

ON IGNAZ GOLDZIHHER'S ELECTION TO THE ARAB ACADEMY OF DAMASCUS

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1 Damascus, a memorable stop during Goldziher's eastern study tour

The young Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921), barely finishing his studies at the Universities of Berlin and Leipzig, began his Eastern study tour on the 15th of September 1873 with a scholarship from the Hungarian Ministry of Education. His first longer stop was – as he described in his diary that he kept during those months – the “glorious, luminous Damascus, ... one of the four paradises on earth”, where he arrived on the evening of the 14th of October (Goldziher 1987:112). Goldziher thoroughly enjoyed his six-week stay in this earthly paradise, where he forged several lasting friendships.

2 Lifelong friendships

Goldziher's acquaintances came from all walks of life.¹ An intimate friend of his was Ṭāhir al-Ġazā'irī (1852–1920), who became one of the great scholars of his time.² Among Goldziher's friends in Damascus, mention should be made of a merchant in the so-called Byzantine Market (Sūqa al-Arwām), called Šālīḥ Šahbandar (d. 1885)³, who was the father of 'Abd ar-Rahmān Šahbandar (1879–1940), the prominent Syrian intellectual, physician, and politician.⁴ Goldziher, as appears from his Oriental diary, was kept in high esteem by the various layers of the Damascene population for his outstanding mastery of Classical Arabic and for his remarkable erudition in Arabic literature in its broadest sense, together with a

¹ On the intellectual milieu of Goldziher in Damascus and his Eastern study trip in general, see Van Ess 2000, esp. 45–47.

² On his life and influence, see Kurd 'Alī 1950: 5-46 and Escovitz 1986. His friendship to Goldziher was also mentioned by Kurd 'Alī 1950:15. See also Kurd 'Alī 1921. On the correspondence of this scholar with Goldziher, see Bourouba n.d.

³ See Šahbandar 1914.

⁴ See Rafeq 2009.

familiarity with Arabic manuscripts and early prints. As a ‘celebrity’, he was invited to modest homes and sanctuaries of learning alike.

Having arrived in Damascus, Goldziher made one of his most memorable acquaintances already during the first days of his visit (Goldziher 1987:114). The person to whom he was introduced was a certain Muṣṭafā as-Sibā’ī⁵, an affluent member of the society and a disciple of the outstanding scholar, ‘Abd al-Ġanī al-Ġunaymī al-Maydānī (1807–1881),⁶ who after his traditional education spent several years as a *murīd* of the shaykh and founder of the local branch of the Šāḡilī Sūfī order, ‘Alī Nūr ad-Dīn al-Yašruṭī (1794–1891),⁷ in his *zāwiya* in Acre.

Goldziher recollects in his *Tagebuch* that he started his excursions in the morning with a visit to this Muṣṭafā Beg as-Sibā’ī, a learned freethinker, and director of the religious foundations in Syria for the benefit of Mecca and Medina, who enjoyed great respect among the Damascene intelligentsia (Goldziher 1977:58). as-Sibā’ī put his rich library at the disposal of the young Hungarian scholar. In his *Oriental Diary* (Goldziher 1987:114 ff.), he gives a detailed account of his visits to as-Sibā’ī’s house, the people he met there, and the nature of their conversation. In another, yet unpublished Hungarian article on freethinking in Islam, Goldziher warmly recalls his daily talks with as-Sibā’ī, their discussions revolving mainly around Sūfism (Goldziher 1874a: f. 7v). He also mentions that he was given access to rare manuscripts from his private collection to be used in his studies, and that he even lent him – among others – a manuscript that formed the basis of his study entitled *Beiträge zur Literaturgeschichte der Šī‘a und der sunnitischen Polemik* (Goldziher 1874b), in which Goldziher gratefully acknowledges as-Sibā’ī’s invaluable help in providing access to his manuscripts (*Ibid.* 442).⁸ He also recollects that on the occasion of his returning this particular book, a less liberal-minded Turkish friend of as-Sibā’ī who witnessed this act had a heated argument with their host because of the contents of the book, which, according to him, should not have fallen into the hands of a nonbeliever, where they can serve as weapons against the tenets of Sunnī Islam (Goldziher 1874a: f. 8v).

⁵ Not to be confused with his 20th-century namesake, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. Our as-Sibā’ī – according to an entry in Goldziher’s *Tagebuch* – was still living at the age of 100 in 1914 (Goldziher 1977:282).

⁶ See Kaḥḥāla 1993: II, 179, No. 7451.

