

Knowledge about the »Orient« between voice and scripture

Michel de Certeau and the Royal Danish Expedition to Arabia Felix (1761–1767)

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Introduction

In his *Beschreibung von Arabien: Aus eigenen Beobachtungen und im Lande selbst gesammelten Nachrichten abgefasst* [Description of Arabia: Drawn from his own observations and from reports collected in the land itself]¹ (1772), geographer Carsten Niebuhr, a member of the Royal Danish Expedition to Arabia² (1761–67), writes about his biggest project, the mapping of Yemen:

I have determined the location of their most distinguished cities [...] in relation to one another with a compass, and their distance, as it were, in steps. For I observed how many steps our caravan took in a quarter of an hour, and always calculated the length of our path, which I noted precisely in hours and minutes. [...] I placed the names

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- 1 The translations from German to English in this contribution were made by the author.
 - 2 Niebuhr's research was part of a venture funded by King Frederick V of Denmark and organized by the Göttingen professor Johann David Michaelis. The expedition sent five scholars and one servant to the Middle East in order to gain as much knowledge as possible »in the service of erudition« (Instruction § 1 in Michaelis 1762). Their journey started in Istanbul and then proceeded to Cairo and the Sinai. Then the travelers sailed down the Red Sea along the Arabian Peninsula. When they arrived at Yemen, they went to the capital Sanaa by land. In Yemen and during an unscheduled passage to Bombay, India, all the participants died except for the geographer Carsten Niebuhr. His trip home took him to, among other places, Persia, Syria, and Anatolia.

of cities and villages I did not see myself on the map on the sole basis of collected reports. (Niebuhr 1772, XXIII–XXIV)³

This quotation and the full title of Niebuhr's *Beschreibung von Arabien* direct our attention to two things. First, Niebuhr explicitly reflects upon on-site knowledge production, though his *Beschreibung von Arabien* was written and published in Copenhagen after he had returned from his journey. Niebuhr accordingly ascribes importance to the local preconditions of knowledge and is keen to explain how he managed to perform measurements in the field. Second, the »reports« that filled the gaps in his information—and consequently covered the blind spots of Niebuhr's map of Yemen—invite speculation about their sources. How were local actors involved in the production of knowledge, and how do we address those actors? Both aspects—reflections on the conditions of knowledge production and the role of local actors—will be important in my subsequent reading of Niebuhr's texts about the Arabian Peninsula and Egypt.

Niebuhr was the only survivor of what was known as the Royal Danish Expedition. His narrative therefore stands *pars pro toto* for the whole undertaking.⁴ Although the expedition has not attracted as much attention as other erudite ventures of the eighteenth century, such as those in the wake of Cook or Napoleon, Niebuhr has become paradigmatic for the

3 »Ich habe die Lage ihrer vornehmsten Städte [...] gegen einander mit dem Compas, und ihre Entfernung gleichsam in Schritten bestimmt. Denn ich bemerkte, wie viele Schritte unsere Karwane in einer viertel Stunde machte, und berechnete allezeit die Länge unsers Weges, welche ich genau in Stunden und Minuten aufzeichnete. [...]. Die Namen der Städte und Dörfer welche ich selbst nicht gesehen habe, habe ich nur aus gesammelten Nachrichten auf die Charte gesetzt« (Niebuhr 1772, XXIII–XXIV).

4 After Niebuhr returned to Copenhagen in 1767, he first published *Beschreibung von Arabien* (1772), which is structured thematically. He then later published the two-volume *Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien und andern umliegenden Ländern* [Description of the journey to Arabia and other neighboring lands] (1774–78), which offers a chronological account of the expedition. The third volume about his travels in Syria and Palestine was planned, but only published posthumously in 1837 due to a lack of interest on the part of his patrons in Copenhagen (see Rasmussen 1990a).

early use of expeditions in modern science (Beck 1971, 92; Feuerhahn 2004, 163; Rasmussen 1990b, 11). In many eyes, he also represents impartiality toward those he observed.⁵ Niebuhr himself fuels these narratives by reflecting obsessively on his measuring techniques and by emphasizing the need to adapt to local ways of living in order to survive in the Middle East. Existing scholarship's verdict on him is consequently almost unanimous. Han Vermeulen, for example, who examines the genesis of anthropology in the eighteenth century and considers Niebuhr's travelogues, writes in his appraisal:

Especially noteworthy are Niebuhr's openness, impartiality, and research methods. He was not judgmental, and his endeavor not to reproduce prejudices against Muslims is impressive. [...] There was no asymmetry of power, and Niebuhr had a dialogic relationship with his informants. (Vermeulen 2015, 258)

Larry J. Baack, author of the only monograph about the Royal Danish Expedition, is also convinced of Niebuhr's »hard work, dedication to accuracy, open-mindedness, cultural generosity, unpretentiousness and humanity« (Baack 2014, 343) and concludes that »Niebuhr's portrayal of the Arab Middle East did not create or perpetuate pre-colonialist ideological frameworks or models of European superiority or Middle Eastern inferiority.« (Ibid., 381; see also Rasmussen 1990b, 12; and Guichard 2014, XIV).

This corresponds to Jürgen Osterhammel's thesis on the »disenchantment of Asia« by European scholars during the eighteenth century (Osterhammel [1998] 2012).⁶ Osterhammel states that in encounters with Asia in the eighteenth century, the »connection between knowledge and power« described by discourse analysis existed »only in weak form,« since Europeans

5 This is also the tendency of many essays in the important anthology *Carsten Niebuhr und seine Zeit* (2002). Stephan Conermann is the only one who asks about Niebuhr's »orientalistic potential« and therefore places him in the debate about Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979).

