

## A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE

Born on 6th November 1941 in Budapest, Alexander Fodor commenced his studies at the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest (majoring in Arabic and studying History as his second subject) in September 1960. Since his graduation in June 1965, he has been working at the Department of Semitic Philology and Arabic Studies of the University. Having been advanced to the position of Reader in 1981, he was subsequently, during the course of the year 1984, appointed Head of the Department of Arabic, which position he has held ever since. He acquired a full professorship in 1996, and has held the post of Director of the Oriental Institute at the University since 1999. Having already served the Faculty of Arts thrice as Vice-Dean in charge of the international relations (between 1990 and 2000), then in 2000 the Faculty of Arts of the University proceeded to elect him to the post of Dean. He was vice-president of the Hungarian Society of Orientalists from 1988 to 1994, in addition to having been, since 1984, head of the Islamic Studies Section thereof. He is involved in popularizing scholarly achievements on Islam through the written and broadcast media on a regular basis.

After having spent a whole year in Egypt on a scholarship grant in 1966, he has repeatedly visited that country, where he was elected member of the *Mağma' al-Luġa al-ʿArabiyya*. During the 1970's, he participated in two grand canoeing expeditions that took him along the Nile and the Tigris respectively, journeys during which he could gather a remarkable amount of useful scholarly observations on local folklore. Other Arabic countries in which he frequently conducted scholarly research include Morocco, Iraq, Syria and Tunisia. For several years he has been returning to Kuwait every autumn to lecture there and do a thorough investigation of the amulet collection of the Tareq Rajab Museum. He spent a lengthy period of research in 1994 at the London based Warburg Institute.

A regular participant of international conferences with his presentations, he has contributed since 1974 to almost all the congresses of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants, in the committee of which he became a member in 1986. The first conference that he took part in organizing was the 14th Congress of the UEAI, held in Budapest in 1988 under his chairmanship. On this occasion he founded *The Arabist (Budapest Studies in Arabic)*, of which he is the series editor ever since. In 1993 and 1995, he organized conferences on popular beliefs in the religions of the Middle East and North Africa. He was vice-chairman of the 35th ICANAS and chairman of the Arabic Studies Section thereof in 1997, then chief organizer and

chairman of the 20th Congress of the UEAI in 2000, both of which took place in Budapest.

In the centre of his scholarly work lies the study of popular Islam, and, generally, popular religion in the Middle East, a focus of which he has analysed, in his numerous publications, various facets of a religio-historical, ethnological, linguistic, literary or historical relevance, with a special emphasis on Egypt and Mesopotamia. The subject of his dissertation, titled *Arabic Legends on the Pyramids* (in Hungarian), was, as the title shows, mediaeval Arabic accounts on the Pyramids, which earned him the degree of Candidate (PhD) at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1980. It is an uncommonly complex historical study of religion and culture, the gist of which is probably best summarized by its subtitle, "Syncretism in Islam". As the study demonstrates, syncretism as a religious phenomenon never ceased, even after the disappearance of pagan cults, to be an important element in the Middle Eastern cultural scene, receiving as it did its inspirations both from the civilizations of Antiquity and the new world-power that Islam came to be. A pivotal point in the dissertation is the impact upon Muslim thought of Hermetism.

His main scholarly endeavour in the field of studying popular religion has always been to demonstrate the identical features of Muslim, Christian and Jewish popular religions in the Middle East; to show the survival and continuity of ancient ideas and practices in the Islamic world; and to give an idea about the birth, growth and degeneration of amulets as far as the material, the craftsmanship and the complexity of the contents are concerned.

Alexander Fodor has not only come to be an expert of international reputation on Islamic talismans and amulets, and especially talismanic charts and amulet scrolls, but also the owner of one of the bulkiest collections of such material. When the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants held its 14th Congress in Budapest in 1988 on the central theme "Popular Culture in Islam", this occasion gave him the opportunity to organize an exhibition of a collection of amulets, magical books and manuscripts, fear cups, censers and rosaries which he had collected in the Middle East and North Africa during the previous two decades. Part of the material had already been exhibited in Milan in 1985 on the occasion of an international congress about the subject of "La Magia in Egitto ai Tempi dei Faraoni". His book under the title *Amulets from the Islamic World* presents best the collection.

*Tamás Iványi*