
IN MEMORIAM

“FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE”: PROF. SERGIO NOJA NOSEDA (1931—2008)

On January 31, Prof. Sergio Noja Nosedà, member of the Editorial Committee of our journal, was tragically killed in a traffic accident. He was one of the leading European specialists in Islamic and Arabic studies, a person who had many friends in Russia. He lived a truly fantastic life. At the age of 10, this son of the Italian general over Italy's air force who had fought against Russians in Spain's civil war, had started studying Russian with the aim to help Soviet war prisoners kept in Italian camps. When he was 12 he declared his personal war against the Nazis and was nearly captured by a roving guard of the SS with six grenades he had just stolen from a German military truck. In July 1944, at 14, he ran away from home, crossed the battle line, declared in the military camp that he was 19 already, and came into the Italian Army fighting against the Germans. The only problem was his voice: it was not loud enough for the bombardier corporal of the 3 inch mortar. His 68th line infantry regiment was fighting against the “Green Devils”, the German paratroopers, which took part in the liberation of Cassino, Florence and Bologna. He could never forget the moment when a German soldier gave him his “Luger” saying: “So ended ein Krieg”. On August 15, 1945 when his real age was discovered accidentally he was disbanded from the Italian Army. His colonel told him: “You can stay in the army all your life but let me give you some advice — go home, return to the Lyceum, and after... after... you should come back”.

He chose this other way and was able to combine a successful business career with thorough studies of Middle Eastern languages and cultures. His first scholarly work “La lingua nelle Sacre Scritture” was written eight years before he graduated from the university (1956). He had started his scholarly career at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana and in 1964 together with Monsignor Giovanni Galbiati, Prefect of the library, published the facsimile of the manuscript *Ahkām al-‘aṭīqa* and its translation (“Canoni giuridico-morali per arabi cristiani”). Later the Ambrosiana presented him with another discovery: a hitherto unknown copy in Arabic of the apocryphal Gospel attributed to Thomas.

In 1967 he was appointed to the University of Turin and for ten years was teaching there a course devoted to the Muslim Law. One of the results of the thorough study of the topic was the publication of the “Detti e fatti del Profeta dell'Islam raccolti da al-Buhari” (Turin, 1983). He prepared also the “Catalogo dei manoscritti arabi, persiani e turchi” of the Biblioteca nazionale di Torino (Roma, 1974) and ten years later the “Catalogo dei manoscritti arabi” of the Biblioteca Reale di Torino (Roma, 1984).

The broad scholarly experience obtained by Sergio Noja by this time made it possible to start the research series devoted to the history of Islamic civilization in general. In 1975 he published the biography of Muḥammad widely using in his work the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and the archaeological data obtained by this time. The work was followed by four volumes of “Storia dei popoli dell'Islam” published by “Mondadori”, Milano (“Maometto, Profeta dell'Islām”, 1990; “L'Islām dell'espansione, dalla morte del Profeta all' invasione mongola, 632—1258”, 1993; “L'Islām dell'immobilismo, caduta di Bagdad allo sbarco di Napoleone in Egitto, 1258—1798”, 1994; “L'Islām moderno, dalla conquista napoleonica dell'Egitto all'ultima guerra del Golfo”, 2003 — revised edition of the volume published in 1995). The series is not only the most important work in Italian on the topic. As one of the serious results of twentieth century Arabic and Islamic studies in Europe it brought to the author the reputation of being a new Leone Caetani. The “Breve storia dei popoli arabi” (Milano, 1997) was his last book devoted to the general problems of the Arabic and Islamic history.

Following the proposal of Francesco Gabrieli, he was appointed to teach Arabic language and literature at the Università Cattolica di Milano. For many years he was the Professor at the University and it was characteristic that he organized his official farewell university meeting in the student discotheque (2001).

In 1991 he was elected member of the Istituto Lombardo, Academy of Science and Literature. Cardinal Martini also nominated him as Curator of the Biblioteca Ambrosiana. In 1998 he received the title of Grand Ufficiale of the “Ordine al Merito della Repubblica”.