

## Introduction

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**O**n November 10, 1753, the members of the *Königliche Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften* (The Royal Society, later Academy, of Sciences) in Göttingen, gathered, as they did each year at this time, to celebrate the endowment of the Society by the Elector of Hanover. A thirty-six year old professor of philosophy, Johann David Michaelis, gave the main address. His talk focused on the need to send a scholar, fully conversant in Arabic, to Palestine and Arabia to investigate the geography, natural history and language of the region in order to better understand the Bible as a cultural document of the ancient Israelite civilization. His attention was drawn especially to Arabia, which he judged had been little affected through the centuries by foreign conquest or foreign trade. There he believed “the old customs of the House of Abraham” would be still discernible.<sup>1</sup> Around the same time, under less exalted circumstances, a young man of rural background was working on his relatives’ farm located on the North Sea coast, near the mouth of the Elbe River. His education at the school in the local town had been interrupted by the early death of his father (his mother had already died when he was six weeks old). His name was Carsten Niebuhr.<sup>2</sup> He was an unlikely candidate to carry out Michaelis’ call for new scholarship on the Hebrew Bible in the Middle East.

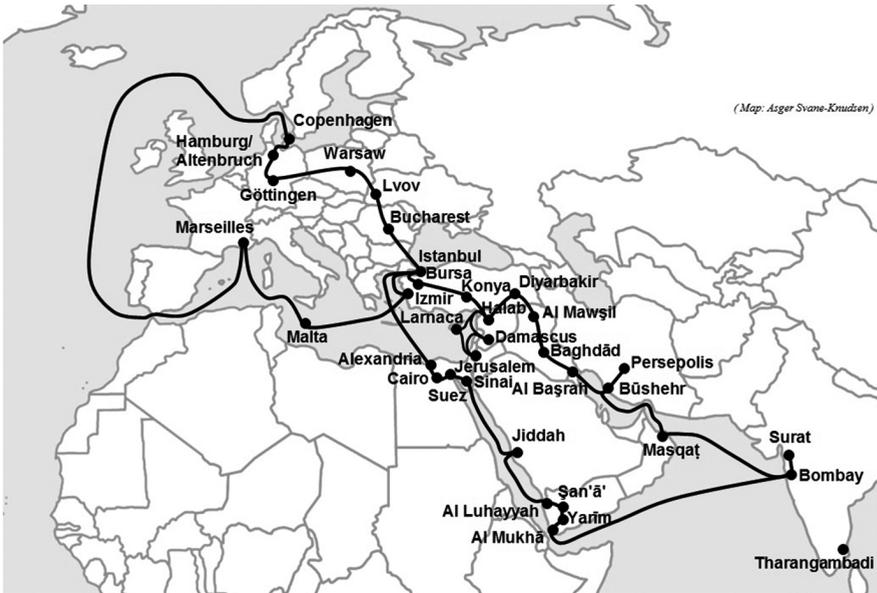
<sup>1</sup> *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen*, 139 (17 November 1753): 1241–1244.

<sup>2</sup> Dieter Lohmeier, “Heinrich Wilhelm Schmeelkes Biographie seines Onkels Carsten Niebuhr,”

How the professor of philosophy and the farm boy came together with the help of the King of Denmark-Norway to produce one of the great journeys of exploration and investigation in the Eighteenth Century is the subject of this study. The study has two themes. One is the idea of an expedition; not only what the idea represented, but also how it evolved and was transformed by the influences of others and by the difficult realities of an expedition. The other is the life story of the young man and the expedition – an account of exploration, adventure, tragedy, courage and, above all else, curiosity. Both played out in the changing environment of the Northern European Enlightenment and the stimulating setting of the Middle East. The journey that resulted from the intertwining of these two themes within the milieu of 18<sup>th</sup> Century Europe and the lands of the Arab world was the Royal Danish Expedition to Arabia, or in Denmark usually, *Den Arabiske Rejse*, The Arabian Journey.

Funded by the King of Denmark-Norway, Frederik V (1723–1766), the expedition brought together a team of six men – a philologist, a botanist/zoologist, a cartographer/astronomer, a physician, a professional illustrator and an orderly. It was a truly Northern European group – two Danes, two Germans and two Swedes. The party left Copenhagen in January 1761, and in that year traveled by ship to Istanbul and Alexandria. They then visited Cairo and the Sinai Peninsula before traversing the Red Sea via Jiddah to Yemen, which was the group's main destination. After investigating Yemen the journey took the expedition across the Arabian Sea to Bombay before entering the Persian Gulf and visiting Shīrāz, Persepolis, al Baṣrah (Basra), Baghdād, al Mawṣil (Mosul), Halab (Aleppo), Damascus, Jerusalem and Cyprus. Thus, the expedition circumnavigated the Arabian Peninsula, and touched upon a number of neighboring territories, and India, along the way. The return trip overland crossed Anatolia to Istanbul, and then home by way of Bucharest and Warsaw to Copenhagen, returning in November of 1767. The expedition lasted almost seven years, and of the original six participants, only one, Carsten Niebuhr, survived through the fourth year. For the remaining years he continued the work of the expedition as a solitary explorer.