6 Osterhammel refers to the term »*Entzauberung*«, originally shaped by Max Weber. In English-speaking scholarship, it is usually translated as »disenchantment.« See, e.g., Kim (2017).

mainly went to Asia as travelers and merchants and not yet as colonizers (ibid., 21). What is more, for a short time, European *philosophes* viewed Asia not as Europe's »glorious« or »demonic« other but rather in a rational light. Europe and Asia could therefore meet in dialog as equals (ibid., 11). In this sense, continues Osterhammel, the eighteenth century can serve as a model for us today of cosmopolitanism and »global concepts of order without steep hierarchies and sharp contrasts« (ibid., 402).

In this way, Osterhammel implicitly contrasts intercultural encounters of the eighteenth century with those of the nineteenth century, which scholars such as Edward Said ([1979] 2003) and Mary Louise Pratt ([1992] 2008) have closely linked to the colonial ventures of European powers. It is advisable to maintain a certain skepticism about Osterhammel's position and its political implications. It seems to use eighteenth-century sources to find pre-colonial and therefore non-Eurocentric knowledge of the Middle East. The question of how to critically examine pre-colonial knowledge production remains open due to the tendency of existing scholarship to overlook crucial difficulties. Can we indeed assume that there is no asymmetry between the makers of knowledge and those being observed? What kind of insight into intercultural encounters can we gain by »reading the archives« of European expeditions? Can we locate traces of those being described?

Michel de Certeau (1925–86), a French Jesuit and scholar whose writings encompassed history, sociology, and anthropology, asked many of these questions about how to read European archives and how to approach actors who were erased from the record. He did so by looking at widely different sources and periods, such as the exorcism of possessed nuns in seventeenth-century France (Certeau [1970] 2000), sixteenth-century travelogs (Certeau [1975] 1988), language policies in revolutionary France (Certeau et al. 1975), and the twentieth-century practices of everyday culture (Certeau [1984] 2002). Despite the historical range of his topics, all of his works are influenced by the same, partially theologically motivated, experience of alterity and loss. In his eyes, both historiographical and ethnological writing consist in *heterologies*, in discourses on the absent other (see Certeau [1986] 2010; and Füssel 2007, 7). Bringing in elements of

psychoanalysis, Certeau engages cultural analysis to search for alterity both within the Western subject itself and in its relationship to those it silenced (Freccero 2001, 366). This approach does not intend to be a form of psychoanalytical diagnosis, but rather a methodology of free association »designed to make a space for the unconscious to speak« (Highmore 2007, 55).

According to Luce Giard, Certeau's readings of his varying sources are also driven by an interest in the circulation of speech (*parole*) in its oral and written forms; furthermore, his writings show a deep fascination for places (*lieux*) and spaces (*espaces*) as social sites and starting points of the historian's own »historiographical operation« (Giard 1997, XIII–XV; see also Füssel 2013, 24). In the analysis that follows, the perspectives offered by Michel de Certeau serve as a guideline for reading Niebuhr's travelogues. The first part of the analysis asks how the *voices* of the other were transformed into European »scripture« in the Royal Danish Expedition.⁷ I then consider how knowledge gained in the field is a product of various forms of spatial appropriation. My reflections attempt to offer a somewhat different view on pre-colonial intercultural encounters, in contrast to the now-conventional interpretation absolving them of Eurocentrism.

Voice and scripture I: Writing that conquers

Certeau asks with utmost urgency who speaks in and through ethnological texts and travelogues. In his eyes, the issue is part of a larger »structure belonging to modern Western culture,« whose »other«—the Indian, the past, the people, the mad, the child, the Third World« (Certeau 1988, 3)—is constantly transformed, invented, and changed by »a writing located

7 Certeau reflects on ethnology by considering how local *voix* were inscribed into European *écriture* (Certeau 1975). The translator of Certeau's *L'écriture de l'histoire* [The Writing of History], Tom Conley, was well aware that *écriture* was one of Certeau's terms that »are not difficult to turn into English, but translated they convey little of the complexity expressed in the French usage« (Conley 1988, XX). Conley translates »writing« when the French original says »écriture.« I, on the other hand, wish to uphold and emphasize, in this reading, the canonical connotation of »écriture« as a »religious tradition,« as Certeau put it (Certeau 1988, 211). I have therefore opted to use the term »scripture.«

elsewhere« (Highmore 2007, 16). Certeau thus shares the epistemological doubts of writers such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak about »the Archive« or what Certeau calls »the scriptural economy« (Spivak 1985). Like Spivak and similarly to Edward Said, Certeau perceives ethnological writing (in the broad sense of the word) as a repressive inscription of power:

This is *writing that conquers*. It will use the New World as if it were a blank, »savage« page on which Western desire will be written. It will transform the space of the other into a field of expansion for a system of production. From the moment of a rupture between a subject and an object of the operation, between a *will to write* and a *written body* (or a body to be written), this writing fabricates Western History [*italics original*]. (Certeau 1988, XXV–XXVI)

According to Certeau, the act of writing transforms local voices into what we might call European »scripture« (see footnote 7). Post-colonial writing would therefore be impossible, since all »writing as a praxis is already a colonization of a terrain not its own. [...] Writing orders the world, composes it in terms of its own grammar« (Buchanan 1992). Certeau's texts maintain a critical stance that is not restricted to ethnographic accounts of the past. For one thing, Certeau believes his critique also applies to his own writing, which cannot solve the relationship between voice and scripture but rather »upholds the problem without resolving it« (Certeau 1988, 212). For another, he wants cultural theory as a whole to realize and accept its proximity to the primal scene of the ethnologic encounter (Highmore 2007, 18).

