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| Jurjī Zaydān جرجي زيدان (1861-1914) |
| Jurji Zaidan, Jurji Zaydan, Ǧurǧī Zaydān |
| Jurjī Zaydān was a Lebanese novelist, journalist and scholar of the Nahḍa (‘awakening’), an intellectual current of the long nineteenth century for the renewal of Arab culture. With his cultural journal *al-Hilāl* (*The Crescent*), established in 1892 in Cairo, Zaydān developed a very successful medium to popularise knowledge about Arab history and Arabic literature in order to establish a national consciousness. He became especially famous for his novels on the history of Islam, ranging from the seventh to the beginning of the twentieth century (most of them serialized in *al-Hilāl*), that are outstanding for their impact both on the history of Arab nationalism and Arabic literature and remain well-read classics to this day. |
| Jurjī Zaydān was born in 1861 in Beirut into a rather poor Greek Orthodox family. He left school at the age of eleven to help his father with the restaurant. In the restaurant he came in contact with many students and teachers of the Syrian Protestant College (later renamed the American University of Beirut) who encouraged him to continue his education. At the age of twenty, he passed, nearly as an autodidact, the demanding entrance exams for Medicine at the Syrian Protestant College, only to be expelled one year later: when one of his professors defended in 1882 Darwin’s evolutionary biology, the conservative administration dismissed not only the professor but also those students who supported him, including Zaydān. He left for Egypt to continue his medical studies, but soon worked instead for an Arabic newspaper and for the British army as war interpreter in Sudan. At this time his interest in Islamic history and Arabic literature and language was awakened, and he returned in 1885 to Beirut in order to study Hebrew and Syriac. He eventually published in 1886 his first book, *al-Alfāẓ al-ʿarabiyya wa-l-falsafa al-lughawiyya* (*Arabic Words and the Philosophy of Language*). In this study, Zaydān combined Arabic theories on the origin of language with evolutionary biology. Due to its merits he was appointed a member of the Royal Asiatic Academy in Italy.  Later in 1904, Zaydān analysed in his *al-Lugha al-ʿarabiyya bi-ʿtibārihā kāʾin ḥayy* (*The Arabic Language: a Living Being*) the more recent history of the Arabic language, from the pre-Islamic period to the nineteenth century, in order to show that the Arabic language was in a constant state of flux due to its cultural and linguistic contacts through the ages. Against this background, he defends and calls for contemporary modifications of the Arabic language in order to satisfy modern needs. Zaydān’s oeuvre notably helped to simplify and remodel the literary and academic Arabic language of its time.  Due the success of his first publication, Zaydān travelled in 1888 to London to pursue his studies, but then returned in 1889 to Cairo to work as a schoolteacher and for the renowned scientifically oriented Arabic journal *al-Muqtaṭaf* (*The Selection*). With this experience, Zaydān founded in 1892 in Cairo *al-Hilāl* (*The Crescent*), a literary and cultural journal that soon had a tremendous impact on the Nahḍa and is the only journal of that time that still runs today. *Al-Hilāl* facilitated the shift of journalistic focus from the West to the Arab world and Islam, and allotted contemporary Arabic literature a firm place in the newly emerging public spheres. Creating a rubric for serialized novels, *al-Hilāl* became a stage for many later famous authors and most notably for Zaydān’s own novels.  In the course of his lifetime, Zaydān published in *al-Hilāl* many of his twenty-one novels on Islamic history ranging in periods set from the late seventh century to his own day. Though these novels do not follow an overarching unity, they all combine more or less two features: historical accuracy and amorous adventures. Historical novels were for Zaydān primarily a means to popularize knowledge that readers otherwise would not read or discover, and only secondarily a means to tell a story and to entertain the reader. While his novels were often compared to those of Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) and Alexandre Dumas (1802-1870), Zaydān blamed the European historical novel for changing the course of history for the sake of a story, whereas he claimed to be faithful to history by providing the reader with a bibliography and sometimes even footnotes referring to historical sources and studies. However, around the historical nucleus, Zaydān weaved stories of ardent love, severe tragedies and dangerous adventures, written in a fluent and easy language without literary or linguistic embellishments. Though most of his protagonists are in a rather stereotypical way either good or evil, the texts emphasise atmospheric description and narratives full of turns and twists in order to arouse the reader’s interest while providing a wide range of historical information.  For instance, Zaydān’s first novel *al-Mamlūk al-shārid* (*The Escaping Mamluk*, 1891) is set at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the Egyptian ruler Muḥammad ʿAlī massacred the Mamluks in order to safeguard his power. The only Mamluk to escape is Amīn Bey, who hides in the desert. His pregnant wife considers him dead and returns with her son Salīm to her home region in Mount Lebanon, only to lose him on the way and to give birth to her second son Gharīb. This novel narrates the complex quest of a family for reunion in the regions of Egypt and Mount Lebanon and thereby becomes involved not only in the Egyptian massacre of the Mamluks, but also the Egyptian invasion of Sudan, the Egyptian occupation of Lebanon, and the Greek War of Independence.  The success of his first novel convinced Zaydān to give up his position as a schoolteacher and to earn his living through writing, becoming thereby what he calls *kātib ʿāmm* (‘public writer’), a professional writer for the common people writing on a wide range of cultural topics which he considers useful for the nation. In this vein, Zaydān published, between 1902 and 1906, his important scholarly work *Taʾrīkh al-tamaddun al-islāmī* (*The History of the Islamic Civilization*), where he focusses not so much on the religion of Islam but rather the history of the Arabs, i.e. those who speak the Arabic language. He also wrote *Taʾrīkh ādāb al-lugha al-ʿarabiyya* (*The History of the Literatures in the Arabic Language*), published between in 1911 and 1914, where he relies on a broad concept of literature elaborating on Arab intellectual history from the pre-Islamic period to the nineteenth-century Nahḍa. In his various literary and non-literary works, the Christian Zaydān intended to make ordinary Arab readers aware of their history and thereby fashion a cultural understanding of the Arab people based not on a common religion but on a common history and language. Though his work paved the way for political Arab nationalism, Zaydān never considered himself a politician but a writer and scholar. As such, he had a wide success among contemporary readers, but was criticized by some intellectuals for his allegedly weak literary language and the non-academic style of his scholarly works. In 1910, Zaydān was offered a position on Islamic History at the Egyptian University, but he was soon dismissed due to the resistance of conservative Muslim scholars.  When Zaydān died in 1914 in Cairo, he left a vast scholarly and literary oeuvre that shaped the cultural concept of the Arab people at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. His literary works, moreover, left a lasting imprint on later Arabic literature. His novels are still well-read classics in the Arab world today, and the English reader too can discover some of them in recent translations.  Works (Selection):  *al-Alfāẓ al-ʿarabiyya wa-l-falsafa al-lughawiyya*: الألفاظ العربية والفلسفة اللغوية (*Arabic Words and the Philosophy of Language*). Beirut 1886. (Partly translated in: T. Philipp (2010) *Jurji Zaidan and the Foundations of Arab Nationalism. A Study by Thomas Philipp. Selected Writings by Jurji Zaidan. 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