As an historical event, the expedition stands out for a number of reasons. At the human level it is simply an incredible tale of personal courage and unrelenting intellectual curiosity. As an endeavor in exploration, it was the only major scientific expedition to emanate from Scandinavia and Germany in the entire 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and it was primarily land-based, less common in an era noted for seaborne exploration, principally in the Pacific. Institutionally it was unique because its purpose, methodologies and organization were shaped by the universities of Northern Europe, namely Göttingen, Copenhagen and Uppsala. It operated solely as a scholarly endeavor. It was always called “*die gelehrte Gesellschaft*,” “the scholarly party or association”. It was not part of a military unit or some other government agency; and



The Route of the Royal Danish Expedition to Arabia 1761–1767\*

despite many difficulties, the expedition produced an abundance of valuable scientific results that were applauded in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and are still impressive today. Its cultural and geographic descriptions of Arabia and parts of the Ottoman Empire with their emphasis on people and religions, were the most comprehensive, accurate and unbiased available in that era. Its maps constituted the most important contribution to the cartography of the region produced in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. It greatly advanced the science of navigational astronomy, particularly its use in hydrography and cartography, and the determination of longitude. Its work in the natural sciences – botany and zoology (especially marine biology) – led to important scientific discoveries pioneering for the times, that are still valued today in those fields. Finally, its meticulous examination of various antiquities introduced new scholarly standards to that kind of work and contributed to the understanding of several ancient languages.<sup>3</sup>

\* From, with permission, Asger Svane-Knudsen, “Den Arabiske Rejse og Asiatiske Kompagni 1763–1766. Fire breve og den veksel fra Carsten Niebuhr i Bombay til guvernør Abbestée i Trankebar.” *Danske Magazin* 51/2 (2012): 483–513.

<sup>3</sup> Its significance is summarized in Stig T. Rasmussen, “Niebuhriana’ in Kopenhagen,” in *Carsten Niebuhr (1733–1815) und seine Zeit*, ed. Josef Wiesehöfer and Stephan Conermann (Stuttgart, 2002); Dietmar Henze, “Carsten Niebuhr und sein Beitrag zur Erforschung des Orients,” the Foreword to the reprint of Carsten Niebuhr, *Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien und den umliegenden Ländern*, 3 vols. (Copenhagen/Hamburg, 1774–1837), reprint ed. (Graz, 1968), I, pp. III–XXII; the same author’s “Carsten Niebuhrs Bedeutung für die Erdkunde von Arabien,” Foreword to the reprint of Carsten Niebuhr, *Beschreibung von Arabien* (Copenhagen, 1772), reprint ed. (Graz,

Modern popular interest in the expedition was awakened first by the entertaining historical novel, *Det Lykkelige Arabien*, by Thorkild Hansen, published in Denmark in 1962.<sup>4</sup> In more recent years there also has been renewed scholarly interest in the expedition in Denmark and Germany. This was first stimulated by an exhibition in Riyadh organized by the *Kongelige Bibliotek* (Royal Library) in Copenhagen and the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs upon the occasion of the visit of Queen Margrethe II to Saudi Arabia in 1984. The exhibit subsequently was expanded and then shown at the *Kongelige Bibliotek* in Copenhagen, the *Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesbibliothek* in Kiel and the *Dithmarscher Landesmuseum* in Meldorf in 1986 and 1987. The exhibition included a substantial scholarly catalog.<sup>5</sup> In 1990, Stig Rasmussen, the author of the exhibition catalog, produced a handsome volume on the expedition concentrating especially on a fuller discussion of its results and significance. It included chapters by specialists in a variety of fields and was published in cooperation with the *Kongelige Bibliotek* with support from the crown.<sup>6</sup> This scholarly activity in Denmark has been complemented by work in Germany. The Center for Asiatic and African Studies at the Christian-Albrechts University in Kiel convened in Eutin a symposium entitled “*Carsten Niebuhr und seine Zeit*.” It brought together scholars on the Middle East, geographers, natural scientists, philologists, theologians and historians. The proceedings of the symposium, edited by Josef Wiesehöfer and Stephan Conermann and published in 2002, included an outstanding group of specialized papers on the expedition and its meaning.<sup>7</sup> Individual scholars in Germany have also produced a number of very valuable works. These have included especially Dieter Lohmeier, who has published a series of important essays and collections of letters on Niebuhr and the expedition, based on extensive work in the archives.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the fine book publisher, Forlaget Vandkunsten,