In the case of the expedition to Arabia which took place in the 1760s, the transformation of indigenous voices into canonical »scripture« for the purpose of gaining knowledge proves to be of great importance. The original mission for the expedition—as formulated by its organizer, the Göttingen-based professor Johann David Michaelis—was, indeed, to turn local voices and objects into tools for understanding a particular scripture: the Old Testament. The Arabic dialect spoken in Yemen and the region's natural history and culture were supposed to help investigate and explain uncertain passages and biblical miracles (see first of all Rauchstein 2017; also Achermann 2003; Hübner 2002; and Legaspi 2010).

Michaelis succinctly captures this relationship between voice and scripture in the preface to his one hundred *Fragen an eine Gesellschaft gelehrter Männer, die auf Befehl Ibro Majestät des Königes von Dännemark nach Arabien reisen* [Questions to a company of learned men who are traveling to Arabia by order of His Majesty the King of Denmark] (1762):

Almost all the questions I have raised are related to explaining the Holy Scripture. [...] [T]he Old Testament [is] a book that essentially forces us to delve into the whole natural history and customs of the Orientals [Morgenländer] if we want to understand it. (Michaelis 1762, »Vorrede«)⁸

Moreover, Michaelis also states that only present-day residents of the biblical lands can answer many of the pressing philological questions; understanding the ancient book requires, more than anything, their everyday speech:

How few travel accounts about Lucky Arabia [i.e. Yemen] do we have? [...] Its dialect is different from western Arabic, which we are familiar with [...] what kind of enlightenment must we then properly expect for the most important book of antiquity, the Bible? What died out in one dialect will still perhaps be left in another. (Michaelis 1762, »Vorrede«)⁹

In fact, the travelogues of the Royal Danish expedition mention informants quite often. Residents of the regions they visited help with the Arabian names of villages, assist the philologist Frederik Christian von Haven in

8 »Die Fragen die ich aufgeworfen habe, beziehen sich beynahe alle auf die Erklärung der heiligen Schrift. [...] [D]as alte Testament [ist] ein Buch, welches uns gleichsam zwinget in die ganze Naturgeschichte und Sitten der Morgenländer hineinzugehen, wenn wir es verstehen wollen« (Michaelis 1762, »Vorrede«).

9 »Wie wenige Reisebeschreibungen vom glücklichen Arabien haben wir? [...]. Sein Dialect ist von dem uns bekannten westlichen Arabischen noch verschieden [...], was für Licht müßen wir denn billig für das allerwichtigste Buch des Alterthums, für die Bibel, erwarten [...]? Was in der einen Mundart untergegangen ist, wird vielleicht in der andern übrig seyn« (Michaelis 1762, »Vorrede«).

buying manuscripts, and bring flowers to the biologist Per Forsskål. When it comes to geographical knowledge, Niebuhr is sure that only a scientist's observations and measurements can guarantee reliable maps (Niebuhr 1772, XXIV). By contrast, he classes the acquisition of geographical information by questioning local informants as an inferior method of knowledge production. At best, Arabic informants who travel a lot—like merchants or camel drivers—are familiar with the regions they traverse (ibid.). But even in such cases, Niebuhr emphasizes that his informants' knowledge must be examined cautiously and needs to be systematized:

One [...] must ask only casually for everything one wants to know. That takes not only a lot of patience and time, but also one must be very cautious and suspicious about the answers, because also in the Orient [den Morgenländern], one finds people who tell lies on purpose or out of ignorance so as not to inform a foreigner about everything at once or to create the impression that they know everything. (Niebuhr 1772, XVIII)¹⁰

In his essay *Ethno-graphy: Speech, or the Space of the Other*, Jean de Léry, Certeau examines a traveler from the seventeenth century: Jean de Léry, who visited the Tupi people of Brazil.¹¹ Certeau writes that for Léry, »[b]etween »them« and »us« there exists the difference of possessing »either sacred or profane« writing, which immediately raises the question of a relation of *power*« (Certeau 1988, 215). The notion of European supremacy is justified

10 »Man muß [...] nach allem, was man zu wissen verlangt, nur beyläufig fragen. Hierzu gehört nicht nur viele Gedult und Zeit, sondern man muß auch sehr aufmerksam und mistrauisch auf die Antworten seyn, weil man auch in den Morgenländern Leute findet, die mit Fleiß, oder aus Unwissenheit Unwahrheiten sagen, um einen Fremden nicht gleich von allem zu unterrichten, oder um das Ansehen zu haben als wüßten sie alles« (Niebuhr 1772, XVIII).

11 Léry, Jean de (1534–1613) was a shoemaker, innkeeper and theologian. As a Huguenot, he took part in the short-lived mission sent by Johannes Calvin to build a French colony in Brazil called »La France Antarctique.« His »Histoire d'un voyage fait en la terre du Bresil« (1578) described his journey and was widely recognized during and after his lifetime (Fornerod 2008).

by the possession of writing; writing that can preserve knowledge through time and space. Native orality, in contrast, remains tied to a body, and thus forgets its own past. It »is limited to the vanishing circle of its auditors« (ibid.).

The travelers of the Royal Danish Expedition show the same conviction that writing and knowing how to understand writing differentiates Europeans from »Orientals.« But the travelers do not believe that »Orientals« lack script because they have not yet progressed to that point; Niebuhr rather assumes they once had a scripture and have forgotten their own scriptural past:

None of the [Arabic] scholars in Yemen, whom I got to know well enough that I dared to ask them for a clarification of these inscriptions, could read much more of them than I. [...] But it would be superfluous to include them [their explanations, M. H.] because European scholars are probably even more familiar with the old Kufic handwriting than present-day Arabs. (Niebuhr 1772, 96)¹²

Like Jean de Léry, Niebuhr is convinced that the Arabs' inability to write and read has led them to forget or ignore their own past; they »care very little about more recent history and not at all about the history of their ancestors who lived before Mohammed« (Niebuhr 1772, 185).¹³ When Niebuhr looks at hieroglyphs engraved on the column of Cleopatra in Alexandria, he regretfully states: »what care the ancient Egyptians employed to preserve their messages as if for eternity; it is not their fault that their

12 »Keiner von den Gelehrten im Jemen, mit welchen ich so bekannt wurde, daß ich mich unterstehen durfte sie um eine Erklärung dieser Inschriften zu bitten, konnte davon vielmehr lesen als ich selbst. [...] Es würde aber überflüssig seyn diese beyzufügen, weil die europäischen Gelehrten vermutlich noch besser mit den alten Kufischen Schriftzügen bekannt sind, als die jetzigen Araber« (Niebuhr 1772, 96).