⁷ This branch became called aṭ-Ṭarīqa al-Yašruṭiyya after the name of its founder. On the order, see Trimmingham 1971:113, 126, 279. On the life of ‘Alī Nūr ad-Dīn al-Yašruṭī and the principles of the order, see as-Sawāfiṭa 2008.

⁸ Although Goldziher’s views on the development of Šī‘ī tenets may seem outdated, he was – without doubt – one of the forerunners of Šī‘ī studies in Europe where access to relevant sources in the second half of the 19th century was very limited. For the formation of his views and a scholarly correspondence on Šī‘ī thought by Goldziher and his peers, see Schmidtke 2023.

It was also in Damascus that he first met Carlo Landberg (1848–1924) whom he then eyed with some suspicion (Goldziher 1987:127), but with whom – despite all their differences – he later became on excellent terms.⁹

3 Muḥammad Kurd 'Alī and the Arab Academy of Damascus

In later years, Muḥammad Kurd 'Alī (1876–1953),¹⁰ a disciple of Goldziher's Damascene friend, Ṭāhir al-Ġazā'irī, who became a leading Syrian intellectual, in his capacity as the owner and editor of *al-Muqtabas*,¹¹ not only kept a lively correspondence with Goldziher between 1907¹² and 1914¹³ but also stopped in Budapest in February 1914 to meet the “shaykh of *milal wa-niḥal*” in person (Goldziher 1977:282).¹⁴ After the end of World War I, he hastened to renew his ties with Goldziher, sending him a long letter in which he also remembered fondly his previous visit (Kurd 'Alī 1920a.).

In 1919, he was elected the first president of the Arab Academy of Damascus, a position he held until his death.¹⁵ Thanks to him, altogether three Hungarian scholars became corresponding members of this Academy: Ignaz Goldziher, the polyhistor – astronomer, natural scientist and Egyptologist – Ede Mahler (1857–1945)¹⁶ and Julius (Gyula) Abdul-Karim ['Abd al-Karīm] Germanus (1884–1979), a professor of Arabic literature in Budapest and a close friend of contemporary Arab authors.¹⁷

⁹ On Landberg's career in the field of Arabic studies, see Zetterstéen 1942. Landberg became one of the most frequent correspondents of Goldziher sending him altogether 180 letters from the 1880s.

¹⁰ On his life and for an excellent analysis of his views, see Kearney 2022.

¹¹ On Muḥammad Kurd 'Alī and his influential daily paper, which he founded at the end of 1908 and published until 1918, see Ezzerelli 2018.

¹² Kurd 'Alī 1907. This first letter was written as an appendix to his master's letter to Goldziher.

¹³ In addition to his first and last letter, he sent seven letters to Goldziher in the years 1911 and 1914.

¹⁴ See also Kurd 'Alī's visiting card in the Goldziher correspondence with the date of the visit, 9 February 1914 written in pencil.

¹⁵ A second visiting card preserved in the Goldziher correspondence, which might have accompanied his letter written in 1920 already mentions him in this position in addition to being the owner and editor-in-chief of *al-Muqtabas* (Kurd 'Alī 1920b).

¹⁶ On his life and the history of Egyptology in Hungary, see Horváth 1985.

¹⁷ See their names among the deceased foreign corresponding members (*al-a'dā' al-murāsīlūn ar-rāḥilūn*) on the Academy's website <http://www.arabacademy.gov.sy/> [last accessed 18 February 2023]. On the life and career of Germanus, see Mestyan 2014. and Lendvai Timár 2009.

4 Goldziher and The Arab Academy of Damascus

The letter Goldziher received from the Arab Academy of Damascus announcing his election does not appear to have been preserved in his correspondence. It seems plausible that it accompanied a copy of the journal sent to Goldziher. This seems to be corroborated by the introduction of his letter in which he expressed his thanks to the Academy and which also refers to the official journal of the Academy. Similarly, the draft of his letter thanking the Academy for having conferred on him this honour was not preserved in his correspondence but in his archive (Fig. 1).¹⁸

It is to be noted that Goldziher was very parsimonious, and it was a general custom of his to reutilise paper. This is the case of the present letter as well, which he drafted on the back of a letter dated 4 June 1920 by Dr Ottó Légrády (1878–1948), the editor-in-chief of the Hungarian daily *Pesti Hírlap*, which accompanied the collection of revisionist maps published by the paper and sent to Goldziher together with other prominent members of the Hungarian intelligentsia on the occasion of the signature of the Treaty of Trianon. This date serves as a *terminus post quem* for dating the undated draft. The letter, however, was written at a much later date, on the 15th of October 1921, less than a month before Goldziher's death. This date is known from the published version of the letter, which was printed in its entirety in the December 1921 issue of the official journal of the Arab Academy of Damascus (Goldziher 1921b), immediately followed by an obituary written by a member of the Arab Academy of Damascus, the historian 'Īsā Iskandar al-Ma'lūf (1869–1956) (al-Ma'lūf 1921).