1969), pp. III–XIII; and Stephan Conermann, “Carsten Niebuhr und das *orientalistische Potential* des Aufklärungsdiskurses – oder: Ist das Sammeln von Daten unverdächtig?” in *Carsten Niebuhr*, ed. Wiesehöfer and Conermann, pp. 404–405.

<sup>4</sup> Thorkild Hansen, *Det Lykkelige Arabien* (Copenhagen, 1962). It was translated into English in 1964 by James and Kathleen McFarlane, and published as *Arabia Felix. The Danish Expedition of 1761–1767* (New York, 1964). It is the only extensive account of the expedition in English. While lively and interesting as a novel, Hansen’s work is not reliable as a historical study.

<sup>5</sup> Stig T. Rasmussen, *Carsten Niebuhr und die Arabische Reise 1761–1767. Ausstellung der Königlichen Bibliothek Kopenhagen in Zusammenhang mit dem Kultusministerium des Landes Schleswig-Holstein* (Heide, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Stig T. Rasmussen, ed., *Den Arabiske Rejse 1761–1767. En dansk ekspedition set i vedenskabshistorisk perspektiv* (Copenhagen, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Wiesehöfer and Conermann, eds., *Carsten Niebuhr*.

<sup>8</sup> Dieter Lohmeier, “Ein Leben im Zeichen der Arabischen Reise: Carsten Niebuhr,” in his collection of essays entitled, *Die weltliterarische Provinz. Studien zur Kultur- und Literaturgeschichte Schleswig-Holsteins um 1800* (Heide, 2005), 187–244; the same author’s “Gregorius Wiedemann (1735–1762). Ein unbekannter Schüler Carl von Linnés und Freund Carsten Niebuhrs aus Kopenhagen,” *Fund og Forskning* 41 (2007): 57–87; “Carsten Niebuhr, Tobias Mayer und die Längengrade,” *Fund og Forskning*, 42 (2008): 73–114; “Mondsdistanzen und Längengrade.

in cooperation with the University of Copenhagen and the C.L. Davids Foundation, has published new Danish translations of Niebuhr's main works and an excellent critical edition of the diary of one of the other participants.<sup>9</sup> That same publisher will also be issuing a new, scholarly, English translation of Niebuhr's major work, which is badly needed. Finally, there has been continuing interest in the natural history results of the expedition. In 1994, The Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew, and the Botanical Museum, Copenhagen, published a detailed update of the pioneering botanical studies completed by the expedition's Swedish naturalist, Peter Forsskål, entitled *The Plants of Pehr Forsskål's 'Flora Aegyptiaco-Arabica'*, by F. Nigel Hepper and Ib Friis. Most recently, the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters has issued an analysis of the very valuable use of Arabic in Forsskål's description of Middle Eastern flora, entitled *The Arabic Plant Names of Peter Forsskål's flora Aegyptiaco-Arabica*, by Philippe Provençal.<sup>10</sup>

The history of the expedition is noteworthy because it provides so many opportunities for useful analysis of the period. For example, the Danish project took place at a time in Europe that saw the integration on a new scale of exploration and the sciences. By the 18<sup>th</sup> Century much of the world had been explored by Europeans in the most basic sense. With the notable exception of the far reaches of the Pacific and Antarctica, and isolated regions such as Siberia and Arabia, the configuration of the world's land masses at their peripheries in the most general sense was known. What the 18<sup>th</sup> Century experienced was the deployment of a range of scientific disciplines in support of more detailed exploration of areas already known in only a superficial way by Europeans. The three voyages of James Cook to the Pacific, the imperial Russian expeditions to Siberia, Kamchatka and the Caucasus, the Spanish royal scientific expeditions to South America, and indeed, the Lewis and Clark expedition to the American West at the end of our period, all had a strong, but certainly not exclusive, scientific focus and usually were staffed with men professionally trained in the natural sciences and other disciplines. In another arena, some

Der Briefwechsel zwischen Carsten Niebuhr und Tobias Mayer 1761," *Fund og Forskning* 49 (2010): 135–165; and his "Carsten Niebuhr: Briefe von der Arabischen Reise," *Dithmarschen*, 13 installments, 2004–2009, whose accompanying commentaries provide a great deal of detailed information about the expedition. This last work has been expanded and elaborated in a book-length study entitled *Mit Carsten Niebuhr im Orient. Zwanzig Briefe von der Arabischen Reise 1760–1767* (Heide, 2011), and is an essential work on the expedition. Finally see his article, co-authored with Stig Rasmussen, "Carsten Niebuhrs Stambog," *Fund og Forskning* 49 (2010):103–133.