13 »Die Araber hingegen bekümmern sich sehr wenig um die neuere, und gar nicht um die Geschichte ihrer Vorfahren, welche vor Mohàmmed gelebt haben« (Niebuhr 1772, 185).

descendants can no longer read them« (Niebuhr 1774, 46).¹⁴ Confirming a typical notion of anthropology since the Enlightenment, Niebuhr views modern Arabs as inauthentic *évolués* of an authentic and learned past (Fabian 2014, 11). This idea of *no longer* coincides with that of *not yet*, which places the other in a »waiting room of history,« as Dipesh Chakrabarty calls it (Chakrabarty 2000, 8). Niebuhr makes reference to such a state of *not yet* when he comments on a peasant who was afraid of one of Niebuhr's astronomical instruments, his binoculars. The binoculars show objects upside down and the peasant believes they will upend the whole city:

One should not, of course, be very surprised that the Mohammedans become suspicious over such observations since, not long ago, one could still find plenty of Europeans who thought that everything they could not immediately understand was magic. (Niebuhr 1774, 50)¹⁵

To quote Johannes Fabian, ethnology seems, indeed, to be a »science of other men in another time« to the travelers (Fabian 2014, 143). But the comparison Niebuhr draws also shows that the difference between »Mohammedan« and European societies is not perceived as a natural difference (ibid., 147); to Niebuhr, the Arabs are superstitious and lack scientific skills »not because they lack ability, but rather books and a good education« (Niebuhr 1772, 104).¹⁶ Niebuhr consequently gives the expedition a clear mission: to research and understand times and spaces that the local population can either not yet or no longer understand. Local informants may contribute to this mission, but transforming their imperfect knowledge into scientific scripture clearly remains the travelers' task.

14 »welche Vorsicht die alten Egypter gebraucht haben, ihre Nachrichten gleichsam für die Ewigkeit aufzubewahren; es ist nicht ihre Schuld daß ihre Nachkommen sie nicht mehr lesen können« (Niebuhr 1774, 46).

15 »Man darf sich eben nicht sehr verwundern, daß die Mohammedaner über dergleichen Beobachtungen argwönisch werden, da man nicht vor langer Zeit auch noch Europäer genug gefunden hat, die alles für Zauberey hielten, was sie nicht gleich begreifen konnten« (Niebuhr 1774, 50).

16 »nicht weil es ihnen an Fähigkeit, sondern an Büchern und gutem Unterricht fehlet« (Niebuhr 1772, 104).

Voice and scripture II: Voice as a loss inside scripture

At first sight, it seems that both for Certeau and in the sources of the Royal Danish Expedition, the heterogeneous voices of the other are silenced through the act of ordering and writing, making them inaccessible to us. It is impossible to recover and hear the voice of the »native informant« as the archive alters his/her figure (Highmore 2007, 88). One of the strengths of Certeau's work, however, is that while he acknowledges the epistemological dominance of European writing, he also attempts to reveal those silenced voices by investigating the preconditions of scripture. In this sense, texts are sites of oppression that can nevertheless emerge as fields of play for different actors (see Hartnett 1998, 286).

In his inquiries, Certeau's traveler Jean de Léry is confronted with the songs of the Tupi, »vocations« loosened from the orbits of meaning« that move him so much that he struggles to translate them into the productivity of his writing (Certeau 1988, 230). According to Certeau, those absent but simultaneously somehow present voices cannot be recovered as content; instead they only remain as a loss inside of scripture: »[N]ative speech takes on the figure of a missing precious stone. It is the moment of ravishment, a stolen instant, a purloined memory beyond the text« (ibid., 213). The voices at least influence the one who tried to erase them, and by doing so, they disturb the archival impulse. They stimulate moments of pleasure and confusion beyond the »utilitarian construct of the tale« (ibid., 227):

Facing the work of the West, that is, Western man's actions that manufacture time and reason, there exists in Léry's work a place for leisure and bliss, the Tupi world, indeed a feast for the eyes and ears. [...] These moments rend holes in the fabric of the traveler's time, just as the Tupi's festive organization was beyond all economy of history. Spending and loss designate *a present*; they form a series of »snippets,« nearly a lapsus in Western discourse. (Certeau 1988, 226–27)

The »savage world« that Léry describes therefore has two different functions, both serving as an object of Western discourse and necessarily distorting that discourse; necessarily because »the vocal exteriority is also

the stimulus and the precondition of its scriptural opposite« (ibid., 236). If we look at the travelers of the Royal Danish Expedition, it is hard to find moments that are »beyond all economy of history« (ibid., 227). The travelers barely seem to register the »Orient« as a »body of pleasure,« as Certeau calls it (ibid., 226). There are no signs of ecstasy or enthusiasm. It seems that the thesis of the »disenchantment« of Asian cultures during the Enlightenment fits the texts produced from the expedition.

