Seen in this light, and given the reality of societal lethargy, it is much more efficient to concentrate on creating practical tools to input the correct Unicode characters for the existing transcription methods.

As for governmental use, since the terrible events of September 11, 2001, the driving force behind innovation of Arabic transcription is the American government. After all, a mixed bag of confused non-standards bogs down intelligent action upon developments in the Arabic-scripted world. BGN

(United States Board on Geographic Names), FBIS (Foreign Broadcast Information Service), IC (US Intelligence Community) and SATTS (US Armed Forces Standard Arabic Technical Transliteration System), to mention just a few. None of these systems are mentioned in the reviewed book. Meanwhile, as old dogs can not be taught new tricks, the US innovation effort concentrates on developing computer programs to convert intelligently between these clumsy but widely established *de facto* standards.

To take the critique of *Transkription arabischer Schriften* one step further, let's take a close look at just one word of the proposed transcription taken from the Arabic phrase

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ [bismi l-laahi r-raHmaani r-raHiimi], as it is used in the final example in the reviewed book, presented in contrast to the DMG standard it aspires to replace (this reviewer added the US methods as a bonus):

NT	bi ' smi ' llāhi ' r-raḥmāni ' r-raḥīym
DMG	bismi 'llāhi `r-raḥmāni `r-raḥīm
BGN	Bismullāh Ar Raḥmān Ar Raḥīm
FBIS	Bismallah al-Rahman al-Rahim
IC	Bismallah al-Rahman al-Rahim
SATTS	BSM ALLH ALRHMN ALRHIM

In the word بِسْمِ الرَّحْمَنِ *r-raḥīym* / *`r-raḥīm* DMG and NT both attempt to represent the silenced *`alif*, something that is more in line with *transliteration* than with *transcription* — but then, why do both leave out the *waṣṣā* of the original? As they stand, both examples are hybrids.

NT retains the orthographic *yā`* of بِسْمِ الرَّحْمَنِ — *Umschrift*:
'r-raḥīym

whereas DMG renders the resulting sound — *Lautschrift*:
`r-raḥīm

In both systems the article is assimilated as well as marked with a hyphen as a morphological clue: morphologically enhanced *Lautschrift*.

Seen from the perspective of information technology, that what constitutes the ultimate validation of any transcription should have been the focus, namely, reversibility: what does it take to enter Arabic data in Latin characters in anticipation of output in correct Arabic orthography — or vice versa? For such technologies, it would have sufficed to spell the word under consideration as *r-raHiim*. Innovation in transcription protocols should concentrate on making absolutely minimal improvements required to produce a practical reversible transcription. Rules for a successful conversion into original orthography can be derived from Arabic grammar and phonotactics. A transcription as used for the example

r-raHiim

should be designed to the reality of the ubiquitous ASCII keyboard. It can be left to additional software modules to generate from it, e.g., the typographically more professional DMG version in correct UNICODE:

r-rahīm

Finally, the reviewed essay also dwells briefly on *transliteration*, but it stops short of showing the reader its full implication. In fact, a scholarly and linguistically meaningful

transliteration that takes into account every single grapheme of the original, has not yet been defined for oriental studies. Consequently, a first confrontation with a true *eins-zu-eins* rendering of بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ would, at least momentarily, throw even a seasoned orientalist off the trail:

B-iS0Mi A~LL: !Hi A~LRG0M!N+Ii A~LR:AGiB-2Mi

It is a sobering thought that in this field linguistically consistent transcription and transliteration principles still have to be formulated. The author can be forgiven for not pushing his proposal to the limit.

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GERIES, I.Kh. — A Literary and Gastronomical Conceit. *Mufākharat al-Ruzz wa 'l-Ḥabb Rummān*. The Boasting Debate Between Rice And Pomegranate Seeds. Or al-Maḳāma al-Simā'iyya (The Tablecloth Makāma). (Codices Arabici Antiqui, VII). Verlag Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 2002. (24 cm, 40, 153). ISBN 3-447-04614-7. ISSN 0340-6393. € 48,—.

A Literary and Gastronomical Conceit by Ibrahim Kh. Geriēs is a critical edition of a short, Arabic-language text written in Cairo at the turn of the XV century. The title of the text, included in the long subtitle of the book, reflects the unusual character of the story it contains. *The Boasting Debate between Rice and Pomegranate Seeds*, or *The Tablecloth Maḳāma*, is a “record” of a violent argument which broke out between two personified food items, rice and pomegranate, as soon as they were served, their bowls close to each other, on the table.

