

## Semitic Languages at Lund University

Semitic languages have been studied at Lund University since its foundation in 1666. The discipline was for a long time called “Oriental Languages” (*linguarum orientalium*) which mainly meant Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic; although, during certain periods Greek (1682-1712 and 1728-1812) and even Sanskrit, Iranian and Turkic languages were included. Many prominent Orientalists and Semitists have been professors at Lund University, as e.g. Jacob Jonas Björnståhl, Matthias Norberg, Carl Johan Tornberg, Esaias Tegnér Jr. and Axel Moberg. The last-mentioned was above all a specialist on Syriac, a language of great importance to the Christians in the Middle East. The interest in Syriac has continued through studies and translations made by among others Sten Hidal, Per Å. Bengtsson, Bo Holmberg and Lena Ambjörn.

During the recent decades, the study of Arabic has been increasingly stressed. On one hand, the philological tradition of editing texts (Sven Dederling and Gösta Vitestam) has continued, while on the other, Axel Moberg’s interest in the Christians in the Middle East has been developed. At many times these two interests have walked hand in hand. One may mention Bengt Knutsson’s study and edition of three Syriac-Arabic versions of *Judicum* (1974) as well as Per Å. Bengtsson’s edition of two Arabic versions of the *Book of Ruth* (1995) and his study of translation techniques in Arabic versions of *Ruth* (2003). Lena Ambjörn may also be seen as combining these two lines of study, though her speciality is the Arabic medical tradition. In 2000 she published an edition of a medical treatise by the Christian physician Qusta ibn Luqa in the late ninth century. The present professor of Semitic Languages, Bo Holmberg, has above all treated the Christian literature that was originally written in Arabic through a critical edition of a theological and philosophical treatise by Israel of Kashkar in ninth-century Iraq (1989) and numerous articles in journals on the Christian minorities and their literatures in the Middle East. At present he participates in a research program on “Early Monasticism and Classical Paideia” led by Samuel Rubenson. In this program he studies the Apophtegmata Patrum i Syriac manuscripts from the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. In 1995, Lund hosted an international conference on Christian Arabic Studies. In addition to this, one may mention that since 1988 Lund has also been the host of recurrent Nordic conferences for scholars in Semitics held at Kivik.

Several of the Semitic languages are no longer spoken and even if the study of dead languages may be highly rewarding, living Semitic languages have grown in interest. This is evident in several ways. Today, Modern Hebrew, not only Biblical Hebrew, is taught and practical proficiency has been emphasised in the teaching of Arabic at least since the 1980s. Thanks to his emphasis on practical knowledge in the tuition of Modern Standard Arabic, Henry Diab has been of great importance. Modern linguistic theories have been applied in research on Arabic such as Maria Persson’s study of sentential object complements in Modern Standard Arabic (2002). With regard to Arabic literature, modern Arabic poetry and fiction, there have been translations of contemporary short stories and poetry by famous poets like Mahmoud Darwish (2005), Nizar Qabbani (2008), and Muhammad al-Maghut (2011). In April 2008, the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies organized an Arabic-Swedish poetry festival with both Swedish and Arabic authors.

The traditional philological approach of Semitic Languages has always been open to studies of history, society and culture. But during the last decades Middle Eastern Studies as an independent discipline has slowly emerged beside the study of languages.