What is striking, though, are the unconscious moments of scientific discourse in the travelogs—ruptures in the conviction of expertise and supremacy. These moments lead to fear and failure, which indeed »rend holes in the fabric of the traveler’s time« and the economy of knowledge (Certeau 1988, 227). First, there are many situations that profoundly disrupt the possibility of knowledge in a hostile environment. For example, Niebuhr repeatedly mentions how difficult it is to map cities and landscapes properly if the region’s residents do not want them mapped (e.g., Niebuhr 1774, 109; 191–92). Philologist von Haven recalls how he was almost beaten up when he tried to buy maps and books at a shop in Istanbul. Von Haven writes that he became »sick because of this annoyance« and no longer felt able to carry on collecting manuscripts or conducting his philological research in Istanbul. Indeed, his report about the city breaks off here (von Haven 2005, 538–39).

Similar events in Mocha in Yemen illustrate the degree to which the expedition’s production of knowledge was endangered. All three travelers who wrote diaries—von Haven, Forsskål, and Niebuhr—recount the escalation of events during the inspection of their luggage at the local customs house (von Haven 2005, 384; Forsskål 2009, 357–58; Niebuhr 1774, 363–64). Against the travelers’ wishes, their natural objects are examined first (Niebuhr 1774, 363–65). The inspector spills some fish specimens that were preserved in alcohol and the smell fills the room; then the crowd watching them discovers conserved snakes. A rumor spreads that the travelers want to poison the residents of the city, and the travelers find themselves thrown out of their accommodation (ibid., 365).

What is worse, the rashness of the inspection endangers the material evidence of their expedition: »A large portion of the shells that we had

packed up with great care was pulled out onto the floor and the rest were pierced with a pointed iron rod. We protested in vain that many would be broken« (Niebuhr 1774, 364).¹⁷ This is an act of destruction against »Western« science and its artifacts, that is, the objects it has appropriated, »packed up,« dis-located and transformed into artifacts. Things are broken—ruptured. The voice (the »rumor«) silences the scripture. Niebuhr's report on Mocha consequently differs from those about cities like Constantinople, Alexandria, and Al Luḥayyah. There is no further description of the town beyond the inspection and the incidents that followed; nor is there a map or view of the town like those he made for many other places and cities. This time, the recording of local entities in European scripture fails.

Thus, although text orders and normalizes through the act of writing, it also registers within itself the presence of something it cannot control. The travelers cease to be the masters of their research and become the objects of a time and place. Sometimes, the omniscient »solar Eye« of the travelers is hindered from »seeing« at all, and the writing stops. Voices are absent, but can inscribe themselves, absent, in the fear they cause. Attending to these »epistemic anxieties« and »affective tremors« in European scripture entails reading »along the archival grain« with its extant, yet always contested ontologies and claims to truth (Stoler 2009, 19). Ann Laura Stoler demonstrates the challenges and possibilities of such an approach in her study on the colonial administration of the Dutch East Indies. She shows that Dutch colonial officials constantly worried about both the reliability of their knowledge of the colonized and the applicability of that knowledge to everyday interaction with local residents. Their anxieties thus created a »messy space between reason and sentiment« in European archives (ibid., 39). Speaking with Certeau, »messy spaces« appear in European texts because of the traces of disturbing voices. Such voices, »leftover[s]« and »waste product[s] of constructive thinking« (Certeau

17 »Von den Muscheln, welche wir mit der größten Sorgfalt eingepackt hatten, ward ein großer Theil bis auf den Boden heraus gerissen, und das übrige mit einem spitzen Eisen durchbohrt. Wir stellten vergebens vor, daß vieles zerbrochen werden würde« (Niebuhr 1774, 364).

1988, 227), can be described more adequately if we consider different ways of appropriating space. This is an issue in the following section.

Strategies and tactics, places and spaces

As we have established, Certeau interprets the relationship of scripture to voice in pre-modern »ethno-graphy« as deeply ambivalent. This ambivalence is connected to his dualistic approach: Certeau wants to demonstrate the West's epistemological dominance in knowledge production, but he also wants to create limited agencies for those who have been excluded by this knowledge (see Highmore 2007, 83).

The same tendency becomes apparent in Certeau's most influential work, *The Practice of Everyday Life* ([1988] 2002), which discusses topics such as consumption, strolling around the streets of a city, and everyday storytelling. A strong duality between critiquing science and conceding limited agency to the objects of the scientific gaze defines this collection of essays. Everyday practices, Certeau says, are always spatial practices emerging from two genuinely different kinds of space. First, there is abstract, geometric *place* (ibid., 117). Certeau illustrates it with his own experience looking down from the World Trade Center:

The gigantic mass is immobilized before the eyes. [...] Having taken a voluptuous pleasure in it, I wonder what is the source of this pleasure of »seeing the whole,« of looking down on, totalizing the most immoderate of human texts. [...] An Icarus flying above these waters, he can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below. His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was »possessed« into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more. (Certeau 2002, 91–92)

New York becomes a static place that is open to cartographic projection, which erases the differences between objects. Such projections claim to

be neutral metonymically based presentations, not metaphor-based representations (Hartnett 1998, 287). Certeau calls this distant, scientific view from above *strategic*. An agent of will and power, such as a municipal administration or scientific institution, possesses its own place and controls it. According to Certeau, »[p]olitical, economic, and scientific rationality has been constructed on this strategic model« (Certeau 2002, XIX). The similarities to his notion of scripture that conquers voices are easy to recognize.

Second, Certeau writes about a *space* of experience that is produced by movements of the body (ibid., 117). In an urban landscape, the operations of the controlling rationality are constantly subverted by the maze of practices inside urban spaces, a maze of footsteps and movements. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, these heterogeneous practices are called *tactics*. Tactics do not own a *place*, but they can temporarily create *spaces*. Practices such as walking generate temporary, transient occupation of places owned by someone else.

In addition to the ephemeral space created by the physical movement of pedestrians, Certeau is interested in narratives of space: how representations of space not only describe, but produce it.

Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice. [...] These narrated adventures [...] do not merely constitute a »supplement« to pedestrian enunciations and rhetorics. [...] In reality, they organize walks. They make the journey, before or during the time the feet perform it. (Certeau 2002, 115–16)

The narratives, according to Certeau, constantly change static and stable places into living spaces and the other way around. Certeau's dualistic approach thus becomes apparent once more: for him, an everyday spatial description »oscillates between the terms of an alternative: either *seeing* (the knowledge of an order of places) or *going* (spatializing actions)« (ibid., 119). He accordingly delineates »two symbolic and anthropological languages of space« (ibid.). The first language of space is captured with the term *map*, which refers to »a plane projection totalizing observations« (ibid.). Maps are about seeing something. In contrast, *itineraries* show a series of

movements. Itineraries are about going somewhere. For Certeau, ordinary culture is associated with this language of space. In his point of view, *itineraries* were slowly replaced by *maps* during the birth of modern scientific discourse from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century. Seeing places became superior to going through spaces:

The map, a totalizing stage on which elements of diverse origin are brought together to form the tableau of a »state« of geographical knowledge, pushes away into its prehistory [...] the operations of which it is the result or the necessary condition. [...] The tour describers have disappeared. (Certeau 2002, 121)

This is where my reading of the sources from the expedition to Arabia Felix diverges from Certeau. In what follows, I demonstrate that the sources are defined by a complex *mélange* of narratives, of maps and itineraries, and that the practices of research employed are strategic and tactical at the same time (see Füssel 2013, 34). In other words, the narratives oscillate between scientific maps or overviews of Arabia, which overlay and conceal the practices that produced them, and reflective itineraries that reveal the movements through Arabia as preconditions of the travelers' research.

If we regard maps and itineraries not only as genres, but as narrative patterns of spatial experience as Certeau did, then Niebuhr's travelogues seem to be shaped primarily by the spatial language of the map. Both his cartographic work and his travelogs exhibit a strong tendency toward the a-temporal and abstract description of locations and their residents. Take for example Niebuhr's »Anmerkungen zu Alexandrien« (Remarks on Alexandria), a city that in his eyes was primarily composed of »hills of rubble« (Niebuhr 1774, 43–54, here 45).¹⁸ This chapter from the *Reisebeschreibung*

18 For a problematic view on Niebuhr in Egypt see Guichard (2014), who seems to reiterate the narrative of a static Orient regarding the customs and behavior of the local residents. For instance, Guichard comments on Niebuhr's anecdote of an Arabian beggar: »In some respects, not a great deal has changed in the 250-plus years since the Danish expedition was in Cairo« (ibid., 200).

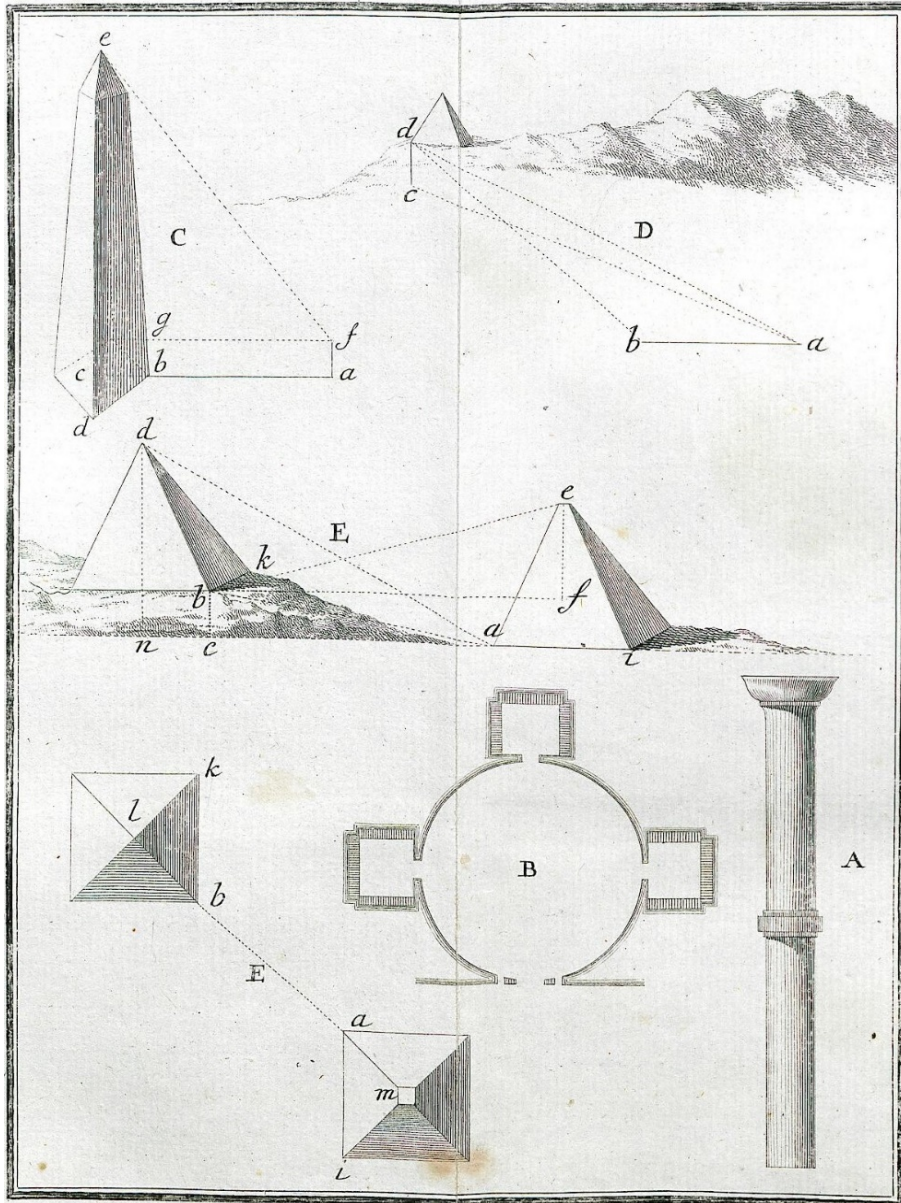


Fig. 1: Schematic representation of monuments in Egypt. Engraving V from Niebuhr's Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien und andern umliegenden Ländern [Description of the Journey to Arabia and Other Neighboring Lands], vol. 1 (Copenhagen: Nicolaus Möller, 1774).