The book is bilingual, written in Arabic-English. Somehow atypically, the bilingualism does not refer to the Arabic edition of the text of the story and to its English rendition only. The acknowledgements, preface, description of the manuscripts, as well as the sections discussing the author, the dating of the text and the story itself, are all provided in two languages, too. Such a composition of the book, supposedly a gesture of respect towards those who read only one of the two languages, makes one take it for granted that the contents of the English-language chapters match their Arabic-language equivalents. Oddly enough, this is not always the case. To wit: English chapter IV (“Text-structure: its subject, style and aim”) consists of three sections, while its Arabic-language “counterpart” is composed of six sections. In other words, three sections present in the Arabic version of the chapter are missing from the English-language part of the book (although not completely: in the English version they were summarized and included in the section titled “The Debate”). These are: “Dawr al-Ruzz” (The role of rice), “Dawr Ḥabb al-Rummān” (The role of the pomegranate) and “Dawr baqiyyat al-at'ima” (The role of the remaining food items). Equally surprising is the fact that the linguistic-historical-culinary commentaries to the edited text (“Al-Shurūḥ wa-l-ta'liqāt”) are provided in the Arabic language only. True, no reader would expect the editor/scholar to translate the endnotes, considering, the bilingual form of the book, leaving one chapter untranslated appears to be an inconsistency.

The essence of the book, or the edition of the Arabic text of the *maqama* whose author was convincingly identified by Ibrahim Geris as 'Abd al-Wahhāb son of 'Arabshāh, is based on four manuscripts dating back to the period between 1579 and 1645. The edition is fully vocalised and provided with footnotes which include extensive editorial comments referring to the particular manuscripts and to the differences between them.

The edition of the Arabic text is followed by its English rendering. Translating the short but strange *maqama* must have been a difficult task. Its English version is sometimes difficult to read, which is partly because of the nature of the work's design, but partly also because of the translational lapses. In the sentence on p. 38, for example, an expression is apparently missing: it seems that instead of "You are not touched except by spoons and the source of choking" it should rather read "You are not touched except by spoons and *drinking you is the source of choking*". On the same page, we find a sentence: "Frowning is too far from smiling, and the bottom of the spear is far from the tip!" Judging by the Arabic version of it, the second part of the quotation does not refer to "bottom" but, rather, to *ells* or *elbows* ("ku'ūb") of the cane of which the spears were made. This meaning is, by the way, mentioned by Geris in n. 37 ("Al-Shurūh wa-l-ta'liqāt"). Moreover, further on the same page, the word "sage" in the sentence "If Rice were a man it would be a sage," seems to be a misinterpretation of the word "ḥalīm" which, in this context, should probably be rather understood as "patient man." The correctness of the version: "If Rice were a man he would be a patient man" (and not "a sage") seems to be confirmed not only by ash-Shirbīnī ("rice agrees to all what is done to it"), but also by a certain Ibn Sudūn al-Bashbughāwī (XV century) who, in his *Nuzhat al-nufūs wa-mudḥik al-'abūs* (in: A. Vrolijk, *Bringing a laugh to a scowling face: a study and critical edition of the Nuzhat al-nufūs wa-mudḥik al-'abūs* by 'Alī Ibn Sūdūn al-Baṣbughāwī, Leiden: 1998, p. 72), included an anecdote devoted to explaining the saying under discussion. Furthermore, the sentence "you are overturned on the table..." uttered to Pomegranate by Rice (on p. 38), is difficult to understand, apparently because of the translator's choice of the verb "overthrow" instead of, e.g., "pour out," as the meaning of the Arabic verb "kabba." These and other minor imperfections notwithstanding, the translation is very useful for both those who read Arabic and those who do not.

The Arabic text and its English rendering share the Arabic-language section containing explanations and comments to the text of the *maqama* ("Al-Shurūh wa-l-ta'liqāt"). Made of over eighty exhaustive and sometimes extremely detailed endnotes, the section constitutes the essence of the research part of the book. The bulk of the comments included in it refers to Arabic culinary terms, i.e. to names of dishes or ingredients which, personified, play their role in the story. Since much of the medieval Arabic-Islamic cuisine is extinct today, such commentaries, accompanied by bibliographical references, are particularly valuable and useful (although referring the reader, on a few occasions, e.g. nn. 9, 18, 27, or 61, to sources' indices is somewhat surprising).

Some notes, however, appear to be either supererogatory or overfilled with unnecessary/irrelevant details. This refers, above all, to notions and terms which are part of the general domain of knowledge. Such is the case of, for example, n. 2 in which the notion of "al-aruzz" or "rice" is explained and which includes, apart from linguistic comment referring

to the term, a remark that rice plays an important role in one of the *Arabian Nights*' stories. The same refers to n. 3 in which "pomegranate" is exhaustively commented upon. The note consists mainly of numerous bibliographical references which refer the reader to medieval Arab cookery books, dictionaries, or to literary fiction. Then a whole paragraph is devoted to stressing the part that pomegranate plays in the *Nights*' "Story of Wazīr Nūr al-Dīn and His Brother Shams al-Dīn." Since in neither case the relevance of the *Arabian Nights*' stories to the discussed *maqama* is elucidated, the motivation behind inserting this kind of information is difficult to follow. Similarly, it is difficult to understand the need to explain terms such as "fat" ("duhn," n. 5), "gourd" ("al-qar'," n. 12), "fat geese" ("al-iwazz al-musamman," n. 19), "sprayed/sprinkled" ("marshūsh," n. 31), "musk" ("misk," n. 44), "black raisins" ("al-zabīb al-'antārī," n. 58), or "peas" ("basilla," n. 76). The fact that these terms are commented on in the appropriate notes does not make us understand their meaning in the context of the *maqama* in question.