<sup>9</sup> See Carsten Niebuhr, *Rejsebeskrivelse fra Arabien og andre omkringliggende lande*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen, 2003), which includes an informative Introduction by Michael Harbsmeier, and *Beskrivelse af Arabien ud fra egne iagttagelser og i landet selv samlede efterretninger* (Copenhagen, 2009); also Anne Haslund Hansen and Stig T. Rasmussen, eds., *Min Sundheds Forliis. Frederik Christian von Havens Rejsejournal fra Den Arabiske Rejse 1760–1763* (Copenhagen, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> F. Nigel Hepper and Ib Friis, *The Plants of Pehr Forsskål's 'Flora Aegyptiaco-Arabica'. Collected on the Royal Danish Expedition to Egypt and Yemen 1761–63* (Kew, 1994); and Philippe Provençal, *The Arabic Plant Names of Peter Forsskål's flora Aegyptiaco-Arabica* (Copenhagen, 2010).

nineteen students of the great Swedish botanist, Carl Linnaeus, sometimes attached individually as a kind of one-person scientific team to various exploratory and commercial ventures that touched many parts of the globe, were experimenting with a new kind of scientific travel.<sup>11</sup> Peter Forsskål, the naturalist for the Danish expedition, was one of Linnaeus' most capable students. In this setting of scientific exploration and travel the Danish expedition provides opportunities for comparative analysis with other expeditions of this era and particularly distinguishes itself. It assembled a multi-disciplinary team of scholars who prepared specifically for the trip, and the role of the university as an institution in the expedition is particularly noteworthy and precedent setting. It was not predominantly ship-based, nor in the field part of a European military presence or other manifestation of European power. Its findings were unusually broad and scientifically rigorous. Indeed because there is no evidence that territorial, military, commercial or proselytizing objectives were behind its sponsorship, it has been called by some the first modern, purely scientific or scholarly expedition in history.<sup>12</sup>

It is precisely its essentially scientific or scholarly character that has led some scholars to see the Danish expedition as a prime example of what Mary Louise Pratt has articulated as the Enlightenment's "anti-conquest conquest" of non-European lands through the phenomenon of European scientific travel. Exploring the relationship between scientific research and European imperialism, she argues that what is notable about such travel is that "within its innocence the naturalist's quest does embody ... an image of conquest and possession."<sup>13</sup> Then utilizing Pratt's analysis the expedition has been described by other scholars as "an ideological exercise in domination."<sup>14</sup> Our examination of the Danish Arabian journey as a case study of 18<sup>th</sup> Century exploration concludes that this is an incorrect characterization of the expedition. It simply does not present most of the essential elements of Pratt's thesis. As the obliteration of local language and culture is a central consequence of scientific travel according to Pratt, the expedition by way of contrast, in its method-

<sup>11</sup> For the students of Linnaeus see the important multi-volume project, *The Linnaeus Apostles. Global Science and Adventure*, edited by Lars Hansen, 8 vols. in 11 (London, 2009–2012), which has published in English translation the scientific foreign travel journals of the students of Linnaeus.

<sup>12</sup> See Wiesehöfer and Conermann, Preface, and Lohmeier, "Carsten Niebuhr. Ein Leben im Zeichen der Arabischen Reise," both *Carsten Niebuhr*, ed. Wiesehöfer and Conermann, 11 and 17 respectively. Also see Hanno Beck, *Alexander von Humboldt*, 2 vols. (Wiesbaden, 1959–1961), I: 3 and 85.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London, 2008), 55, and see especially Chapters 3 and 4. She does not specifically reference the Danish Expedition, but is especially interested in the scientific travel inspired by Linnaeus.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible. Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, 2005), 197; and Jonathan M. Hess, "Johann David Michaelis and the Colonial Imaginary: Orientalism and the Emergence of Racial Antisemitism in Eighteenth-Century Germany," *Jewish Social Studies* 6 (2000): 80. This article also comprises Chapter Two in his *Germans, Jews and the Claims of Modernity* (New Haven, 2002), and see specifically 78.