nach Arabien und andern umliegenden Ländern [Description of the journey to Arabia and other neighboring lands] (1774) starts with the general topography of the city, then elaborates on its harbor, which »is already of little use and becoming worse every day« (ibid., 43),¹⁹ the remnants of the old and newer town walls (ibid., 44), and the city's water supply system with its basins and canals (ibid., 45). These general observations are followed by exact descriptions and measurements of two significant monuments, the so-called Obelisks of Cleopatra (ibid., 45–46) and Pompey's Pillar (ibid., 48–49). Niebuhr's measurements are supported by an engraving that follows the textual description of Pompey's Pillar. On the engraving, Pompey's Pillar is labeled with an »A« and the one still-erect Obelisk of Cleopatra with a »C.« The summarizing portrayal of the urban topology and its graphic depiction claim to be a sovereign overview in the manner of Certeau's »solar Eye.« The experiences and movements of the geographer, which are a necessary precondition of his report and mapping activities, are excluded from the narrative.²⁰

But after a while, Niebuhr's schematized description of Alexandria mutates into a temporalized narrative. This also happens in other parts of the *Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien*, usually when local residents disturb Niebuhr's measurements. While Niebuhr's descriptions of cities like Alexandria are not tied to the physical presence of the observer, the narrator sometimes seems to realize his endangered position in the place he is currently describing. For example, his »Remarks on Alexandria« dwell on the Obelisk of Cleopatra and its precise orientation, when the narrator suddenly stops and complains that »[t]he Arabs always milled around the city and among

19 »[Der Hafen] ist schon sehr unbrauchbar, und wird es täglich mehr« (Niebuhr 1774, 43).

20 In addition to the abstract description of Alexandria's topography, one event is also described at the end of the report. Niebuhr recounts how, after arriving in the city, some nomads got into a fight with its residents, and were later killed (Niebuhr 1774, 53–54).

the ruins during our stay in Alexandria« (Niebuhr 1774, 49).²¹ Shortly thereafter, he writes:

One of the Turkish merchants who were present and noticed that I had pointed the astrolabe at the city, was very curious to look through the binoculars also, and was more than a little worried when he saw a tower upside down. This gave rise to a rumor that I had come to Alexandria to turn the whole city upside down. [...] My Janissary no longer wanted to accompany me if I wanted to take along my instrument, so I did not obtain any more geometric measurements here. (Niebuhr 1774, 49)²²

The travelogue's narrative style changes into the spatial language of an itinerary, which means that the scientific, objectifying gaze is restricted and a first-person narrator appears. This transformation can be interpreted in different ways. First, it shows that the travelers were conducting their research in places controlled by other agents of will and power. Consequently, their tactics of camouflage can only temporarily appropriate spaces, and their research is subject to conditions determined by others. For example, to conduct their research, they dress up like Arab Christians, hide their instruments, and measure things out of the corner of their eyes while talking to locals.

Second, one may conclude that local residents, who are largely absent from the narratives, do indeed become actors through their interventions. What is more, we here once again witness the »rumor«—the powerful manifestation of voice—interfering in the scriptural project. 'The inhabitants'

21 »Die Araber schwärmten während unsers Aufenthalts zu Alexandrien beständig um die Stadt und unter den Ruinen herum [...]« (Niebuhr 1774, 49).

22 »Einer von den türkischen Kaufleuten, die zugegen waren, und bemerkten, daß ich das Astrolabium auf die Stadt gerichtet hatte, war so neugierig auch durch das Fernglas zu sehen, und ward nicht wenig unruhig als er einen Thurm umgekehrt erblickte. Dieß gab Gelegenheit zu einem Gerüchte, daß ich nach Alexandrien gekommen wäre um die ganze Stadt über den Haufen zu werfen. [...] Mein Janitschar wollte nicht mehr mit mir gehen, wenn ich mein Instrument mit nehmen wollte, [und] so erhielt ich hier weiter keine geometrische Messungen« (Niebuhr 1774, 49).

tactics can hinder the travelers' production of knowledge or even stop it temporarily. Due to the inhabitants' interference, the utilitarian narrative is, for a short time, unable to make abstract statements *about* these actors. By disturbing the scientific appropriation of space, these actors might exert a kind of resistance that Certeau associates with his concept of the *itinerary*.