The text of Goldziher's letter is reproduced here based on his autograph draft.¹⁹ Differences in the printed version appear in the footnotes. Generally, there is no way to tell whether these small changes reflect Goldziher's last minute corrections or can be attributed to the journal editors. However, one change seems to indicate that we have to deal with Goldziher's corrections. This is where instead of the text of the draft *suḥbat 'allāmat baladikum* (the company of the scholar of your country), the printed version runs as *suḥbat ḥabībī 'allāmat baladikum* (the company of my dear friend, the scholar of your country).

¹⁸ Goldziher 1921a. Image by courtesy of the Oriental Collection, Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

¹⁹ The original layout of the draft and Goldziher's orthography were not kept. Concerning the latter, a few general remarks can be made: In his Arabic handwriting, Goldziher – as can be seen in Fig. 1 – never put *hamzas* on the *alifs*, nor did he used dots under a final *yā'*.

The strikethroughs follow Goldziher's draft. Later additions that Goldziher wrote either between the lines, in the margin or on the other half of the paper were put between slashes. Goldziher chose his words very carefully as can be seen by the modifications he introduced into the text.

التحية والتسليم لحضرات رؤساء المجمع العلمي العربي في دمشق
حرسها الله تعالى

أما بعد بثّ جزيل السلام وأداء واجب الاحترام فقد بلغتني مجلتكم
الغراء بالإخبار عما شرفتم أكرمتهم الفقير باجتهائه عضواً ٢١ ملقباً بالشرف
من أعضاء مجمعكم المحترم مع هزيل قلّة بضاعتي المزجاة ٢٢ وعدم وقلة
استحقاقي ذلك التشريف غير بيد أني منذ عنفوان شبابي لا ٢٣ أبرح محباً
للعلوم المشتملة عليها ندوتكم معتوفاً مشتاقاً لتحصيل ٢٤ فوائدها حسب
طاقتي الضعيفة فما وإنما فقصدى مقصودي بكتابي هذا أن اعرض / أقضي
حقّ نعمتكم علىّ بأعراضي ٢٥ / إلى مقامكم العالي تشكّري عن قلب
مخلص ٢٦ على عنايتكم

وأيضاً مورود فإن ورود كتابكم ٢٧ الكريم الذي تلقيته بالتبجيل
والتعظيم أوقع في خاطري تذكر ذكرى أيام سلفت لي صحبة ٢٨ علامة بلدكم

²⁰ The expression *biḍā'a muzgā* is taken from Qur'ān 12:88. Its translation 'merchandise of scant worth' is taken from Arberry (2003). It is worth mentioning that this Qur'ānic chapter, i.e., *Sūrat Yūsuf* was the one from where Goldziher took the text of his seal with which he used, e.g., to stamp the letters he received. The text of the seal is from Qur'ān 12:18 *fa-ṣabrun ḡamīlun wa-llāhu l-musta'ān* ('[May I have] fair patience. God is the one to whom I must turn for help') (translated by Alan Jones 2007).

²¹ Printed: *mā*.

²² Printed: *ilā taḥṣīl*.

²³ Printed: *bi-'an 'a riḍa*.

²⁴ *'an qalb muḥliṣ* is absent in the printed version.

²⁵ Printed: *saṭṭrikum*.

²⁶ Printed: *suḥbat ḥabībī*

المرحوم الشيخ طاهر / بن صالح²⁷ / المغربي²⁸ / زمان كوننا في كلانا في عهد الشباب / وما كان بيننا من الألفة والمودة مدة استقامتي في دمشق الشام ذات الثغر البستام سنة ١٢٩٠ إذ كان حبل وفائه موصولاً بجبلي غير منقطع طول زمان انفرادنا وقد أحفظ في ذخائري تحف مكاتيبه الفصيحة المرسله منه الى أولها بتاريخ / ٧ جمادى الأولى عام ١٢٩١ / وهلم جرا رحمه الله تعالى رحمة واسعة

وأرجوكم أن تتفضلوا بقبول جليل الثناء والاحترام من كاتبه الفقير
[تحريراً في ١٥ أكتوبر من شهور سنة ١٩٢١]³⁰

[خادم العلوم الشرقية في جامعة بودابست عاصمة المجر]
[Dr Ignace Goldziher]

English translation:

Greetings and salutations to the honourable heads of the Arab Academy of Science in Damascus, may God Almighty guard it.

