Arab France: Islam and the Making of Modern Europe, 1798–1831

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“Who would have said, twenty-five years ago, before the French expedition to the banks of the Nile, that an inhabitant of Sioût [Asyut] would come to give lessons on the banks of the Seine [in 1819]…? Who could have believed that a semibarbarian, simply through application and insight, would come at last to have a profound knowledge of general grammar, and…produce an almost academic work?” (p. 142). So mused the French geographer Edmé-François Jomard, who had accompanied Napoleon on his conquest of Egypt in 1798 as a member of France’s “scientific commission”, as he reflected on the appointment of an Egyptian, Ellious Bocthor [sic], to a professorship at the École les Langues Orientales in Paris. Jomard’s statement was revealing in two ways. It showed, first, how far the French establishment was falling short of the universalist ideals that had inspired the Revolution, by exposing its cultural chauvinism. And it showed, second, how much men like Bocthor (the author of an Arabic-French and French-Arabic dictionary) were up against as they sought to find footings in France during the years before the French conquest of Algeria in 1830.

Ian Coller begins his study on “Arab France”, during this 1798-to-1830 period, by considering the people that the French government called the “Egyptian refugees”. They began as a forlorn group of a few hundred men, women, and children who arrived in
Marseilles in October, 1801 after sailing with the French army as it retreated from Egypt. The leaders of these refugees were men who had thrown in their lot with Napoleon’s army in Egypt and who feared local retaliation once it withdrew; some of them appear to have embraced French republican ideals. The group included many Christians of Coptic Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Melkite Catholic, and Armenian background; they also included Muslims, including some *mamluks*, or military slaves, who had been born in places like Georgia where the Ottoman Empire extracted recruits. Within the group there were even some Sudanese servants who accompanied their owners in exile. Upon reaching France, these refugees qualified for French state pensions graded on a scale of their service to the French state. Meanwhile, some other Arabic-speaking people, who found themselves in France but who had not been in Egypt with Napoleon, joined the “Egyptian refugees”, making the community still more diverse. Their experiences suggest that Arabic, not French, was the *lingua franca* in France for these motley “Egyptians”.

In France, many of the “Egyptian refugees” settled together in a section of Marseilles where, in back gardens, they cultivated *mulukhiyya*, a leafy green used in a characteristically Egyptian soup. Some of the refugees joined the French army in France, where Napoleon, now emperor, fashioned a turban-clad “Mamluke” military corps (consisting in this case of both Muslims and Christians) that appealed to his fantasies of eastern exoticism. A smaller number, among the most scholarly, headed to Paris where they found precarious livings as Arabic teachers attached to French institutions. There in Paris, men like Mikh’ail Sabbagh wrote propaganda poems for Napoleon’s regime in a desperate effort to curry favor.
In 1815, halfway through the period that this book covers, a French crowd in Marseilles began “baying for Egyptian blood” (p. 121) during a time of high political tension that followed the collapse of Napoleon’s regime and the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy. What resulted, Coller writes, was a “pogrom” (p. 121) that fed upon xenophobia, racism, and resentment over the French government’s pension payments to the refugees. The massacre began with the killing of two Egyptian “negresses” of probable Sudanese origin: rioters shot one in the head and skewered the other with bayonets. The rioters went on to destroy the Egyptian village, and to scatter its people (making them refugees once again). In the aftermath of this trauma, some Muslim members of the community (such as ‘Abd al-‘Al, former chief of the Janissary police in Cairo) converted to Christianity by joining the Melkite church, which used Arabic in its liturgy. “Where the civilizing narrative and personal connections to the Egyptian expedition had been the key to political negotiation with the imperial regime,” Coller observes, “now the connections with Catholicism…had a new political and cultural valency” (p. 131).

In one of the most interesting sections of the book, Coller discusses the first Egyptian delegation of more than forty study-abroad students that Muhammad ‘Ali sent to France in 1826. The French authorities asked a few Paris-based intellectuals from the “Egyptian refugee” community to serve as translators and assistants for the group, which included the man who would become the most important figure of early nineteenth-century Egyptian nationalism. This was Rifāʾa al-Tahtawi, who had accompanied the students as their imam. Coller suggests, convincingly, that Tahtawi’s interactions with the wildly diverse “Egyptian” community of France may have influenced his subsequent
recognition of a “plural Egyptian identity” drawn together by a “common Arab heritage” and by an attachment to the landscape of Egypt (p. 175).

The source base for this study is impressive. Coller draws upon thousands of documents that “washed up [in French military archives] like piles of driftwood”, representing “fragments of Arab lives in early nineteenth-century France” (p. 2). He also uses police files, lithographs and paintings, poems, grammatical treatises and dictionaries, and other literary sources. Although the book assumes a specialized knowledge of French history in the early nineteenth century (thereby making its strongest appeal to historians of France), it will be of great value to historians of Egypt and the Arab world, too. Above all, it offers insights into the consequences of the French occupation of Egypt for France, the internally contested formation of French Orientalism, the transnational construction of pan-Arabism, and the challenges that faced a naturalized Arabic-speaking immigrant community in France a full century before the labor migrations of the First World War that propelled so many Algerian Muslims into the country.

*Arab France* is an important book, and a sad one. It is about the forgetting, and in some respects the obliteration, of history; it is also about lost ideals. It ends as France’s conquest of Algeria was making it difficult or impossible for an “Arab France” to persist in an age of colonialism. Coller is right in suggesting that the history of these “Egyptian refugees” in France remains relevant given the “clamor of [our] diverse present” (p. 218), when xenophobia threatens to undermine cultures of cosmopolitanism and tolerance.