In any case, the travelers' footsteps—and that means their itineraries—literally mark the boundaries of the city maps that the geographer draws. In the end, Niebuhr himself admits how much his cartographic skills must yield to the conditions of Arabian cities:

I generally believe that one will not be able to demand more precise measurements from a traveler in the Orient than by means of a compass and footsteps, because without permission of the authorities, it is just as dangerous and arduous to make maps of cities there as in Europe. On a map of an Oriental city, one will also not look for all the streets but only for its size, its location, and the location of the most noteworthy squares in it. One will find this both on my map of Constantinople [...] and on all other drawings I have sketched of Oriental cities, even though the streets on this map are only largely indicated arbitrarily to fill in the space. (Niebuhr 1774, 24)²³

23 »Überhaupt glaube ich daß man von einem in den Morgenländern Reisenden keine genauere Messungen als vermittelst der Boussole und Schritte werde verlangen können, weil es daselbst eben so gefährlich und beschwerlich ist, ohne Erlaubnis der Obrigkeit Grundrisse von Städten zu machen, als in Europa. Man wird auch auf einem Grundriß von einer morgenländischen Stadt nicht eben alle Straßen, sondern nichts mehr suchen, als ihre Größe, ihre Lage und die Lage der merkwürdigsten Plätze in derselben. Dieß wird man so wohl auf meinem Grundriß von Constantinopel [...] als auf allen übrigen Zeichnungen, welche ich von den morgenländischen Städten entworfen habe, antreffen, obgleich die Straßen auf diesem Grundriß größtentheils nur willkürlich angezeigt sind, um den Platz auszufüllen« (Niebuhr 1774, 24).



Fig. 2: Map of Constantinople, Galata and Scudar. Engraving III from Niebuhr's Reisebeschreibung (1774).

Conclusion

[This, M.H.] leads me to try to locate in travel narratives the forms that this combination of the rules of literary production and those controlling scientific production takes. The travel narrative oscillates between these two poles and permits the elaboration of a theory of this association: the travel narrative is a text of observation, haunted by its Other, the imaginary. In this way it corresponds to its object, a »culture« haunted by its »savage« exteriority. (Certeau 1991, 225)

These words are taken from a paper Certeau originally wrote in 1978, in which he presented an outline of his new main project »Travel narratives of the French to Brazil: Sixteenth to eighteenth centuries,« to which he planned to dedicate all his time (Giard 1991, 213). When Certeau died in 1986, he left much of his work about the New World and travelogues as a »scientific and literary genre« unfinished (Certeau 1991, 221). Thinking about travelogues with Certeau thus means connecting pieces from various texts and seeing how they interact with a travelog at hand. Certeau's paper does give some indications as to what is important to him in examining travel literature: first, literary production, and second, scientific production. Bringing the two together, I have tried to consider travel writing both as an act located between voice and scripture and as a scientific practice of appropriating spaces.

Modern scholarship on the Royal Danish Expedition and the Enlightenment in general generally considers the relationship between European producers of knowledge and those being observed to be symmetrical and dialogic (see, e.g., Baack 2014; Vermeulen 2015). However, Certeau's thoughts on the transformation of voice into scripture could prompt us to look at knowledge production as a process of translation. Niebuhr himself stresses the fact that the travelers alter local knowledge by assessing, selecting, and abstracting it. As we have seen, European epistemic authority also rests on asserting possession of scriptural knowledge of ancient Arabic languages. Local residents, in contrast, have supposedly forgotten this knowledge and therefore their own past. If we consider Certeau's notion of »scriptural economy,« then eighteenth-century European knowledge

production can be regarded as a process of taking possession despite the absence of colonial ambitions among the scholars and travelers.

But Certeau's ethical provocation (Highmore 2007, 18) reaches further than pointing out different forms of epistemic violence.²⁴ Perhaps the greatest merit of his work is his call to search for local voices in the disturbances of the text's economy. Yet the travelogs of the Royal Danish Expedition do not seem to regard »the Orient« as a »feast for the eyes and ears« that interrupts the rational pattern of the narrative (Certeau 1988, 227). The theses Certeau developed about Jean de Léry may thus be historically limited in their applicability.

A closer look at different languages of space shows, however, another possibility for considering absent voices in the sources of the Royal Danish Expedition. Beyond the a-temporal and abstract narratives of maps that influence Niebuhr's travelogs, there are also, as I have shown, narratives of itineraries. In such itinerary narratives, locals disrupt the narrative patterns of the author's texts. This happens when Niebuhr writes about how local residents endanger his research. The expedition to Arabia thus shows that scientific sources can be haunted in different ways—in this case less by lust and fascination than by fear and insecurity.

Looking at knowledge formations in Certeau's spirit can encourage cultural studies to consider the different layers of writing production from manuscripts from the field to printed books. Concerning the Royal Danish Expedition, travel notes and hundreds of letters from and to the travelers promise a textual corpus in which local actors play roles that differ from those manifest in the printed sources. In these manuscripts from the field, itinerary narratives tend to be more dominant. Thus, provisional types of texts, such as asides and travel notes, can point out the limits of the archive's »panoptic glare« (Stoler 2009, 23–24). This approach agrees with Certeau's demand to analyze history as an operation, which means considering analytical processes as objects of historiographical scrutiny in their own right (Certeau 1988, 72).

24 The concept of »epistemic violence« was shaped by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; see Spivak 1988, 280.

Further, it seems advisable to trace various constellations of strategies and tactics through the different media that constitute the corpora of European expeditions. The relationship between scripture and voice, between strategies and tactics of spatial appropriation, must be examined for written texts, but also for collections of objects, pictures, and maps (about the expedition's objects, see Haslund Hansen 2016). For example, the pictures created during and after the expedition to Arabia and published with Niebuhr's texts speak a different language of space than the written sources (see Haslund Hansen 2013, 142).

Certeau was well aware that his essay about Jean de Léry did not break the rules of the scriptural economy but rather repeated them (Certeau 1988, 211–12). The same holds true for my readings. When I look at the sources of the Royal Danish Expedition, I sometimes have to remind myself that not only one, but two »solar Eyes« are directed at the regions formerly called »the Orient: the eye of the travelers, whose sole goal was to create as much empirically based ethnological, biological, and geographical knowledge as possible; and my own eye, which observes the expedition from a place far away in time and space. In the end, I can only assume the »existence and survival of a polytheism of concealed or disseminated practices« inside the texts—without really knowing them (Certeau 2010, 188).

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