After spreading abundant greetings and fulfilling the duty of respect, [I would like to let you know that] I received your esteemed journal with the information that you have shown regard for the poor by electing him a so-called honorary member of your respected Academy with my insignificant merchandise of scant worth and my lack of deserving that honour. However, since the prime of my youth, I have not ceased to love the sciences studied by your scholarly group, eager to obtain their benefits according to my weak ability. My intention with this letter is only to fulfil my duty which your grace obliges me [to do] by returning to your high station my sincere thanks to you for your concern.

²⁷ Printed: ibn aš-šayḥ Ṣāliḥ

²⁸ Printed: al-Ġazā'irī

²⁹ The day is omitted, which seems to be a typo.

³⁰ These last three lines appear only in the printed version.

In addition, the arrival of your noble letter, which I received with respect and exaltation, reminded me of the days when I was in the company of the eminent scholar of your country, the late Sheikh Ṭāhir ibn Ṣāliḥ al-Maḡribī, when we were both in the era of youth and of the intimacy and affection that existed between us during the period of my stay in Damascus, Syria, in the year 1290 [1873], full of cheerful laughter, when we were in the state of faithfulness to each other without interruption as long as we were together alone, and I preserve among my relics the masterpieces of his eloquent letters he sent to me, starting on 7 ḡumādā l-ūlā in 1291 [8 July 1874] and continued later on.

Please accept great praise and respect from the poor writer [of this letter].

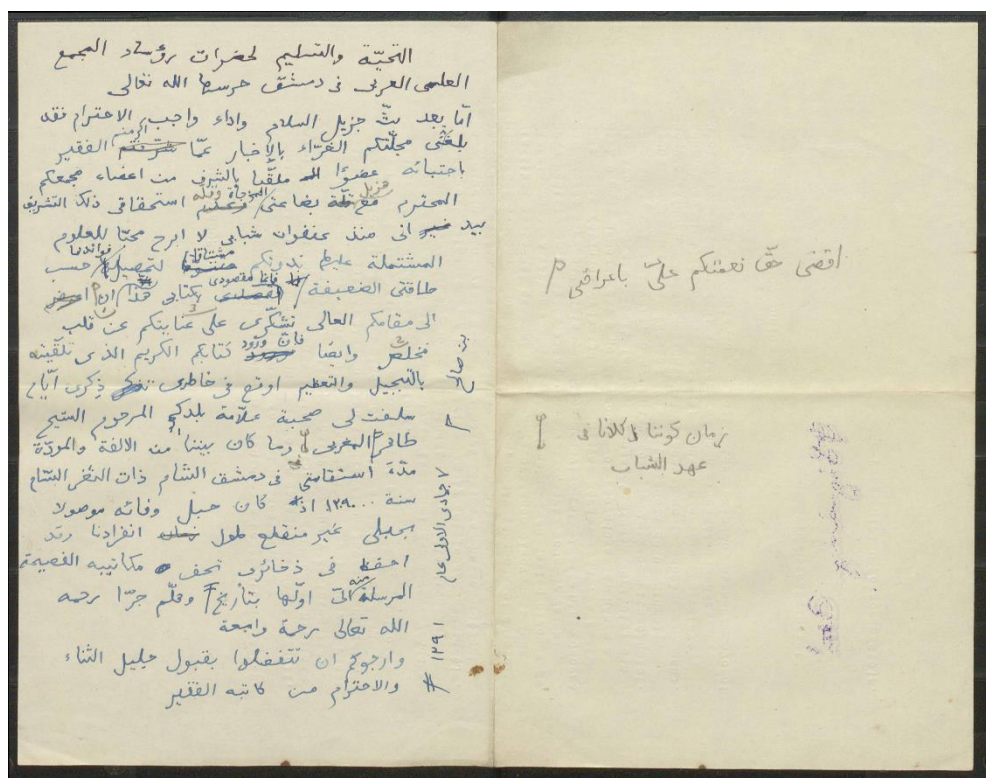


Fig. 1 Goldziher's undated draft letter to the Arab Academy of Damascus (Goldziher 1921a)

Goldziher's election to the Arab Academy of Damascus was certainly the last great scholarly recognition he received. As his letter reflects, in addition to its scholarly merit, it brought him great joy, especially because it evoked one of the happiest periods of his life. In subsequent years, Goldziher's name appeared from

time to time on the pages of the journal of the Arab Academy, not because his memory lingered, but because of the scholarly reception of his oeuvre in the region.

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