One may also take issue with some of the comments and interpretations. This is the case, for example, of n. 6 in which Geris maintains that the term "mā'i'", meaning "liquid, liquescent," was used in the text of the *maqama* to designate the opposition to "yābis," or "dry." This conclusion was apparently based on a fragment from Avicenna who had indeed defined rice as "hot and dry." In fact, this way of defining food items was an element of the Galenic system of humoral pathology which dominated Islamic medicine of the Middle Ages. Therefore, while using this definition as quoted by Avicenna, Geris referred, consciously or not, to the Galenic doctrine. According to this doctrine, the therapy and therapeutics were based on the principle of allopathic "contraries," which means, e.g., that "hot" diseases were to be cured by "cold" remedies. In this doctrine, however, the opposition to the "dry" ("yābis") quality was not something "liquid" ("mā'i'") as posited by Geris, but a quality which was categorized as "moist" ("rātib"). The Galenic theory, as represented in this case by Avicenna, seems to have been inadequately applied in this context.

Another point in question is related to n. 38. The exhaustive commentary it includes was apparently meant to provide an elucidation of an old Arab saying which Geris translated as "If Rice were a man it would be a sage!" (p. 38 of "English translation"). Geris' way of reasoning is, however, not quite clear here. He first argues that the authorship of the saying might be attributed to the prophet Muḥammad, than that it may have had something to do with 'Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib. Then he refers to two similar sayings attributed to still other persons. Interestingly, all the sayings which Geris quotes resemble the discussed saying only as far as the style is concerned; none of them has anything to do with rice.

Having discussed these somewhat irrelevant formulations and their possible authors, Geris tries to get closer to the point. In fact, he did find a perfect fragment to explain the meaning of the saying in question. The fragment is quoted from al-Shirbīnī's *Hazz al-Quhūf* and reads: "And some people say: 'If rice were a man he would be a patient man,' which is because rice agrees to all what is done to it." (transl. P.L.). The way Geris uses the quotation, however, blurs the clarity of the explanation, if only because it is intermingled with al-Shirbīnī's references to Galenic medical theory. In fact, Geris' final interpretation of the saying ("rice

fits every food and occasion”) is not wrong. Judging by the way he translated it into English, however, it is not altogether obvious whether he indeed correctly understood the saying itself.

There are also notes, however, whose value must be appreciated. Such is the case with n. 11, where a rare dish called “danārishta” is exhaustively examined; n. 13 in which Geries explains the term “miqta”, or “garden”; n. 22 which includes a comprehensive commentary to the term “mushawwar”; n. 24 in which possible interpretations of the verb “ihtawasha” are discussed; n. 40 in which the question of whitening the rice grains with salt is studied; n. 68 in which Geries thoroughly explains the possible nature of a rare preparation called “al-jaghal maghal”; n. 74, in which the operation of “takhliq,” or anointment with saffron, is comprehensively discussed; and an extremely interesting n. 78 where “bunduq” and “khurduq,” or “bullets” and “small shots,” are studied in the historical context.

The text of the maqama is analyzed in the chapter titled “The aim of the text” (“Maghzā al-naṣṣ” in the Arab-language version). In an attempt to find a meaning behind the strange story in which personalized food items are involved in an argument, Geries dismisses the possibility that the maqama could merely be a result of its author’s need to use and show his “linguistic, rhetorical, etc. abilities.” Geries clearly prefers to accept the thesis that the maqama was written as an allegory of the political situation of Mamluk Egypt in late XV and early XVI centuries. To substantiate his point, Geries first mentions four internal conflicts which corroded the Mamluk society of that time. Then he points to the three “striking common similarities” which he noticed between the historical records referring to these conflicts and the text of the maqama. In short, these similarities amount to the fact that the expression “khallaqa bi-l-za‘farān” (“to anoint with saffron”) and the terms “bunduq” and “khurduq” (“bullets” and “small shots”) were used both in the text of the discussed maqama and in some XV/XVI century chronicles. Another similarity is “the attempt to make peace between the rivals” which Geries noticed both in the historical records depicting the inter-Mamluk strife and in the text of the maqama where a group of dishes participating in the debate tries to convince the Rice and Pomegranate to reach a compromise.

True, these “common elements,” few as they are and not too “striking,” may point to the fact that the discussed maqama is an allusive depiction of the contemporaneous Cairene political scene. However, Geries did not examine other options. It is also very much possible that the above-mentioned “elements” were simply a natural part of the local culture and thus of the everyday vocabulary. And that, when used in the work of fiction, they were not meant to convey any allegorical meaning at all. A third option is also likely. The *Debate between Rice and Pomegranate* bears a striking similarity to *The Delectable War between Mutton and the Refreshments of the Market-Place* (*Al-Ḥarb al-ma‘shūq bayna Lahm al-Ḍa‘n wa-Hawāḍir al-Sūq*), a much longer and much more sophisticated story written in Cairo of the Middle Ages. Geries mentioned it as a reference, but he failed to discuss it in the comparative context. Such a comparison could make one conclude that the “Rice and Pomegranate” maqama, apart from all its possible messages, may be just an awkward imitation of *The Delectable War*.